



French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina

Marie-Paule Ha

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
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French Women and the Empire is the first book-length investigation of colonial gender politics in Third Republic France, using Indochina as a case study. Its departure point is the interrogation of the dramatic change in the French colonialist view of the empire as an exclusively male preserve where women feared to tread. At the turn of the century, a reverse discourse emerged in the metropole, forcefully arguing that colonial female emigration was essential to <"true"> colonisation.

The study begins by analysing the highly complex web of interconnected factors underlying this radical transformation in the representation of the empire from being a <"no woman's land"> into a <"woman's haven.>" Then, drawing on a large body of hitherto little examined sources, the study continues by reconstructing the experiences and activities of French women in Indochina from the fin-de-siècle to the interwar era. The most significant finding from this study is that contrary to the image propagated by promotional literature of the colonial woman as essentially a bourgeois homemaker, the class and ethnic make-up of the French female population in the Asian colony was in fact remarkably heterogeneous, with a sizeable contingent of them, married or single, actively engaging in a variety of paid employment outside the home. By thus foregrounding the diversity and complexity of colonial female experiences, French Women and the Empire seeks to move the story of French women and the empire beyond the narrow confines of the imperial family romance to the wider arena of the colonial public sphere.

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