

# Familial properties

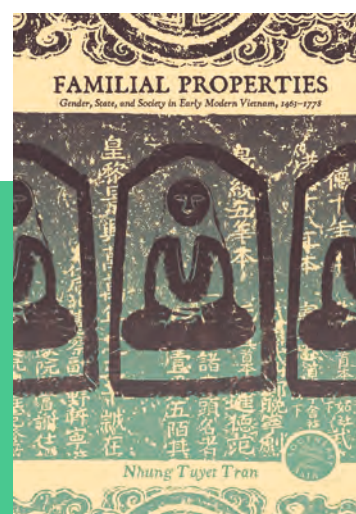
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Reviewed title

## Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778

Nhung Tuyet Tran. 2018.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press  
ISBN 9780824874827



In introductory courses on Southeast Asia, many researchers focus on the relative strength of women as a definitive regional trait compared to neighboring South Asia and East Asia. The focus often lies on Vietnam as a regional crossroads, with a Chinese Confucian order transposed upon a Southeast Asian peasantry. Nhung Tuyet Tran's *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778* sheds new light on gender in Southeast Asia. Utilizing a wide range of primary sources, Tran provides an ambitious historical-political anthropological account of gender systems in precolonial Vietnam, citing official laws alongside sites of resistance in a highly readable study.

### Vietnam's gender system

Chapter One lays out what Tran refers to as the gender system of historical Vietnam, a state-articulated vision of proper womanhood from childhood through death (and beyond). Subsequent chapters focus on adolescence, marriage, sexual relations, property, death, and the afterlife, charting the life course of womanhood. Tran interprets Vietnam's gender system in economic terms, with Vietnamese society as a market and its participants as economic actors. The Vietnamese state has promoted its gender system in its quest for stability, as stable families and the continuation of elite agnatic lines were intended to produce a stable social hierarchy as well as a secure tax base. This gender system placed significant pressures on women as responsible actors, making them the key figures in Vietnamese culture and nationalism.

One of the book's great strengths is that Tran lays out official gender systems, but always remembers that lived realities often varied significantly from state visions. Such a feat is difficult in contemporary studies, but is especially impressive in historical work. Each chapter notes different experiences over time, by ethnicity and geography (with the Cham-influenced South featuring distinctive gender systems), and class. Class is especially important, as elite women were expected to conform to stricter rules for the sake of social stability, whereas poor women were afforded more flexibility in areas such as remarriage and the workforce. However, this did not always

benefit lower-class women, who were sometimes expected to fulfill sexual roles for more powerful men. All told, Tran manages to document gender systems across Vietnamese history while paying attention to the diverse experiences of women, successfully painting a general picture while not essentializing.

This nuance is made possible by impressive, meticulous research. Tran bases her discussion on a wide range of sources, including laws, textbooks, early colonial accounts, folk stories, village steles and records, and more, many of which are primary sources written in Vietnamese demotic script. Tran differentiates between prescriptive sources (the laws, textbooks, dictionaries, and guides that lay out what the state thinks should be) and descriptive sources (the legal cases, folk poetry, short stories, missionary letters, and other observations of what was). Particularly impressive is Tran's use of village steles, slabs erected in honor of various patrons. These steles show that Vietnamese women were able to amass resources and maintain influence within a Confucian legal system and veneration in the afterlife.

### Other themes

By examining the application of neo-Confucian laws under the Lê Dynasty and how they affected gender systems in Vietnam, *Familial Properties* informs debates surrounding Southeast Asian versus East Asian influence, state capacity, urban/rural societies, northern versus southern Vietnamese societies, tradition versus modernity, and Vietnamese nationalism. If the question is whether gender in Vietnam was more Southeast Asian, featuring relative autonomy for women, or more Confucian, subordinating women in a patriarchal order, then the answer is that it was both. Vietnam saw both the successful application of Confucian

laws that influenced Vietnamese society, but also resistance to these laws, which often failed to shape local communities. One source of disruption was various civil wars, which necessitated women playing public role. Another was changing markets, with the 'Age of Commerce' creating new areas of female power and wealth. Women were also afforded more autonomy where the state was weakest, namely in rural areas and in the south, and among poorer classes. Tran shows Southeast Asian agency within a Confucian structure, with the Lê state possessing significant, but not total power.

In terms of other topics, Chapter Three discusses legal discourses related to rape, sex work, chastity, and homosexuality. In both, class status mediated crimes and punishments. Homosexuality is notable by its absence in Vietnamese law, with greater attention paid to whether same-sex relations violate class lines or not. Punishments were dealt in cases where poor servants penetrated more powerful partners – where sexual orders overturned socio-economic orders, thus inviting social instability.

The book's final chapter examines the contemporary relevance of historical gender systems in Vietnam. Tran notes that French colonizers framed Vietnamese women as oppressed by Chinese laws to help legitimize colonial power. At independence, Vietnamese leaders promoted similar tropes, noting that Chinese and French forces oppressed women, unlike traditional Vietnamese culture. With one of the great promises of communism was also to uplift women. Today, Vietnamese leaders mix communist and nationalist rhetoric about women's equality, often aimed at denigrating China for political gain. The story told is that ancient traditions of Vietnamese matriarchy were transformed into 'a totalizing, oppressive, misogynist Confucian society' (p. 186), with

the Vietnamese government working to restore Vietnamese traditions. Tran makes a case for greater complexity, challenging the basic trope and locating patriarchy early in Vietnamese history. As Vietnam continues to develop and tensions with China continue to mount, there is a need to question state claims of traditional equality, as if patriarchy lacks roots in Vietnam.

### Possible critiques

*Familial Properties* features impressive research, clear writing, and speaks to a range of important debates. Although Tran succeeds in showing that official laws often played out differently in practice, she could be clearer regarding the limitations of historical records. For the most part, state power correlates with records. Even if we move beyond official records to village steles, it is likely that we are still overlooking the rural majority. The book essentially tackles the hardest cases, showing that even in historical records and areas of state strength, women maintained autonomy and resisted official norms. It should be remembered, though, that where history was not recorded, women likely had even greater autonomy. A related point is that, by focusing on the state, we have little sense of how gender norms were enforced societally. Cases of adultery and perceived sexual indiscretions were more likely to have been punished immediately by non-state actors, with judicial records providing only an echo of social enforcement. Tran provides several accounts of judicial decisions that skirted official rules, cases framed in terms of persuasive women and judicial interpretation. They may also be explained by state weakness, with courts providing post-hoc rationalizations for their inability to act. Even today, many state efforts to enforce gender laws are mediated by strong societal norms, with states forces loathe to admit their weaknesses. State forces such as courts possess incentives to make it appear that social enforcement reflects their will, clouding our understanding of how the reach of state rules.

### Conclusions

All told, *Familial Properties* is an impressive achievement, navigating official and lived gender systems over several centuries of Vietnamese history. Tran manages to paint a broad picture while not losing sight of variation over time, status, and place. It is essential reading for those interested in women's history, Southeast Asian history, gender in Vietnam, and Vietnamese national identity. A rare study that is both meticulous and readable, Tran is to be commended.

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to the decline of factions and the rise of party leadership. Chapter Four focuses on national electoral battles, including rural support networks, turnout rates, the LDP-Komeito alliance, and party recruitment. Chapter Five examines partner organizations, providing a window into the shifting patterns of the LDP's business and professional networks. Finally, Chapter Six examines subnational politics, including elections and the personal organizations bolstering local candidates.

One of the book's most impressive features is its data. Nakakita mixes quantitative electoral and spending data with personal interviews, internal party documents, and media reports, bringing together multiple sources to illustrate and explain LDP power. The book is replete with instructive figures and tables that illustrate, among other things, politician backgrounds, factional affiliations and strength, industry support for LDP candidates, and more. Specific individuals identified in the book, such as prefectural party bosses and senior LDP officials, provide detailed descriptions of the 'realities' of the LDP.

This book represents a deep dive into Japan's ruling party but will also be of interest to those studying party politics, campaign finance, dominant party systems, and state-society relations. One core theme is the far-reaching effects of electoral

reform. Changing Japan's electoral system in 1994 from the multi-member Single Non-Transferable Vote towards a mixed plurality-proportional electoral system has caused myriad transformations in Japanese politics and within the LDP. Electoral reform largely succeeding in its core aims of weakening factions and pork politics, also transformed the policy process, party membership, leadership styles, business ties, and more. This study is a testament to the importance of electoral systems for shaping political behavior.

Electoral and finance reforms helped bring about the decline of factional politics, paving the way for a more top-down, executive-run LDP. However, Nakakita emphasizes that the LDP's power is relative rather than absolute, with victories resulting from low voter turnout, support from various associations, a weak opposition, and the alliance with Komeito. In fact, the LDP's support base is shrinking. The LDP has adapted to maintain power, but it is hardly unassailable. As the author concludes, 'there is potential for the current political conditions that allow an 'all powerful' LDP to suffer a sudden reversal' (p. 205).

Another key theme is differentiating between the LDP's dominant recent figures, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe. Although the former mentored the latter, they share a factional background, are third generation politicians, and have dominated the LDP,

they differ by ideology and leadership styles. Nakakita emphasizes how Koizumi promoted neoliberal reforms and courted floating voters with a media-friendly, populist message, while Abe returned to earlier LDP practices and is more conservative. In an effort to reconnect to rural voters alienated by Koizumi's reforms, Abe has captained the LDP's rightward shift, including policies refusing to allow married couples to keep separate surnames, rejecting non-citizen voting rights, and rewriting the constitution to allow for military and emergency powers. One could see this rising conservatism as an unexpected consequence of electoral reform, as combatting factionalism and pork politics has led Abe's LDP to find new ways to connect to voters and maintain power.

Not only does this book provide expert analysis of the inner party workings, it contributes towards an understanding of state-society relations, although here the emphasis is on business, professional, interest, and religious interactions with the party rather than the state. It is fascinating to see how various factions connect with non-state interests, from Koizumi challenging postal lobbies, to policy groups connected to dentists, firefighters, kindergarten teachers, truckers, and chambers of commerce. Overlapping state/society distinctions also exist subnationally, with politicians depending on personal support organizations and kinship networks. We also see changing roles for

religion, with historical LDP ties to Shinto and other interests transforming in response to the LDP's partnership with Komeito.

There are few available critiques of this masterful study. The book could do with an introduction or background chapter, bringing those less familiar with Japanese politics up to speed instead of jumping directly into factions. Readers may want more details on subnational electoral competition, especially varied local party alliances, and perhaps more on LDP foreign policy. Finally, the book has few references to scholarly theories or comparative cases. There are a few spots where glances beyond Japan might heighten its analysis, although this is probably not the author's goal in a book aimed at a Japanese audience.

All told, *The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan: The Realities of 'Power'* provides a commanding account of how the LDP has managed to maintain power in and over Japan. This will undoubtedly be required reading for students of Japanese politics, but will also be of interest to a broader audience in Comparative Politics. This is a simply excellent study that will teach a wide readership about one of Asia's most important, fascinating parties.

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