



especially over a long period of time. The transmission of family resources and networks does not happen automatically, especially when families involve non-family members in their political operations. Unfortunately, in his analytical choice, Nishizaki chose not to address the mechanisms underlying the variations in the size and continuity of Thai political dynasties (p. 11).

Dynastic Democracy speaks to a broad academic audience. This book should be a critical reference for scholars of Thai politics. The detailed information on kinship networks presented in this book is an invaluable source for understanding the intricate connections of influential families, which are integral to the contemporary Thai political fabric. Yoshinori Nishizaki's creativity and tenacity in collecting, coding, analysing, and visualising data from various archival sources serve as an excellent example for history, sociology, and political science students who want to conduct similar research in different contexts. Finally, this book provides food for thought for those who study dynastic politics in developing countries because it challenges several conventional wisdoms about the structural factors—such as regional economic variations—that lead to the formation of political dynasties.

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Single mothers and the state's embrace: Reproductive agency in Vietnam

By HARRIET M. PHINNEY

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The aftermath of war in Vietnam gave rise to the phenomenon of older single women who 'asked for a child' (*xin con*) by requesting sexual relations with a man whom they did not intend to marry for the express purpose of becoming pregnant. In *Single Mothers and the State's Embrace*, Harriet Phinney examines how women's intentional choices in the 1980s and 1990s made *xin con* a legible category of social action, an object of state research and law, and a topic of popular discussion. Drawing on interviews conducted over two decades with 35 northern Vietnamese women, 31 of whom live in rural areas, Phinney compellingly analyses the intertwining dynamics of agency, governmentality, and subjectivity surrounding *xin con*. On the one hand, unmarried women's postwar decisions to become biological mothers reflected long-established cultural values and patriarchal structures that essentialised women as mothers. On the other hand, the pursuit of a different path toward motherhood and state support for doing so transformed ideas about gender and marriage that affected subsequent generations, including the women Phinney interviewed in Hanoi who asked for a child in the 2000s. The result is a powerful longitudinal

analysis of the social context that shapes individual decisions which, in turn, alter that context by transforming state ideologies, legal policy, and popular attitudes.

The first of the book's three parts explores the complex wartime and postwar circumstances that fuelled *xin con*. Chapter 1 argues that single women in the postwar years desired biological children because the transformative act of giving birth bestowed social recognition. Adoption was less attractive because ties of blood, gestation, and lactation established stronger bonds of kinship and sentiment (*tinh cảm*). Chapter 2 examines the reasons why many northern Vietnamese women faced this predicament, including: the war effort that took women away from home during their marriageable years; male mortality during the war; postwar work assignment and household registration policies that kept women in rural areas and made it difficult for them to meet men; desire for love as the basis of marriage; and ideas about the appropriate age for marriage that rendered older women 'overripe'.

Part 2 focuses on agency and governmentality. Chapter 3 demonstrates that although women's choice to *xin con* reflected gender essentialism, its emergence as a term and practice constructed 'a novel maternal subjectivity outside the old bounds of the patriarchal family' (p. 74). Women's agency entailed manoeuvring: flouting some norms, reinforcing others (p. 97). Chapter 4 considers how governmentality brought single mothers into the state agenda. First, the government recognised the natural right of women to be mothers, most notably in the 1986 Law on Marriage and the Family. Second, state-sponsored researchers and journalists cultivated sympathy for older single women who *xin con*. Phinney contrasts this acceptance to the concurrent demonisation of single mothers in the United States. This reference, however, touches upon issues of class and race that Phinney might have explored further. In the United States, classed and racialised 'culture of poverty' and 'welfare queen' discourses justified the retrenchment of public support. The fact that all of Phinney's respondents are ethnic majority Kinh raises the question of whether single mothers from different ethnic groups were similarly accepted in official and public discourse in Vietnam.

The book's final section explores women who *xin con* in the 2000s. No longer facing postwar demographic obstacles to marriage, this generation frames the decision to become a single mother in terms of personal happiness and lifestyle. They criticise men as patriarchal and refuse to marry without companionate love. They assume the right to be mothers as an expression of choice, rather than feminine instinct. Like the earlier generation that eschewed adoption, the women who *xin con* in the 2000s rejected state-regulated artificial insemination because they wanted to know their child's biological father, as well as preserve their privacy.

Single Mothers and the State's Embrace charts a fascinating shift in attitudes toward single motherhood from its emergence as a postwar Vietnamese social problem to its recent incarnation as a popular media topic and global trend. While Phinney's argument is convincing, methodological considerations might complicate the book's account of transformation over time. First, nearly all of Phinney's earlier interviewees lived in rural areas, while the later generation lives and works in Hanoi. Might the differences between these cohorts also reflect class, education, and geography? What attitudes toward marriage and children do contemporary young rural women have? Second, while Women's Union representatives attended

all of Phinney's rural interviews, no officials participated in her conversations with Hanoi women who *xin con* in the 2000s. How might the presence or absence of an official affect interviewees' emphasis on individual happiness or lifestyle? Finally, because interviews prompt narrators to make logical, causal connections, they risk over-emphasising intention and choice. Circumstances did not permit Phinney to conduct extensive participant observation with single mothers in rural northern Vietnam in the 1990s. Had such research been possible, it might have provided further evidence of the relational and moral constraints on agency in women's daily lives.

Single Mothers and the State's Embrace makes a significant contribution to our understanding of kinship and gender in postwar Vietnam. Phinney's longitudinal perspective beautifully illuminates how individuals make choices within social contexts; society comes to identify those choices as categories of action and being; government renders the categories legible through discourse and policy; and the resulting interpellation shapes individuals' subjectivity and future action. Women in the 2000s and today can *xin con* thanks to the ideas and actions of an earlier generation, yet contemporary *xin con* is also different as a result. Phinney's book provides a powerful lesson in the considerable effort required for a social phenomenon to persist over time, and that endurance does not mean lack of change. Rather, the phenomenon is, in the words of a popular phrase that Phinney quotes, 'Same same, but different' (p. 161).

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