Researching the Fragments ranges across a broad spectrum of countries, disciplinary approaches and historical periods, from the history of Chinese Australians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and Vietnamese Australians in the present, to French women in colonial Vietnam, religious leaders in the Philippines in the 1500s, Japanese and Chinese prostitutes in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia, matriarchal communities on the Sino-Tibetan border, women writing verse for each other in secret scripts in late imperial China, contemporary political leaders in the Philippines, female heroes of classical Malay literature, and more. The editors are to be congratulated for producing such a coherent and interesting book out of such a wide range of material.

Specialists in many different areas will find things to follow up in this volume; the diversity of topics is perhaps at first overwhelming. On the other hand, however, the papers do have themes in common, and can be read for what they jointly offer to the study of history, culture, and politics too.

First, the great theme that all the papers have in common is reflected in the book's title. It is generally acknowledged that standard histories and studies of culture have almost always left the women out, and that part of the reason for such an omission is that women do not often appear prominently or clearly in the sources that are most often used. Moreover, the historical questions that have interested scholars have often been questions that focus on areas of male activity, like high politics, battles, diplomacy and so on. To understand more about women in history, we have to be prepared to be creative and to look in new areas, or perhaps at old sources in new ways and with new questions. Sometimes, it's necessary to 'research the fragments'. As the book's editors say: 'The title is drawn from the perception that writing the histories of women in Asia involves negotiating a multifaceted fragmentation process at the level of culture, theory, resources and therefore methodology' (iv).

All the papers in this volume share a very strong consciousness of methodology, and of the problems faced by researchers who want to know what women were doing and what they thought about it. Some of them are also interested in the ways in which women have constructed their own narratives about their lives and passed them on to each other or to new generations. Many of the contributions are based on unusual types of sources and approaches. So, Lan Tran's piece focusses on the central place of the family photo album in the narrative of arrival, settlement and success for a Vietnamese family in Australia. She shows us an ordinary picture of a family sitting
under a tree in King's Park, describing what it reveals and what it hides about the family's experience of settlement. It might make you think again about family snaps! Norma King Koi recounts in some detail the problems she had when trying to interview her relatives in the Queensland Chinese community in order to write a family history. Oral history is fairly well established these days, but special difficulties await the researcher working in Chinese communities, judging from Norma's experience - she finds out the hard way, for example, that she is not supposed to ask questions directly to her elders, which is a definite disadvantage for a family historian. Jim Warren argues that in investigating an oppressed group like prostitutes, it is necessary to combine the life stories of individuals with an approach emphasising collective biographies in order to develop a broad understanding of the social and cultural context of their lives. Several of the contributors use literature as a source, with Christine Mathieu analysing the creation myth of the Mosuo people on the Sino-Tibetan border to try to decide whether their society was really a matriarchal one, and what that might mean, and Karen Witcombe deals with a narrative poem in classical Malay literature that sets out a very complex pattern of power relationships between men and women.

These are fascinating ways in themselves of doing research and constructing knowledge. Ultimately, though, it is important to assess what such approaches add to the understandings gained from other kinds of history. In fact the contributions to this book expand our view of Asian societies and of history generally in all kinds of ways. One of the most obvious conclusions is that the history of women in Asia is a lot more than the history of oppression, and a lot more interesting too. So, Jim Warren points out forcefully that considering the lives and experiences of the Chinese and Japanese prostitutes will provide a much better and richer picture of life in colonial Singapore; also dealing with Japanese prostitutes, Sachiko Sone demonstrates that organised rings of prostitution that sent women from poor farming families in Japan throughout Asia and even to Australia were one part of the colonial presence, especially in the economic sense. Carolyn Brewer's interpretation of the clash between rival religious systems when the Spaniards came to Cebu in the 1520s, and her picture of the effect that had on gender hierarchies, suggests new dimensions of the Spanish conquest of the Philippines. Anne McLaren's account of the material written in nüshu script, a script used and understood by women only, shows that Chinese culture in the late imperial period included much more than orthodox Confucian ideas. If nothing else, the long verse about the young woman who masquerades as a boy, and the variety of excuses she invents to avoid taking off her clothes in front of her male companion when they sleep in the same bed at night, should be enough to convince any reader of this!

Diana Giese shows that writing the oral history of Chinese Australians can suggest a quite different view of Australian society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while Heather Barker demonstrates how the biography of an individual woman, in her case Eleanor Hinder, an Australian, can help to illuminate the complexities of life in inter-war Shanghai. Mina Roces' piece invites a re-examination of election campaigns in the Philippines. She argues that women politicians have to construct themselves very carefully in terms of the type of power they claim and the ways in which they claim it, and that media image is of crucial importance in this context. And Anne-Marie Medcalf's examination of the lives of French women in colonial Vietnam from the 1860s to the 1940s suggests some of the fascinating ambiguities in colonialism as well as in gender politics. While the original French women settlers tried hard to construct little bits of France in the alien landscape of Vietnam, always battling spiders, snakes, heat and disease as they did so, their daughters, born in Vietnam, tended to think of conditions in Vietnam as normal. A focus on how women both fitted and did not fit into the colonial structure in Vietnam ultimately suggests a different view of colonialism itself: in relation to male colonisers, women's status was inferior, whereas in relation to the colonised nation, they belonged to the conquering side.
Researching the Fragments, in summary, has much to offer readers who want to reflect on how history is conceptualised, researched and written, as well as to readers who seek to know more about women in Asia and Asian women in Australia. It deserves to be widely read.

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