Public space in urban Asia gives a compelling insight into the research conducted by the Asian Urban Lab. The lab, as led by chairman William S.W. Lim and co-directors Sharon Siddique and Tan Dan Feng, is an attempt to align “the best local and international thinking on spatial justice to the particularities of various specific Asian conditions” (p.11).

Sander Holsgens

Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam

Sex trafficking is a hot topic in international politics today. Millions of dollars from international monetary and in-kind aid flows flow into Southeast Asia to stop the trade in women and children. Yet the literature on trafficking in Southeast Asia tends to treat the human rights perspective as though it were applied in the area. The final chapter examines the pressures that human trafficking placed on the colonial government in Indochina. With newspapers reporting horrifying cases of beheadings and victims being thrown overboard, France’s inability to stop traffickers from crossing borders or using colonial ports and coastsland embarrassed the French colonial government. Vietnamese intellectuals criticized the colonial state for the hypocrisy of justifying colonialism with claims to ‘protect’ its subjects. As much of the trafficking trade was run by Chinese gangsters, these discourses in part were anti-Chinese fears and claims that the colonial state was too soft on the Chinese community.

Christina Firpo

Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam is the first in-depth historical study of trafficking in Vietnam. Drawing on a vast base of empirical evidence from 19th and early 20th century missionary reports, military documents, newspapers, statistics, reportage, correspondence, and reports from the colonial government, Lessard identifies large scale trafficking networks that sold women and children within Vietnam or to China and Hong Kong, where they would ultimately be sold into marriage, prostitution, or indentured servitude. Lessard argues that while trafficking did predate French colonial rule, colonialism exacerbated the trade. War, state monopolies on goods and opium, and social norms in which women and girls were both ‘priest and preyed upon’ (p.7) help conditions in which a black market that traded kidnapped women and girls flourished.

The first chapter explores missionary experiences with human trafficking networks. Lessard contextualizes missionary writings on trafficking in a time when Catholic priests aggressively sought converts and the French government launched colonization missions and established a border with China. Conflating Catholic missionaries with colonial forces, he argues that networks of Catholic villages, kidnapped converts and sold them into indentured servitude. Misionaries, heavily influenced by the European abolitionist movement, aimed to stop slavery and the sale of women and children. Their solution was to purchase slaves and adopt them into their missionary communities. For all their good intentions, Lessard shows their efforts were ill executed. Missionaries focused on saving only Christians and they were driven by misconceptions about Vietnamese culture and gender roles. Missionaries operated under the assumption that children would fall victim to infanticide and women would be negatively influenced by what they judged to be a pramorous Vietnamese culture, as a result, missionaries refused to return trafficking victims to their home villages. Chapter 2 investigates kidnappings and trafficking that occurred within the context of the pacification of Tonkin in the second half of the 19th century. Lessard draws on military and official sources, and travelers’ memories of their experience with trafficking in Tonkin, a politically volatile region during this time period. Trafficking of women and children was high and the market for women and girls flourished. The Nguyen government eventually copped some of the bandit and used them to tax the French military as it took over Tonkin. Within this context, kidnapped women and children proved to be valuable commodities that were easily traded for opium and weapons.

The third chapter focuses on trafficking incidents discovered by the French consul to China or discovered by merchant marines vessels or customs and borders agents, both of which were accountable to the command of the consul in cases of human trafficking. The French consul was responsible for reporting victims, yet, as Lessard shows, other repatriations caused diplomatic problems when Chinese men claimed rights to Vietnamese women and children. The French consul attempted to rebrand the trade of Vietnamese women in China by strictly regulating departure permits for Vietnamese or Chinese women traveling to China and checking ships that departed from Hanoi. Human Trafficking in Colonial Vietnam is a thorough investigation into the political, diplomatic, and economic context in which the market for women and girls flourished during the colonial period. With its incredible detail drawn from an array of sources – some known to historians and many more previously undiscovered – Lessard proves that human trafficking is not a modern concept in Vietnam and indeed has a long history in Indochina. One of the strengths of this book is that the author is necessarily satisfied to make claims about invidious distinction. Instead, Lessard asks hard epistemological questions of her sources. As she approaches the topic of trafficking from the viewpoint of missionaries, visiting soldiers, custom agents, and high-ranking colonial authorities, she is careful to critique the biases of these sources as well as to evaluate how likely a source was to have experienced trafficking networks or links with victims themselves. This book will prove essential for the study of human trafficking – both academic and applied. It will be useful for both undergraduate and graduate courses in Asian history, French colonial history, and gender studies. It should be a mandatory read for aid workers who focus on trafficking in Vietnam and China.

Christina Firpo, Cal Poly University (cfirmo@calpoly.edu)