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SAIGON, VIETNAM

The 44-year-old wife of a low-ranking Vietnamese government official recently visited the damp, cluttered office of a woman lawyer, explaining she had been married for more than two decades. "But, now it is just too much," she exclaimed. "In the past six years, my husband has not spoken a word ~~to~~ to me--not a mortal word. I want a divorce." The compassionate woman lawyer ~~succeeded~~ succeeded, however, in forging a reconciliation; she urged the distraught woman to have her hair bobbed, instead of wearing the ~~old-fashioned~~ old-fashioned ~~bun~~ bun, to replace her missing front teeth and to erect a small partition between her bedroom and the sleeping rooms of her in-laws to produce some intimate privacy for her husband. The formula was magical: for the first time ever, the recalcitrant husband put his wife on the back of the family scooter, visited the ~~lawyer's~~ lawyer's office to thank her and to present her a gift of aromatic fish sauce.

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Even the contemplation of a divorce suit epitomizes a miniscule facet of the galloping evolution of Vietnamese womanhood in a country in which only three years ago divorce was illegal except under special dispensation of Roman Catholic President Ngo Dinh Diem and his spitfire sister-in-law, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu. The prospective divorce case illustrated the slow-motion equalization in the husband-wife relationship. In the setpiece battles of the sexes, husband-wife entanglements commonly end up with barrages of dia bay--"flying saucers," as vases, soup bowls or bamboo chairs are hurled into orbit.

In other cases, the wife's sphere of influence already dominates that of her husband in the home. One American advisor was flabbergasted that his counterpart, a Vietnamese province chief, consistently had to ask his wife for twenty piastres (about twenty cents) in order to get a haircut. One Vietnamese high-society wife gloated, "Maybe the Vietnamese generals run the country, but their wives run them." Even Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky and his lovely 25-year-old wife are known to engage in verbal battles bitter enough to cause a flurry of official cables at the American Embassy.

If such marital battles are viewed as commonplace within the context of full-fledged egalisation of the Western woman, in the non-Communist Vietnam, they are part of the smouldering evolution of the emancipation of the female, whose traditional heritage was Confucianistic since the first Chinese conquest of Vietnam in 111 B. C. Within the Confucianistic code of ethics, the tormenting plight of the Vietnamese woman was epitomized in the proverb Thap Nu Viet Vo--"one son is a son, but ten daughters are nothing."
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The moral indoctrination of every Vietnamese woman was to obey without question first her father, then her husband, and then her eldest son when her husband died. Often, she would be ordered to kneel in front of her husband as he beat her with a rattan stick or feather duster. Child marriages—even at 10 years of age—were the norm; her father could sell her as a concubine, or ~~he~~^{she} hire her out as a servant. "My own father was 11 and my mother 10 when they were married," a 43-year-old Saigon scholar explained recently. "But my father really loved my mother. He never took a concubine or second wife as his fortuneteller advised. He was considered a revolutionary at the turn of the century because he cut off his long hair, which Vietnamese men then wore in a bun." This Confucianistic structure—which later became fossilized—prevailed for two millennia; French rule for ~~more than 50 years~~^{almost a century} did little to change these practices in the countryside, although the French venerated the social-economic urban elite with Westernization. Even under the French, the traditional view that the wife should stay home and take care of the offspring and the rice planting prevailed in the countryside; in the cities only a few women were employed, and then either in nursing, teaching or clerical work.

By all accounts, the American build-up of combat troops, which dramatically ~~impacted~~ impacted here in mid-1965, accelerated the emancipation of women far beyond the wildest expectations of the Vietnamese, leaving them "dizzy and disoriented," as one husband explained. The weight of the American war machine—and equally important, the accompanying "green tide of American dollars"—produced a series of exploding cross-currents unparalleled in the preceding two thousand years—the results of which are still unknown and the end of which is still not in sight.

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First, the vicious acceleration of the bloody fighting in the countryside in the past 15 months brought a flood of rural families to the adventures of urban life; ^(most of them were women and children) a total of 900,000 were listed as war refugees, but untold thousands more came, as wide-eyed immigrants in their own country, to live with relatives in the cities. ("Vietnam has become a giant-sized railroad station," one ~~A~~ American observed.) Second, America's deadliest enemy in the cities--inflation--which eroded any genuine increase in living standards, forced more women to become rice-winners. Third, American troops and money brought both the demand and ~~an~~ monetary magnet for hundreds of thousands of housemaids, cooks, construction workers and entertainers, which sommersaulted overnight Vietnam's chronic unemployment into one of labor shortage. Woman-power became an immediate substitute for manpower, which had been bled white on the battlefield. Vietnamese women began to assume more and more responsibilities for the family both inside and outside the home as Vietnamese family life continued its rapid disintegration. The Vietnamese family--including uncles, cousins, and in-laws of two or three generations--often number more than one hundred. The strong ties among family members was the heart of the old Confucianistic structure; the individual had first to fulfill the obligations to the family group and then to the wider community of the village; today, this pattern is being blown to the winds. ("For ~~o~~ better or worse, Vietnam will never be the same," one long-time resident explained as he watched the American build-up. ~~the~~)

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Or, as a young Vietnamese banker explained, "Now, only the Vietnamese women know what they want and how they are going to get it. You foreigners think they are China dolls with hummingbird voices. They are in public, but in private, they are beserk panthers devouring their husband-victims unless they get ^{what} ~~want~~ they ~~want~~ want."

The American build-up of combat forces hurled into orbit a new feminine creation, which the Vietnamese call Phu-Nu The He Moi--"girl of the new generation"--or Phu-Nu Doi Song Moi--"girl of the new life."

"There's been a big evolution for Vietnamese women," one female French sociologist explained. "There's much more schooling for the girls; ten years ago, only the girls from rich families could study; now every girl can have 12 years of schooling. Ten years ago, the Vietnamese wife rarely appeared with her husband outside the home; now she can go to public receptions and cocktail parties with him."

Two decades ago, a well-bred girl was forbidden to ride a bicycle; it would spoil her elegant head-high posture. At the end of the French Indo-China War 12 years ago, only one aristocratic woman dared drive a car through the streets of Saigon--she drove a crimson Cadillac. Today, middle-class women more often than not drive her own family car; upper-class bar girls openly solicit trade on the mainstreets in the newest of American sports cars; Vietnamese secretaries regularly own or drive ~~the~~ their own motorbikes.

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In the urban centers, even the relationship between the modern girl and her parents on the most fundamental question--her marriage--has evolved into a spin. Traditionally, the marriage of Vietnamese grandmothers was arranged by her parents and ~~she~~ ^{they} could not refuse; ~~the~~ ^{they} marriage of Vietnamese ~~wife~~ wives in their thirties was also arranged, but ~~she~~ ^{they} could refuse a number of selections until ~~she found one~~ ^{one APPEARED,} suitable for herself. This marital arrangement was made in a ritualistic ceremony in which the future bride and bridegroom sized up each other over a cup of tea. Today, however, the "new life" girl is free to choose her own husband; pre-marital relations occur, but not frequently. Leading from Saigon to the northwestern provinces, the ~~four~~ ² four-lane, fluorescent-lighted Bien Hoa Highway is one of the most popular lover lanes for the Saigon's teenage motor-scooter set. They are often seen necking in the roadside coconut groves--or watching a portable television set while sitting on a rice paddy dike.

In traditional times, the more the children, the bigger the family ~~joy~~ ^{joy}. Today, Vietnamese wives are expressing more and more interest in various birth control methods. Even for the upper-class, "the pill" is still too expensive and has to be especially obtained from Hong Kong; American males have introduced it to their girl friends. Other contraceptives are sold at the American military exchange and at the street-stall cigarette counters. They are widely used by bar-girls and by some of the Westernized elite; abortions are expensive, but common, though technically illegal. In the hamlets and villages, birth control is rarely used--and then the age-old method of separate beds. The Communist Viet Cong are opposed to birth control, arguing they need more human resources.

Madame Ngo Dinh ~~Ha~~ Nhu, during the Presidency of her brother-in-law from 1955 to 1963, did much to raise both the political and social status of Vietnamese women; polygamy was legally abolished, but violations were not prosecuted; divorce, contraceptives, dancing and all-male inheritances were abolished. Since then, no Vietnamese woman has even dared attempt the political feats of Madame Nhu for fear of absorbing her stigma.

Urban Vietnamese women are considered breath-takingly beautiful, with a rippling comma in each lotus-colored ~~cheek~~ cheek and long flowing ~~black~~ ebony hair which rhythmically sways with the graceful fluidity of a willow in the wind. The tiny-boned, small-waisted women caused one Western diplomat, who has traveled around the globe, to exclaim, "If one had to imagine the most beautiful of all women-goddesses, you would come up with the Vietnamese. They are not women; they are works of art." The national costume, called the ao dai, is a long-sleeved, mandarin-collared dress hugging the body from the neck to the waist and then breaking wispily into two flowing panels which seductively flit over "elephant-footed" satin pantaloons.

Yet, many Vietnamese ~~at~~ schoolgirls, and bar-girls, have forsaken the ao dai for Western ~~clothes~~ clothes; in the countryside, the pajama-like ba-bas are still worn almost exclusively. In Confucianistic times, it was considered "contemptible" for ~~Vietnam~~ Vietnamese women to appear with a bulging chestline; special straps were worn to maintain a flat-chested appearance. Today, the modern girls relish the heavily padded versions which American GI's call "Hong Kongs" because they are not indigenous to Vietnam. The newest ~~beauty~~ beauty status symbol is plastic surgery on the breasts, the unslitting of the almond-like eyes and the "straightening" of the nose. Mrs. Ky had an eye and nose operation of this kind in Japan before her marriage.

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While Vietnamese urban wives can buy a ~~xxx~~ simple dress without their husbands consent, the style of the clothes is often a matter of intense debate.^E In Saigon, the wife of a middle-class accountant--and the mother of three children--began to work as a cashier in a neighborhood bar as a means to combat inflation. One day her husband returned to find his wife wearing pedal-pushers and a beehive hair-do, which the Vietnamese call "the Birmingham Palace Guard upsweep."

"What do you think you're doing," the husband ranted. "You belong to a traditional family--but you look like a whore."

The wife retorted, "I have to wear this to look presentable for my job. What do you care--the kids are better dressed and I make more money than you do." She won the debate.

The jet set--or more accurately, Dakota set--contains a number of prominent women doctors, dentists, ~~pharm~~ pharmacists in Saigon; one ~~is~~ woman is principal of a leading girls' school; another is director of a bank; several are managing directors of radio battery and textile plants; two so-called "dragon ~~ladies~~" ladies" control most of the construction in the northern provinces where American Marines are based.

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Life in the small bracket of educated elite at the top of the Vietnamese social pyramid is cocooned in elegance and luxury. Many of these families own barn-like villas in the old "French Quarter" of Saigon. They are at least a one-car family (chauffeured), and often a two-car family, usually owning either a black Mercedes or a flashy American car. Their sons and daughters attend the elite French schools and become "awkward Frenchmen," speaking better French than Vietnamese. Many of the sons are whisked out of the country before they become eligible for military draft. Their homes are decorated with such modern luxuries as air-conditioning in the bedrooms, stereo tape recorders in the living room; in addition, they possess a bevy of the most ancient ~~convenient~~ conveniences in the Orient--servants--who are a combined baby-sitter, automatic dishwasher, cook and laundromat. In this urban elite, the families in which the husband and wife are older than 40 are dim carbon-copies of the French cultural tradition--"they are just chocolate Frenchmen, being more French than the French," one Western observed. A seven-course candlelight dinner of French cuisine, capped by champagne, for as many as 20 persons is not uncommon. All are discreetly anti-American in their political views and cultural prejudices. The younger elements in this Westernized elite--younger than ³⁰ ~~40~~--are ~~n~~ often more Americanized than Frenchified.

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"Since the French Indo-China War, there has been a big difference, even between my grandmother and myself; one ~~womanly~~ aristocratic, American-educated Saigon housewife explained. "My grandmother was stricter; she had three girls and wanted them to marry young. When my mother married my father, I was the only child. She wasn't happy in her marriage because it was an arranged one. My mother wanted me to be different and to have a higher education which she couldn't have. She wanted me to go to America or France to study--and I did.

"She allowed me to be free, except for one thing--love. She didn't want me to marry young, being afraid I would be unhappy. Though she was liberal, she didn't let me have any boy friends. She did allow male tutors to come to teach me English, Chinese characters and how to play the mandoline. But, she always watched what I did in the big mirror in the hallway. She always told me boys weren't nice and would take advantage of me. If I went to the movie or market, there was always someone trailing me. One boy wanted to marry me--he's now a general--but my mother wouldn't allow it. 'He's just a weak, noodle type,' she told me. She spoiled me and then put ~~the~~ fences around me. She tried so hard to make me someone--not simply a woman--but someone.

"I wanted to be beautiful; though we had money, my mother didn't want me to waste it. The day I left for study in ~~the~~ France, I had only seven Vietnamese dresses and ten suits. My mother said it was enough. I said it's not enough; 'someday I'll have 100 ~~best~~ beautiful dresses'.

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"I suppose she ~~is~~ succeeded. I married for love; my husband is kind and well-off; we have four lovely children--and yes, I have the 100 beautiful dresses my mother wouldn't let me have twenty years ago."

On the political situation, she explained, "Now, all Vietnamese know that our national destiny depends on international events; the question of war or peace--and whether Vietnam is free or Communist--will be decided by others. But, if we Vietnamese can not decide peace--we can decide order within the society. Still, the problems are too big for us, a small nation~~s~~ with an old culture--we can not be changed overnight, even by the big policy-makers of the world. No one yet knows what we will be changed into."

At the other end of the urban spectrum, the plight of the low-class working woman--now far more important ~~numeric~~ numerically--has improved considerably ~~has~~ in the economic field because of boomtime war spending and in the social field because of the courteous way in which American ~~men~~ ^{men} treat women of all classes. This narrowing of the gap between the high and low-class Vietnamese is exemplified by one elderly maid, who began to work for the Americans in 1964. Today, she owns a small house in the Mekong Delta and rents two rooms to American enlisted ~~me~~ ^{men}, thus achieving lower middle class status. In one middle-class apartment area in Saigon, Vietnamese wives are entranced as they watch the way an American private treats his Vietnamese wife; he opens the car doors for her, allows her to enter the taxi before him, and carries their small baby instead of having his wife do it.

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Because of the vast employment opportunities, three Vietnamese maids who had worked years for one of the wealthiest Saigon families resigned en masse when they could no longer bear the tantrums of the owner's wife. "We now have to speak softly to the maids," one Saigon matron conceded.

One ~~maid~~ housemaid, named Sau (No. 6), a peasant girl from the Viet Cong-infested portion of the Mekong Delta, explained that her mother had promised to marry her to a local Viet Cong guerrilla.

"Do you love him?" she was asked.

"I don't know," she replied. "My mother says he's a good boy in the ~~village~~ village; he came once in awhile with a pistol to see my mother. But, she says I'm too young and he's too busy for us to get married. We are only engaged."

Despite her parents' disapproval, the young woman left her home village because of extensive fighting in the area and came to Saigon.

"We can't have security in the countryside," she explained. "A sergeant can marry me by force. The soldiers can rape me. I can be put in jail if I'm caught in a trench during an operation. Virginity is important but how can one preserve it? So, I just took a chance and ~~came~~^{CAME} to Saigon to find work and see the city." She tried unsuccessfully to find work with the Americans. Asked how she could work for the Americans when she was engaged to a Viet Cong guerrilla, she replied:

"Oh, I don't care if he likes it or not. I saw the Americans treat the other maids well; they joke with them and sometimes take them to the movies or give them candy for their children."

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Another 17-year-old maid from the Communist-infested province of Quang ~~Ngai~~ Ngai defiantly recited Viet Cong poems around the house of the middle class family she worked for in Saigon.

"The Viet~~x~~ Cong say the Americans are evil," the former fish-peddler said. "The Viet Cong ~~say~~ say the Americans eat people--that they open up the abdomens and take out the people's liver and eat it. But, that's not true. The Americans eat only canned food. I see alot of empty cans at the rubbish heap."

She was asked if she liked the Americans.

"I don't hate the Americans," she replied. "But, I would never marry one--if I went back to Quang Ngai, the people would criticize me and say I was a prostitute. But, the Americans treat their maids better than the Vietnamese in Saigon treat theirs--that's really democracy." The Vietnamese word for democracy is "Dan Chu", which means literally, "People is the boss." The Saigon government describes its superior relationship to the people in the phrase Phu Mau Chi Dan--"the government is the parents of the people,"

A violent tornado of female social mobility was unleashed for the bar-girls, hostesses and prostitutes, the ~~so~~ so-called "Sin-Dolls" and "Night-Faces" which blossomed around each American cantonment. While the social plight created a political furor within Vietnam--one exploited by the Communists--the economic ladder enabled illiterate women to become supporters of their families and strutting exponents of Americanization.

One Vietnamese mother of three, abandoned by her Chinese husband, began working as a bar-girl in 1963 ^{WHEN} the American advisory effort mushroomed; today she owns the bar.

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"This is much better than the old tradition of being a cook for a husband that beats you," she explained. "And ~~because~~ if I married now, my husband wouldn't let me work in the bar. Since I've ~~already~~ been married, I've already lost my virginity. Now, as a bar owner, now one looks down on me; I own a car, house and stereo set. My children are well-fed and attend the best private French ~~school~~ school in town. Everyone treats me like a princess."

Leaving any major urban center, the sociological landscape, only minutes from the city ~~limits~~ limits, jumps backwards into a static time frame several centuries old. Between the cities and the countryside, there is no suburban bridge. Only five miles from Saigon, in the village of An Phu (pop. 2161), the family of Nguyen Tung Dung lives in a house made of thatch roof, palm-leaf siding and hard-packed mud floors--a replica of the houses of their forefathers for a thousand years. The family belongs to the lowest of the three classes in any Vietnamese village--farm laborers and tenants--which form the vast majority of Vietnam's predominantly rural population; many American officials suspect this class on the whole serves the Viet Cong Communists.

The house of the Dung family is one of ascetically simple furnishings, the most conspicuous ~~but~~ feature being a trench, under the large wooden family bed, surrounded by a thick-three-foot mud dike. It looks like a miniature, do-it-yourself fort. This trench may have saved the life of Mr. Dung several months ago on the day his son was killed only thirty meters from ^{the} ~~his~~ ~~door~~ front door.

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"My wife got up early that morning to go to the rice field at 6 a.m.," Mr. Dung explained, twisting his long wispy white beard and tucking his barefeet under the ~~cab~~ bamboo stool. "I got up to fix breakfast for the children and grandchildren. Then the firing started and we all got under the bed. One bullet came into the house, sped through the curtain and hit the mud dike and a piece of dirt flew into my soup.

"Then, I was afraid that the American planes would come and bomb the Viet Cong and would set the whole village on fire. So, I took the children and grandchildren to the mainstreet of the village. Then one of the villagers told me the news: my son was dead, when a Viet Cong company wiped out the platoon of government militamen (14 men). When I went to find my son, he was only thirty meters from our home. Half of his body was on the high ground and the other half was in the mud."

The old father concluded stoically, but simply, "It is tragic to see the dead."

The war had hurt the family in other ~~wasy~~ ways. In 1963, under the old strategic hamlet program, he had been ordered to move his home along the main highway artery; in this new village he had become a farm laborer, rather than a tenant. The lack of security affected his work.

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"We used to work in the rice paddies from dawn to dark," he said quietly, serving his guests more tea. "Now we work fifty per cent of the time. If we see a plane circle twice above us, we leave the land because we are afraid of being bombed. When we weren't working on the paddy land, we could go to the river to catch fish. But, even 700 meters from here, the Viet Cong control the canals and river. The inflation has hurt us too. If we have 100 piastres (roughly US\$1), we buy more food; if we have 80 piastres, we buy less food. When we are waiting for ^{the} rice crop to be harvested, we eat only two meals a day. We never save any money; everything is from day to day. Now, maybe my second son, who is 18, will also be drafted to serve the government and can't help us with the work. God has put these young men in this age bracket. What can we do? It's up to God to decide their fate."

Philosophically, he summarized the plight of his family.

"We are all caught between two crossfire--the government and the Viet Cong. We, the citizens of the land, have no protection for the people with power." Or, as another elderly farmer explained more incisively, "Both sides are vermin."

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On the non-Communist side, the old Confucianistic-based social structure is rapidly disintegrating without any orderly pattern for the pieces to drop into. Despite official statements by the American and Vietnamese government announcing a new social revolution, the Vietnamese population sees only the disintegration and equate it with social anarchy. The reaction of individual families is based on uncertainty and insecurity over the future; sometimes belief rests on the traditional fatalism that one's destiny will be decided by the movement of the stars. During the series of political crises in 1964-65, one anti-Communist housewife, wrenched her hands and shrieked, "Oh, my god! my god! Why was I born Vietnamese?"

But, a lower-class bar-girl simply shrugged matter-of-factly, "Life is a lotus floating down the river."

In North Vietnam, the Communist regime, in a swift-stroked revolution 12 years ago, crushed the Confucianistic aspects of Vietnamese society and then immediately replaced this regimented social order with a totally new, but even more tightly regimented order of ~~their own~~ their own--an order veering towards collectivization.

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One 26 year-old North Vietnamese prisoner explained life in the rural Communist state. From the time a baby is four months old, he said, the Communist regime in the North begins to rear its young and continues to mold the individual's life until death. The dictatorial decisions, once made by the father in the Confucianistic society, are now made by the Communist state and its party apparatus, including the most personal details of love, sex, marriage and the family's worship ancestors. The first four months after birth the mother feeds the new baby; then the government places it in a state operated nursery and the mother returns to work. As a teenager, the child's social values are established by the Red Kerchief organization, instead of the family; the cream of the crop then move into the Lao Dong (Communist) Youth League, and then later the Communist Party. The Party then becomes the center of life, surpassing even family relationships. If, for example, a daughter and her father sit together at a meeting of the government, or of the party, or of government-run associations, they address each other as "dong chi"--"comrade"--instead of using individual names.

The Communist Party member approves marriage plans; each individual ,arriage request is studied. Those who marry in spite of the disapproval of the Party members are indirectly punished, through economic discrimination in rations or government housing. The wedding ceremony, now drastically simplified, still includes, "collective celebrations with songs," but there is not enough food for feasts. There are no church marriages.

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The imponderable non-military question now confronting South Vietnam is this: will the regimented Communist social revolution weering towards collectivisation prevail; or will the social upheaval on the non-Communist side--now orbitting in mid-air--fall into a more orderly, yet modern and just social framework. This question will not be decided by tough-willed generals or ministers, who now presume to guide Vietnam in its so-called "nation-building" process. It will be decided within the context of each Vietnamese family by those China-doll Cinderellas, who are made of steel and grief-tears.