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October 14, 1965

DIAMONDS, BISCUIT BOXES AND BOMB SHELTERS

SAIGON--There's centuries and classes, wars and worlds of difference between the wealthy Saigon housewife and the young peasant woman.

The rich Saigon housewife worries about the price of rice and milk; the young peasant woman in the province owns rice she has grown in soggy rice paddies, but she worries how long she can hold it before paying off Viet Cong or government troops.

The high-class Saigon housewife worries about getting her children into the French-run schools of Saigon's snob set; the young peasant mother in the provinces wonders how long it will be before either the Viet Cong or the government destroys her child's meagre village school.

The high-class Saigon housewife is an expert on investing in houses to rent to Americans or in other real estate which may surround future American military installations; the peasant woman in the provinces is an expert on building underground bomb shelter.

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For the wealthy Saigon housewife, diamonds are her best friend. She's an expert on good diamonds smuggled in from Bangkok, Hong Kong, Laos or France. She can tell the quality, the carat and the price in a flash. She buys them not for rings on her fingers but to stash away in a biscuit box--the literal and symbolic equivalent of American's hiding money in an old sock. The housewives buy diamonds, first of all, as an investment and a safeguard against inflation. Savings accounts and investments in war bonds are considered insanity; during the past eight months alone inflation has eaten chewed up at least 30 per cent of idle capital.

The second reason for buying diamonds is that they can be easily smuggled out of the country in the event the family wants to make a fast exit or wants to smuggle their savings out of the country, into foreign banks. In this respect, diamonds are much more easily smuggled out than gold, dollars or francs.

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The smuggling of diamonds by the ~~wives~~ of high-ranking officials is considered so commonplace within Vietnamese circles that Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, in a recent press conference, explained he did not take his lovely wife with him on state visits to Taiwan and the Philippines because he was afraid the Vietnamese people would think she ^{was} indulging in illegal transactions of diamonds. When he did take her on his last trip out of country to Malaysia, he told newsmen anyone else could check their luggage for diamonds at the airport.

Gold is also considered a good in-country investment; lower middle-class women frequently have it custom-made into BRACELETS, bracelets, which then become the equivalent of walking bank accounts. But ^{Gold} gold is too difficult to smuggle out of the country in quantity. During the current devastating wave of inflation, the price of gold has jumped in the past few weeks ^{from} 7,500 piastres to tael ^{(475) a} (37½ grams) ~~then~~ to 8,700 piastres (~~487~~).

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It is commonly accepted that these wives influence their husbands--the generals and ministers--who rule the country. American advisers, to the highest-ranking officers of the Vietnamese army, have expressed astonishment that the Vietnamese general who roughly and toughly gave orders to his subordinates during the daytime were virtually henpecked once they got within the confines of their own house and within voice distance of their wives.

It is commonly accepted that many of the wives of Vietnamese generals, colonels and ministers are the business manager within the family; more often than not charges of corruption are directed at a general's wife--or mistress--rather than the general himself. Some of the general's wives are involved in legitimate businesses, such as import-export (but the issuing of these licenses is often a matter of power and position rather than merit); however, some reliable Vietnamese sources indicate that a few of the top-ranking wives are "involved in trafficking of influence." Thus, if a low-ranking captain or major wants to be transferred from a hotspot province into Saigon, or be transferred into a lucrative post for rake-offs (such as the engineering corps), he usually see^s the wife of the general, rather than the general himself. If the proper orders are then signed, the general has, according to official rationale, done a favor for his own wife--but not for the officer himself. Obviously, the wife of the general is also given "a token of appreciation."

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Whether the charges of alleged corruption against the wives of high-ranking officers and ministers is actually true, or whether it is Communist-inspired propaganda--it is so commonly accepted in Vietnamese circles that Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky recently issued an official note sent to all government services and agencies warning against corruption and malpractice of a number of government officials' wives who had made use of their husbands position for self-interested purposes to the detriment of the public.

One necessary status symbol for the Saigon upper-crust housewife--along with air-conditioning and an American or French car, all of which have become more conspicuous with each increase in American aid--is to have her children enrolled in a French school. There are FIVE French-operated schools in Saigon and ~~in the provinces.~~ The French government supplies 400 lovely French schoolteachers. Lists for school admission are so long that a 10,000 piastre pay-off is mandatory; other pay-offs and gifts, such as cameras and watches, are considered musts to the French schoolteacher at examination time, "and if you don't think so, just look at how many French teachers leave Viet Nam and invest in hotels on the French Riviera," one Vietnamese housewife explained.

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Not long ago, a French diplomat explained, "We don't care how many Vietnamese generals make anti-French speeches at press conferences. We know when the student exams roll around, their wives will crawl in the back door begging us to let their kiddies pass". This Summer, the Saigon government broke diplomatic relations with Paris; the French diplomatic staff was expelled, but the French schoolteachers remained.

At the other extreme of the spectrum is Miss Nguyen Thi Bay, a 19-year-old unmarried woman who recently fled the provinces to find a maid's job in Saigon. She is paid 1000 piastres (\$14) a month, plus room and board.

She explained a young woman's plight in a war-infested province of the Mekong Delta.

"Last April, several jets circles over our house about five times and then bombed and strafed it," she explained stoically. "My parents were working in the ricefield and I was paddling my sampan coming from relative's house when I saw the flames pouring out of our house. I ran toward the house to try to salvage some of our belongings, but instead I found my elder brother near the family bomb shelter with blood gushing from his head and my younger 12-year-old brother with his face full of blood.

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"My elder brother was rushed to the medical unit run by the Filipinos and the doctor said it was better to leave the metal fragment in my brother's head rather than to operate. My younger brother was lucky; none of the shrapnel got into his eyes; but his face is now crisscrossed with scars. After that my parents moved into the provincial town to live with my uncle and I came to Saigon to get a maid's job to help support them."

In Saigon, Miss Bay (which means the Seventh child) looked at the trenches built by the Saigon government as protection against possible retaliatory bombing raids from North Viet Nam. She laughed and said, "in the villages, if we built trenches like these, all of us would be killed."

"In our villages, the peasants built two kinds of shelters. One kind is inside the house right under the bed; when we hear any artillery, mortars or groundfire we just roll out of bed into the trench. The second kind is usually in the yard or garden and is used when aerial bombing and strafing starts. Even our family dog, ~~a German shepherd~~, knew exactly which hole to run into. When there was mortar or artillery shelling, he ran into the shelter under the bed. But if there was bombing from airplanes he would lead the family to the big trench in the garden. He could even tell the difference between a cargo plane and a fighter; he didn't even run out of the house when a cargo plane passed over."

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"Some of the families in our village have pretty plush bomb shelters. Some have put their money together to built a community shelter deep in the ground with concrete walls and floor so they can sleep there during the night--time."