

Frontiers of Gender Studies in Asia

The following is a condensed version of a seminar held at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies on February 2, 2108

Professor Peter A. Jackson (Australian National University) and Dr. Nguyen Thi Thu Huong (University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU, Vietnam) are in the process of bringing together an edited collection on the topic of transgender ritual specialists in Southeast Asia. The book deals with the phenomenon during the past two decades of transgender, and sometimes gay, men taking roles in rituals that in the past were dominated by women. This transformation of the gendering, from female gender to transgender, is currently found in at least three countries in Southeast Asia—Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Seeing the invisible—broadening perspectives

A response to Thi Thu Huong's talk by Atsufumi Kato, a political anthropologist from Kyoto Sangyo University

While transgender people are visible in performances, they are still treated as invisible, or strange 'others,' or as a social evil in Vietnamese society. Vietnamese Studies as a discipline also has not paid enough attention to these transgender performers. This is certainly because traditional performances and entertainers were prohibited by the government in the Socialist period, and transgender practices were prohibited by the government.

Their invisibility in society, and in the academic arena, can also be attributed to the way in which we "see" society. Tsuneichi Miyamoto, a Japanese folklorist and author of *The Forgotten Japanese* (originally published in Japanese in the 1980s), drew a picture of Japanese society from an "in-authentic peoples" point of view. He paid attention to the lives of fishermen, islanders, peddlers, and travelling performers. His works can be understood as counter arguments against the mainstream folklore and social history of Japan that puts strong emphasis on farmers. Yoshihiko Amino,

a Japanese historian and the author of *Re-thinking Japanese History*, also depicts medieval Japanese society from the viewpoint of people with special occupational functions, such as traveling performers and entertainers. Vietnamese Studies also has a strong tendency to focus on farmers. The mainstream explanations of Vietnamese culture focuses on the lives of peasants and norms of village community. In these discourses, Vietnamese society is illustrated based on the lives of people who live on land in a relatively enclosed village community and within a tight framework of family. During the revolutionary period, Vietnamese historians, ethnologists, and folklorists were mobilized to write a book of the history of ordinary people that was titled *Vietnamese villages in history (Nong thon Viet Nam trong Lich su)*. In this book we can only find studies about the popular history of Vietnamese farmers. Inauthentic peoples, such as fisherman, peddlers, and entertainers, were ignored in that very important academic work of Vietnamese social history.¹ Those who do not dwell in village communities, who do not have a comfortable place in the family structure, have been treated as invisible in the society, as well as in academic writings on Vietnam.

In recent years, scholars of religious studies and gender studies, both inside and outside of Vietnam, have diligently studied the lives of these invisible people as well as alternative places for these people, like Buddhist temples and ritual activities. Performance groups for funeral rituals are another alternative place for these invisible people. From such alternative places, we find the possibility of another perspective to look into Vietnamese society.

Thi Thu Huong's works will not only help us to understand the status, predicaments, and health problems of Vietnamese transgender persons, but also help us to broaden our perspectives on Vietnamese society in general.

¹ Most anthropological research done in Vietnam focuses on village and family structure. Works on gender related issues most often merely involve studies about marital relations, marriage customs, or ethnic minorities.