FOREIGN AFFAIRS: POLICY, CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF LOVE AND WAR IN VIETNAM

Amanda C. Boczar

University of Kentucky, ajc1625@gmail.com

This Doctoral Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the History at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations--History by an authorized administrator of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
STUDENT AGREEMENT:

I represent that my thesis or dissertation and abstract are my original work. Proper attribution has been given to all outside sources. I understand that I am solely responsible for obtaining any needed copyright permissions. I have obtained needed written permission statement(s) from the owner(s) of each third-party copyrighted matter to be included in my work, allowing electronic distribution (if such use is not permitted by the fair use doctrine) which will be submitted to UKnowledge as Additional File.

I hereby grant to The University of Kentucky and its agents the irrevocable, non-exclusive, and royalty-free license to archive and make accessible my work in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known. I agree that the document mentioned above may be made available immediately for worldwide access unless an embargo applies.

I retain all other ownership rights to the copyright of my work. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of my work. I understand that I am free to register the copyright to my work.

REVIEW, APPROVAL AND ACCEPTANCE

The document mentioned above has been reviewed and accepted by the student’s advisor, on behalf of the advisory committee, and by the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS), on behalf of the program; we verify that this is the final, approved version of the student’s thesis including all changes required by the advisory committee. The undersigned agree to abide by the statements above.

Amanda C. Boczar, Student
Dr. Lien-Hang Thi Nguyen, Major Professor
Dr. Scott Taylor, Director of Graduate Studies
FOREIGN AFFAIRS:
POLICY, CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF LOVE AND WAR IN VIETNAM

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Amanda C. Boczar

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Lien-Hang Thi Nguyen, Associate Professor of History

Lexington, Kentucky

2015

Copyright © Amanda Jean Chapman Boczar 2015
ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

FOREIGN AFFAIRS:
POLICY, CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF LOVE AND WAR IN VIETNAM

*Foreign Affairs: Policy, Culture, and the Making of Love and War in Vietnam* investigates the interplay between war and society leading to and during the Vietnam War. This project intertwines histories of foreign relations, popular culture, and gender and sexuality as lenses for understanding international power relations during the global Cold War more broadly. By examining sexual encounters between American service members and Vietnamese civilian women, this dissertation argues that relationships ranging from prostitution to dating, marriage, and rape played a significant role in the diplomacy, logistics, and international reception of the war. American disregard for South Vietnamese morality laws in favor of bolstering GI morale in the early war years contributed to the instability of the alliance and led to a rise in anti-American activities, health concerns, and military security threats.

The length of the war in addition to the difficulty for service members to definitively identify enemy forces placed stress on soldiers. Publicized cases of rape and disagreements over responsibility for orphans or children born outside marriage to U.S. servicemen in the later war years further deteriorated relations. Negotiating these relationships resulted in implicit assignments of power between the United States and their allies in South Vietnam. In addition to the bi-lateral relations between the U.S. and South Vietnam, North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front propaganda citing the GI-civilian relationships sparked security concerns and further threatened the alliance. This dissertation further contends that encounters provided propaganda material for opposition forces, strained the overall war effort at home, and shaped how Americans remember the war.
FOREIGN AFFAIRS:
POLICY, CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF LOVE AND WAR IN VIETNAM

By
Amanda C. Boczar

Dr. Lien-Hang Thi Nguyen
Director of Dissertation

Dr. Scott Taylor
Director of Graduate Studies

04-01-2015
Date
For JRB
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to my advisor and mentor, Hang Nguyen, for being the most real, reassuring, and generous advisor someone could ask for. Her willingness to give time, energy, and friendship were more than I could have imagined or hoped for, and something for which I am sincerely grateful. I am honored to be your first advisee.

My other core committee members have always been willing to mentor, constructively criticize, and offer their time for my benefit. Akiko Takenaka’s “Representations of War” seminar changed my life. It was the class that sparked my first professional conference, in Switzerland of all places. The readings and discussions in that seminar captivated me in a way that they have shaped all of my work sense. Paul Chamberlin’s advice has always been practical and perfect. I have used his rules for conference papers without fail for years. I still practice my elevator pitch from 710, and I always have my thesis ready when I set out to talk about my work. These skills have made me a better communicator. Heather Stur of the University of Southern Mississippi has likewise provided great feedback and steady encouragement on the project.

At the University of Kentucky, several professors have offered priceless time and advice. Awet Weldemichael challenged me to change how I see the world, and how I understand my own potential, in brand new ways. You became a mentor and a friend and I am honored to know you. Professor Petrone has always been a willing sounding board and an advocate for graduate students. Tina Hagee and Professors Albisetti, Campbell, Kern, and Slaymaker all encouraged me, guided me through seminars, assisted me during qualifying examinations, or provided feedback on the dissertation. Dr. Ellen Furlough was a fantastic mentor who took an early interest in my work that surprised and excited me.
Her guidance and encouragement shaped a great deal of the way I approach research. She always encouraged me to make it bigger, to go after something new, and never be afraid of my perceived limitations.

My friends and family have kept me sane with laughs, support, and lots of coffee. My page-a-day partner and friend, Krystle Farman, has helped me through the challenging days of writing and graduate school with happy thoughts and dark roast. I'm glad we kept each other so honest. Helen Pho has shared countless hotel rooms, Vietnamese tips, and primary sources. Bridget Ash kept me positive and running strong. My sister- and father-in-law, Heather and Jim, made holidays happier from dominos to Christmas cocktails on Wall Street. My brother, John, and my nephew, Lukas, always keep me laughing and encouraged. My parents, John and Annette, go above and beyond to help me however and whenever they can. My family’s patience has been a most valuable gift. My most faithful writing companions have been my dogs. They've heard every idea first and while they seemed overwhelmingly unimpressed, I could tell they supported me nonetheless.

This project has benefitted immensely from the financial support of several generous grants and fellowships. A scholarship from the Southeast Asian Summer Studies Institute provided me the opportunity to begin learning Vietnamese. Two Bemis Dissertation Research Grants from the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, the Lance Banning Memorial Fellowship from the Department of History at UK, and the Dissertation Enhancement Award from the Graduate School at UK supported archival research. Additional funding from SHAFR’s Robert A. and Barbara Divine Graduate Student Travel Grant, the University of Bern, the Department of History at UK, and the Graduate School at UK allowed me to attend conferences. Intellectual support from
archivists, particularly those at the Gerald Ford Presidential Library, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Michigan State University Archives, the National Archives in College Park, the Richard Nixon Presidential Library, the Thư Viện khoa Học Tổng Họp and the Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia II, have likewise offered valuable leads and ideas on how to proceed with my research when my topic seemed invisible in the archival records.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Jason. You have always stood beside me no matter how often I traveled or practiced conference papers on you. Your advice helped me hone my arguments, your excitement for the project kept me excited, and your love has sustained me. While I married him for far more than his librarian skills, it only makes the deal sweeter. Thank you for supporting us these past nine years. You deserve a break more than me.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures ............................................................................................................... viii

Chapter One: Introduction: Love, War, and Bargirls: Lenses of Wartime Vietnam
   Memories of Love and War .......................................................................................... 1
   Foreign Affairs: Gender and Sexuality in International Relations ......................... 3
   Historiography ............................................................................................................. 14
   Outline of Chapters ................................................................................................. 23

Chapter Two: Intimacy and Politics in Colonial Vietnam
   Introduction ................................................................................................................ 26
   Colonial Intimacy, Masculinity, and Power ............................................................... 29
   Regulating Early Colonial Behavior ......................................................................... 37
   French Representations and American Adaptation of Indochinese Sexuality .......... 39
   Prostitution and Venereal Disease from the Interwar Period to Decolonization ...... 52
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 62

Chapter Three: Brothel Culture in the First Indochina War and the Rise of Post-Colonial Morality
   Introduction ................................................................................................................ 64
   Brothels and the defeat of the French in Indochina .................................................. 69
   “Dancing with Death is Sufficient”: Diệm and the Forging of Post-Colonial Vietnam ........................................................................................................... 73
   Madame Nhu against the World .............................................................................. 76
   Michigan State University Goes to Saigon ............................................................ 88
   Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 100

Chapter Four: The Arrival: Morale, Morality, and the “American Brothel”
   Introduction ................................................................................................................ 102
   Boots on the Ground .................................................................................................. 108
   The GI Economy ........................................................................................................ 117
   “Women, taxi drivers, and pedicab pimps”: Saigon’s Sex Market ......................... 120
   Sex and the American Morale Problem .................................................................... 131
   Sexual Revolutions, Anti-Americanism, & the Vietnamese Discourse over Sexuality ........................................................................................................... 135
   The “American Brothel” ......................................................................................... 141
   Conclusion: A Storm Brewing .................................................................................. 149

Chapter Five: Uneasy Allies: Vietnamese Eradication Efforts and the Americanization of Sexual Policy
   Introduction ................................................................................................................ 151
   War on Corruption: The Vietnamese Eradication Campaigns .............................. 157
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1, “Femme de Saïgon” ................................................................. 44
Figure 2, "The Pretty Americans: How Wives Behave Overseas" by Harlan Cleveland... 92
   Copyright © 1959 Harper's Magazine. All Rights reserved.
   Reproduced from the March issue by special permission
Figure 3, “My Lai Memorial Site – Vietnam – Main Monument,” ......................... 257
Figure 4, “My Lai Memorial Site – Vietnam – Garden Statuary 2,” ..................... 257
Memories of Love and War

Reflecting in 1989 on the encounters between civilian women like herself and soldiers during the Vietnam War, Le Ly Hayslip remembered, “We did nothing to make ourselves look prettier, for pretty in wartime meant danger – although for some girls it also meant money.”¹ Hayslip’s comments referred to danger from both American and Vietnamese soldiers. The ability to profit, however, increased dramatically with the American escalation of the conflict. During the war, hundreds of thousands of sexual or otherwise intimate encounters took places between American GIs and South Vietnamese women. As the quote above suggests, the interactions bred both profit and fear for the women over how their relationships with servicemen could shape their station in life or place them at risk for rape or other forms of violence. Women who defied boundaries by engaging in relationships with U.S. servicemen, including the numerous women who found agency in their actions, shaped the war in direct and indirect ways. This dissertation examines the impact of these sexual encounters on the war, foreign relations, and popular culture for the United States, Vietnam, and the rest of the world.

For many Americans who did not fight in Vietnam, our introduction to Vietnamese women comes through the lenses of popular culture in films or memoir accounts like

---

Since its release in 1987, one line from Stanley Kubrick’s iconic war film Full Metal Jacket has infiltrated American popular culture with perhaps the most ubiquitous derogatory stereotype of Asian sexuality. The crass offer spoken by a street prostitute, “Me so horny. Me love you long time” has forged its way into the memory of the war in Vietnam and the women who GIs encountered there. The scene linking sex and violence in the otherwise cerebral war film has almost single-handedly reshaped the way Americans think of the war behind the perceived combat front.\(^3\) The lines from Full Metal Jacket are used again and again whether in songs like 2 Live Crew’s “Me So Horny” or mocked in more recent films like The 40-Year-Old Virgin (2005). They have even popped up in places as strange as signs at Major League Baseball games.\(^4\) While relatively harmless and apart from the original meaning in the context of Vietnamese wartime prostitution, the use of the phrase as a pun for then Cleveland Indian Michael Bourne illustrates the commonality and use of Full Metal Jacket’s terminology in popular culture. The broken English used in the phrase has made the dialog both memorable and inherently racist. When commonly associated with Asian female sexual promiscuity, it has not only offended women of Asian descent, but reshaped how we think of the war.\(^5\)

---


\(^3\) Auster and Quart, How the War was Remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam (New York: Praeger, 1988), 143.


\(^5\) In the face of Cafepress’s line of wearables related to everything from the film’s most famous line to mock advertisements for “Mama San’s Massage Parlor,” stands the popular retort of “I will not love you
Looking past the plots, the representations of Vietnamese women in American war films like *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), or *Causalities of War* (1989) offer an insight to how the U.S. interacted with the civilian populations. They shed light on not only the historical realities of economic Americanization, the growth of the prostitution industry, the spread of disease, and heightened risks of sexual violence within hyper-masculinized spaces, but also the resistance by both GIs and women to the changes on the ground in South Vietnam. With these ideas in mind regarding the role of film in shaping the memory of the war, I set out in this project to unravel the complexities that lay behind these surface representations of GI-civilian sexual encounters so engrained in popular culture.

**Foreign Affairs: Gender and Sexuality in International Relations**

This dissertation seeks to shed light on an aspect of the war that has been widely discussed but rarely researched in order to complicate how scholars understand the interactions between American servicemen and the Vietnamese people they interacted with in South Vietnam. The field of U.S. and the world offers considerable tools to understand the impact of sexual encounters on foreign relations during the Vietnam War, counting many of the themes discussed in Michael Hogan and Thomas Paterson’s *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, second edition. These include examinations of internal foreign policy issues such as bureaucratic politics, psychology, and national...
security, but also the external factors of dependency, borders and global approaches, ideology, culture, cultural transfer, gender, and race. Stepping back from the study of high-power relations, this research presents the encounters with a focus on the intersections where diplomatic and cultural sources are assessed together to illustrate the impact of war on society, and society on warfare. This project sought a balance in these sources, but available sources dictated the ratio.

The lives of civilian women, and especially sexual encounters between these women and American GIs, challenged diplomatic and military relations during the Cold War conflict in Vietnam. The Republic of Vietnam (RVN), colloquially South Vietnam, resisted American social and cultural interactions with civilians. Between the Indochina Wars, the RVN attempted to establish an image of strict morality, including banning public fraternization and prostitution. In contrast, young American men flooding into Vietnam during the 1960s did so in the context of a global sexual revolution with eroticized colonial ideals of Asian women in their mind.

Inflation, vice, and intercultural relationships between GIs and civilians kept pace with the escalation of the war. At odds over social policy within an already tenuous alliance politically prevented either the United States or South Vietnam from making any real progress on curbing the perceived immoral or illegal behaviors, nor their negative repercussions on Vietnamese society and the war effort. Venereal disease, unwanted pregnancy, GI misconduct and distractions, and sexual violence became serious concerns for both governments by the late 1960s. In addition to the practical issues associated with the encounters, they provided constant material for the anti-war movement. Once sexual

---

encounters became so entrenched in the day-to-day conduct of soldiers and civilians working in or around large bases and in urban areas, it became impossible to disconnect the two.

With an emphasis on the United States and its RVN allies, as well as the men and women whose experiences form the core of this dissertation, I argue that in many ways sexual encounters shaped the Vietnam War behind the front lines. This impact can be seen by looking at three main areas, U.S.-RVN power relations, South Vietnamese society, and the U.S. military. Unlike previous experiences of the United States in Asia during the twentieth century, the South Vietnamese bans on prostitution and resistance to interracial marriages created a new set of challenges for American policy-makers and their judgment to write and enforce certain military regulations regarding social activities. This conflict between international powers sheds light on the importance of social and cultural issues in the establishment of power in foreign relations. The acceptance, undermining, or policy of ignoring RVN social policies by the United States during the Vietnam War contributed to the overall relationship between the two nations and in many ways dictated the behind-the-lines conduct of GIs abroad.

Politically, Johnson attempted to ignore and pass on the problems related to international sexual relations to the Nixon administration, allowing corruption, disease, and security threats to skyrocket. The political and diplomatic concerns between western powers and the Vietnamese began during the French colonial era and influenced how the United States viewed and treated GI sexuality in Asia. The Johnson administration’s failure to contain and address sexual encounters as a serious concern upset the RVN and put GIs at risk. During the Nixon years, politics surrounding the sexual behavior of GIs became
too contentious to leave unchecked. The forced implementation of sanitation cards for bar girls, a complete restructuring to marriage legislation, highly publicized reactions to sexual-violence ridden massacres, and an unwieldy Amer-asian orphan problem all shook U.S.-South Vietnamese relations during the already tumultuous years of the Paris Peace Accords.

Several questions drove my research in this area, including: In what ways did the military engage with non-combatant Vietnamese? How does culture, defined by Akira Iriye in the study of international relations as “the sharing and transmitting of consciousness within and across national boundaries,” affect war?\(^7\) How do gender and sexuality bridge cultures or contribute to cultural transfer? The importance of gender and sexuality here builds on Katherine Sibley’s assessment about, “how perceptions and realities of intimate personal relationships and reputed sexual histories can both influence foreign policies and reflect them as well.”\(^8\) As Robert Dean, writes, gender and sexual encounters are critical to foreign relations as they “structure informal, but very real, relationships of power.”\(^9\) And, finally, what was more important for the American government: the morale of troops, the maintenance of alliances, or the perception of morality in their behavior? A similar question can be asked about the Vietnamese motivations for sometimes upholding legal

---

\(^7\) Akira Iriye, “Cultural and International History,” in Ibid., 242; Iriye notes that “culture” is as difficult a term to pin down as “ideology,” “power,” or “security.” By his definition, culture adds significant depth to the study of foreign relations since “cultural phenomena ... are not directly involved in state-to-state political, strategic, or economic affairs.” This introduction and examination of non-state actors and their impact on states is central to this study.

\(^8\) Katherine A. S. Sibley, “Introduction: Gender and Sexuality in American Foreign Relations,” in Diplomatic History 36, no. 4 (September 2012): 696; For a discussion of cultural transfer, see, Jessica C. E. Gienow-Hecht, “Cultural Transfer,” in Ibid., 257-278.

\(^9\) Robert Dean, “The Personal and the Political: Gender and Sexuality in Diplomatic History,” in Diplomatic History 36, no. 4 (September 2012); 763.
social barriers while other times acting complacent in the undermining of their laws. In considering the motivations of the South Vietnamese governments, the emphasis of their policy seems to rest on maintaining autonomy within the alliance.

Broadly, this dissertation engages with questions of sex, power, policy and culture during the Vietnam War by examining the nature and consequences of sexual encounters between U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese civilians from their roots in the French colonial period through the fall of Saigon in 1975. I examine foreign relations and government policies from the United States and South Vietnam during the war relating to a variety of intimate encounters, which in the context of this work can often but not always be interchanged with sexual encounters, between American military forces and Vietnamese civilians. At the core of this dissertation, and I argue U.S.-RVN relations during the war, is the prostitution industry. It is the prostitution industry which grows to be the most prominent, first garners the attention of both governments, and overshadows all other types of relations for the duration of the conflict and its memory with films like *Full Metal Jacket*. Beyond prostitution, this project will examine policy-changing consensual and non-consensual intimate relations including dating, cohabitation, marriage, paternity, and sexual violence as they occurred throughout cities and rural areas in South Vietnam.

***

Using archival documents from multiple archives in the United States, Vietnam, France, and England, I weave together diplomatic, cultural, and gender history to provide a better understand the points of tension and cooperation between the United States and the RVN over social relations. My approach to this study is transnational in nature. A transnational approach, using the definition from Patricia Clavin’s article “Defining
Transnationalism,” will explore the perspectives of and intersections between governments and non-state actors. Clavin argues, transnationalism “is first and foremost about people: the social space that they inhabit, the networks they form and the ideas they exchange.”

By exploring human interactions in a transnational context, this dissertation strives to show new ways to understand the structures of international governments and their actions.

Gender provided a critical link between diplomatic history and cultural history in this project. The breadth and personal nature of the topics have placed limits on how women discuss their role in the war. But, by looking beyond the silences to analyze social norms and cultural transfer we can tell quite a bit about women’s lives as they lived and worked along GIs for the entirety of the war. As feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe writes:

Every military base depends for its operation on women occupying a range of social locations, performing quite different roles. To make visible that gendered base system, one much take seriously the lives and ideas of the military base laundress, the military wife, the woman in prostitution in a disco just outside the gates, a woman who is paid to sneak on base to have sex with a male soldier, the military enlisted woman and woman officer, and the women who has become a public critic of the base.11

---

10 Patricia Clavin, “Defining Transnationalism” Contemporary European History 14, no.4 (2005), 422; Transnationalism is a term used extensively in migration studies with Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Szanton Blanc defining transnational migration as “the process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. We call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders” in Schiller, Basch, et al., “From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorizing Transnational Migration” 68, no. 1 (January 1995): 48-63.

11 While I agree with Enloe, this study does not expand to cover all these categories. Most notably I do not engage with the lives of military women whose involvement develops in different ways from civilian women; Cynthia Enloe, Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics, 2nd Ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014 [1989]), 172-173.
I would like to take this a step further in regards to the Vietnamese female civilian. Not only does their relation to the base shed light on gendered structures in the military, but understanding how they interacted with servicemen also helps us understand how and why the war was fought in the way it was. Social, and sexual, policy became a serious concern, and an expensive one at that. Through a study of prostitution, rape, dating and marriage, this work will illustrate not only the prevalence of the American sexual experience in Vietnam, but, more significantly, how the politics surrounding these little studied encounters strained relations between the allies, as well as between the United States and their North Vietnamese opponents.¹²

Masculinity and gendered views toward Vietnamese men also impacted American attitudes in Vietnam. From the era, legends abound concerning President Lyndon Johnson’s pride in the physical stature of his manhood as evidence of U.S. superiority over both enemies and allies in Southeast Asia. In a now infamous incident, when asked by reporters why the United States was involved in the faraway conflict, the frustrated President exposed himself and declared, “This is why.”¹³ Earlier in the war, following the initial attacks after the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson celebrated, “I didn’t just screw Ho

---

¹² For the purposes of this dissertation, I occasionally use the term sexual or social policies or politics in a generalized way that differs from the use of the term in other subfields, including the feminist theory coining of the term used first by Kate Millet in Sexual Politics (New York: Double Day, 1969). The politics related to sexual encounters during the Vietnam War address all political and diplomatic exchanges related to intimate, romantic, or sexual contacts between members of either nation through the duration of the war. This includes, but is not limited to prostitution, dating, casual sex, marriage, rape, or other forms of sexual assault. To address the nuances of sexual or social policies and politics as they arise, I have, for the most part, chosen to approach these areas separately throughout the dissertation. While other works have given emphasis to one form of inter-cultural relations or another (specifically war-brides or only prostitution, for example), I view the variety of relationships as part of the complicating factor for policy-makers handling such issues. While they will at times overlap, approaching them roughly thematically rather than strictly chronologically allows for the most exhaustive examination of the foreign relations tied to each.

Chi Minh ... I cut his pecker off.”

Never one to mince words, Johnson’s over-compensated comments illustrate the frustration he harbored over how to deal with what he previously viewed as a small threat in Vietnam.

Overall, the Vietnam War contributes significantly to American collective memory of the twentieth century. Often, encounters and perceptions of the Vietnamese people obsess popular culture outlets such as film and literature, but rarely do these representations deal with how these human relationships impacted foreign relations. Through the study of prostitution, dating, marriage, paternity, and rape, this work argues not only for the prevalence of the American sexual experience in Vietnam, but, more significantly, that these relationships strained allied cooperation, created propaganda for their opponents, and ultimately framed the experiences of GIs and civilians behind the front lines.

I am interested in connections between daily human interactions and acts of national policy both within and across borders. Studies such as Sarah Snyder’s *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War: A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network* have convincingly argued that the actions of individuals often dictate the fates of major powers. The focus on the daily lives of soldiers or civilians in Vietnam is not meant to trivialize their lives or sacrifice; rather I hope to provide a face to face-less soldier and the face-less Vietnamese who they interacted with on a daily basis. Through these accounts of love, sex, trauma, war and policy, soldiers played a significant role in shaping the war’s meaning and foreign policy between the nations. Young men, many drafted into military

---


service, lived lives in Vietnam that often challenged the moral standards of the Vietnamese government, as well as their own. Through this study of their daily lives, in particular, their intimate and sexual encounters in Vietnam, it becomes clear that these soldiers not only had a place in the popular consciousness of how the world viewed the war, but also how policy-makers navigated the conflict.

As recent works by historians studying the field once referred to as simply diplomatic history illustrate, elements of other subfields from social and cultural history have been firmly embedded within the methodologies of scholars of American foreign relations for the past several decades. Scholars have long embraced that policy does not occur in a vacuum, and social and cultural elements and the role of non-state actors need to be incorporated as topics of serious inquiry with the potential to drive foreign policy narratives. I see myself in dialog historians who have engaged with these new trends, including Snyder’s use of multiple state and non-state actors across a transnational stage,

---


as well as those like Melanie McAlister’s *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945* which utilizes cultural elements such as film and popular opinion to explain American action in the Middle East in the early Cold War.\(^{18}\) During the Vietnam War, documents indicating shifts in society and culture from labor statistics to fashion coverage in newspapers to literature, as well as policy documents from local governments and heads of state offer critical insight to how sexual encounters affected war-making and policy decisions through a process of pragmatic, non-pragmatic, national, transnational, social and personal factors. Balancing these diverse, and sometimes contradictory, intersections create the conflict at the core of this research.

***

Working on issues like warfare and sexuality regarding the recent past create significant challenges for historians. Records linking the subjects are typically indirect in their discussion of how the United States dealt with interactions between the military and sexual encounters with civilians. Daily police records that did not involve cases brought to trail are protected under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). I visited numerous archives in four countries and engaged with diverse collections of sources to uncover documents about how wartime sexual encounters impacted foreign relations. To obtain a rounded understanding of the complex relationships, I worked to balance government sources with accounts written in memoirs or newspapers.

Within the United States, the archives of institutions and the federal government provided a broad framework for the role of sexuality and foreign relations between the

United States and Vietnam. Visits to the special collections at Michigan State University and the University of Wisconsin, the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, and the Johnson, Nixon, and Ford Presidential Libraries provided thousands of documents for this purpose. Excellent resources, particularly on MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) initiatives were viewed through the Vietnam Center Archives webpage hosted by Texas Tech University. GI and Vietnamese memoirs, published oral histories, and first-hand interviews provided critical sources to fill in the human side of the relationships discussed in the government documents. Personal accounts of legal or illegal behaviors rely on the soldier’s memory, honesty and willingness to discuss events they may not want their families to know took place. Introducing these sources into conversation with each other and archival materials helps support claims. Unsupported claims also serve a purpose by showing how individuals wanted themselves to be remembered.

International archives and sources complicate and enrich the history by placing the events into an inter- and trans-national dialog. The Vietnamese National Archive Center II and General Science Library in Ho Chi Minh City provided sources of anti-prostitution campaigns in the RVN, as well as documents concerning corruption, social behavior, and collaborative documentation for American aid workers supporting post-1973 recovery programs. Other Vietnamese sources include newspapers, as well as published works. I was also able to incorporate numerous sources on the French colonial period using the online Gallica database and through a visit to the Service Historique de la Défense Archives in Vincenne, France. Documents from America’s closest ally outside Vietnam during the war, Australia, were examined at the British National Archives in Kew outside London.
Economics, health, and security records offered particularly useful material on prostitution, while memoirs tended to be the most enlightening regarding cohabitation and the struggle to obtain legal marriages. Similarly, failed engagements and marriages are also evident in requests for adoption. The struggle for the Nixon administration to assess the problem of war orphans indicate the long-term social impact the Vietnam War would have on Vietnamese society. Regarding sexual violence, American memoir and interview records were largely silent but Military Police nightly records indicated a striking number of occurrences of violence against Vietnamese women. Finding the links between such a diverse range of sources guided this project and helped frame the varied relationships as part of a larger phenomenon related to the history of war, power, and gender.

**Historiography**

This dissertation speaks to two primary areas of historiography within the field of U.S. and the world, or the new diplomatic history: Vietnam War Studies and studies of war and sexuality. While there is some overlap in these two areas, this is the first in-depth study of sexual relationships between U.S. service members and civilians during the Vietnam War. Filling this gap within studies of sexuality and warfare, it also expands the field of Vietnam War studies through its use of Vietnamese language sources and gender in its analysis of foreign relations during the war. As a work of U.S. and the world history, I embrace social and cultural methods for analyzing military and diplomatic history necessary to complete a study like this.

The historiography of the Vietnam War represents one of the broadest and most complex fields in modern history. Within Vietnam War studies this dissertation adds to scholarship on American decision making, daily life and war culture for not only the American military but also civilian Vietnamese, in addition to theoretical understandings.
of the relationship between war, culture, trauma and memory. Significant works on these topics include Kyle Longley’s *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*, Heonik Kwon’s *After the Massacre: Commemoration and Consolation in Ha My and My Lai* and *The Other Cold War*, as well as Mark Philip Bradley’s *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam*. Works like Bradley’s points to the shift from American-centric works to those that highlight the significance of the Vietnamese experience to provide a more complete history of the war.

Several top-down foreign policy studies analyze the relationship between the governments in Washington and Saigon over the course of the war. In particular, the American relationship with the Ngô Đình Diệm Administration from 1955 to 1963 represents a major focus of this literature to date. Like the works discussed above, recent monographs in this area emphasize the agency and power wielded by Diệm and the Vietnamese. Both the top-down studies and those exploring the conflict beyond the nation-states embrace the rising trend known as the “Vietnamization” of Vietnam War studies which seeks to correct the imbalance between the American and Vietnamese perspectives.

Recent works have approached the war from this “Vietnamized” perspective enriching our understanding of the conflict. These include David Elliott’s *The Vietnamese...*

---


War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975 which offers a detailed bottom-up study from the Mỹ Tho region of the Mekong Delta. In another example, Benedict Kerkvliet’s The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy illustrates how the Vietnamese in rural areas found ways to move around Hanoi’s plans for collectivization of farming providing them with a sense of agency not present in American-centric studies of the war. In addition, Nu Ahn Tran’s article, “South Vietnamese Identity, American Intervention, and the Newspaper Chính Luận [Political Discussion], 1965–1969” provides wonderful insight into the politics and promotion of South Vietnamese identity during the height of the war. I am interested in these and other various levels of connections that took place between daily human actions in Vietnam and acts of national policy, as well as the relationships between civilian and soldier, nation and nation, and men and women.

These day-to-day relationships between men and women represent a central component of this dissertation, making base-life and gender relations central to my research. Exploring how bases were set up, why they existed where they did, the masculine nature of basic training, as well as policy-maker’s attitudes toward Vietnamese women, the status of women in both American and Vietnamese society, the role of masculinity in establishing policy, notions of sexuality in the global 1960s, and services/aid for Vietnamese women and children in the post-war era all impact the basic premise of this study. Two recent monographs have laid the groundwork on these issues, providing me with a point from which to step-off and build. Meredith Lair’s Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War vividly paints life on bases for the majority of soldiers who never ventured into the jungles or rice paddies to fight, but
supported those efforts as part of the massive logistical system at the rear-echelon. These men and women had the most direct contact with Vietnamese civilians and their culture of consumerism fostered the illicit black markets in urban centers or nearby base towns.

Heather Marie Stur’s Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era provides a much needed introduction to the roles played by women and the dynamics of gender throughout the war. Her study builds on the already developed field of masculinity studies during the conflict. In Beyond Combat, Stur answers the call of Joan Scott to address the role of women and gender in foreign policy and war. Stur offers an analysis of various personal encounters between the military establishment and female service members, volunteers for the Red Cross, and Vietnamese civilian women that are dependent upon gender roles. She argues that all of these relationships are “grounded in the reality of American power and dominance.” Her work offers a useful framework for introducing gender in the history of foreign relations and the Vietnam War.

More broadly, however, Vietnamese women’s voices have been largely absent in the writing of history during the Vietnam War. Scholars like Judy Tzu-Chun Wu and Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen are leading the field in recovering these voices as not simply part of the narrative, but as the part that dictated it. Wu’s study of Vietnamese women

---


24 Ibid., 3.
who “countered classical orientalist depictions of exotic, sexualized, and victimized Asian women” and drew international movements together revolutionizes how we view women during the war.\footnote{26} This dissertation does focus on the sexualized and victimized, but moves beyond a one-dimensional portrayal of them to uncover the varied layers of the subculture and agency of women who took on these roles in the shaping of war and policy.

The history of intimate encounters during the Vietnam War remains an open field with only a handful of scholarly works engaging with questions about prostitution. Few historians have engaged with the industry and its implications on the war beyond the anecdotal accounts portrayed in the works of Neil Sheehan, Neil Jamieson, and others who lived through the war as journalists or soldiers.\footnote{27} Despite excellent studies of the interactions between prostitutes and the American military during other wars, journalists continue to dominate the histories of these relationships during Vietnam. In The East, the West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters, journalist Richard Bernstein overly simplifies the world of sex during the Vietnam War as a “weird” one driven by ease, politics and necessity. Bernstein approaches his topic with a distance uncommon in works by other journalists, allowing him to incorporate many different interviews of soldiers reflecting on the presence of sex during their tours in Vietnam.\footnote{28} Most of the evidence,
however, points toward brothel and street prostitution as commonplace. Fellow journalist, Neil Sheehan’s accounts point to the sheer accessibility of the services provided to Americans. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, Sheehan describes the prostitution industry as the top of the war-time social hierarchy. Sheehan’s brief account of the industry presents a series of important questions about the nature of prostitution in South Vietnam and the scope of both the civilian and military reaction that require more information than he provides.

Like Sheehan, personal experiences shape the accounts of prostitution by other authors. In *Understanding Vietnam*, Neil Jamieson describes the prostitution industry in a familiar way, as one of many vices in South Vietnam. His discussion leaves the reader with many questions, especially concerning the identity of the prostitutes and their status in society. He does, however, shed light on one of the most concerning aspects of the industry for middle class city-dwellers: the ability of bar girls and street prostitutes to “be plugged into” the American-driven inflationary economy. Jamieson breaks down the dynamic where the financial benefit to one member of society is the immoral act to another, or to someone else, plainly, sleeping with the enemy. In stark contrast to his discussion of prostitution, Jamieson also portrays women who maintained the role expected of them by

---


29 Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House”, 1988), 264; Sheehan references an unnamed Saigon newspaper which portrays an image of this hierarchy. One’s livelihood in cities like Saigon, he explains, relied upon the ability to find jobs serving American needs or to beg on the streets near refugee slums resulting from war destruction. The subject of Sheehan’s book, John Paul Vann, a Lieutenant Colonel and military advisor reflected on the overabundance of prostitution in the South and concern over safety for military officials. He claimed to always refuse prostitutes because, “[i]t lowers our prestige in their eyes. They’re trying to get something they can hold over you. Too damn many Americans in this country are sleeping with Vietnamese women. It’s bad for our image. The Vietnamese don’t like it. It arouses their resentment” (599).
the RVN as modest and traditional women who channeled their energy and strength into the family. These women, nonetheless, held little sway over the direction of society during the war in comparison to the highly paid bar girls. As part of the thriving war-time bar scene, prostitutes even divided themselves into their own sociocultural units depending on the status of the establishments in which they worked. Jamieson’s background into not only the resistance of prostitutes by society, but also the more intricate divisions between social strata, helps visualize the tension within Vietnam.

Dedicated studies of war-tied sexual encounters tend to focus on the World War II era with the exception of broad survey works. In her work on war brides in the twentieth century, Susan Zeiger compellingly links the Cold War’s replacement of a clean victory with the realities of “stalemate” and “withdrawal” to the demise of the war bride. She argues that prostitution replaced marriage as the “interpersonal metaphor that captured Americans’ ambivalence about their commitments to former colonial subjects in Cold War foreign relations.” The institutionalization of prostitution by the American military in Asia, especially in areas such as the Philippines, Korea, and Japan, are addressed in Saundra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus’ edited volume *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia*.

Scholars of war and intimacy have been particularly active on topics geographically linked to Asia, but scholars working on Europe have also begun to address the sexual practices of World War II GIs. Michiko Takeuchi and Sarah Kovner have both published


31 Ibid., 333.

recent works on U.S. military prostitution in occupied Japan. Takeuchi argues that sexual politics in Japan represented a means for Americans to assert neocolonial domination over Japanese women, and a “synchronous neocolonialism” on the part of the Japanese state.\textsuperscript{33} Takeuchi’s presentation of state-supported neocolonialism in Japan presents a useful contrast with the South Vietnamese who adamantly opposed the industry. This is also reflected in Kovner’s \textit{Occupying Power} which argues that policy changes came too little too late to fix the problems linked to prostitution in Japan.\textsuperscript{34} Even more open to sexual exchange than the Japanese, Kathleen Moon’s research argues that occupied Korea offered women and sex as rewards and signs of gratitude to American servicemen.\textsuperscript{35} In Europe, studies of GIs and Germans, French, and British women are all well addressed in works blending the histories of war, sex, and foreign relations.\textsuperscript{36}

Beyond these works exploring the consensual nature of intimate encounters, scholars in gender and women’s studies, feminist theory, anthropology and political science have written extensively on the issues of race, sexual violence and rape during the wars of the past century. John Dower’s \textit{War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War} argues that the raw brutality practiced by both the U.S. and Japanese militaries fighting

\textsuperscript{33} Michiko Takeuchi, “Pan-Pan Girls” Performing and Resisting Neocolonialism(s) in the Pacific Theater: U.S. Military Prostitution in Occupied Japan” in \textit{Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War Two to the Present}, Edited by Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 79-108.


on the Pacific front during World War II resulted from racial prejudice and arrogance by both sides.\textsuperscript{37} The problematic of feminizing, “othering,” or otherwise villainizing Asian men and woman played a prominent role in the shaping of American expectations of Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War. These intertwining themes of race and sexuality regarding Asian women have been especially well defined in research on the colonial period from scholars such as Elizabeth Ezra and Ann Stoler.\textsuperscript{38} Gina Marie Weaver’s \textit{Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War} offers several analyses of literary and memoir texts discussing sexual violence cases during the war to highlight the prevalence of an issue that has received relatively little attention by scholars.\textsuperscript{39}

Studies exploring U.S.-RVN relations from the top-down have provided historians with a dialog for discussing how these governments interacted from the Điện period through the end of the war, but recent scholarship is only beginning to give us views of the war through civilian eyes. This dissertation hopes to contribute to this process of giving a voice to non-state actors by placing them as integral to not only the history of social life, but the history of transnational foreign relations, as well. Works on prostitution and the


\textsuperscript{39} Gina Marie Weaver, \textit{Ideologies of Forgetting: Rape in the Vietnam War} (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).
military during times of conflict represent the most defined of the subfields, but the research rarely engages meaningfully with the Vietnam conflict. Addressing this absence is not simply “filling a gap,” but moving the conversation on the war forward. While many say that the media in the first televised war shaped its outcome, it is important to look even further to the people they reported on. In all exchanges it may not be clear who is influencing who in regards to the formation for foreign policy actions during the Vietnam War, but recognizing that servicemen, civilian women, and the allied governments all contributed to the discourse is crucial to this project.

**Outline of Chapters**

This dissertation consists of six core chapters, plus an introduction, epilogue, and conclusion. The first core chapter, chapter two, examines the formation of American ideals regarding Vietnamese sexuality through their witnessing of Indochina during the French colonial period. In addition, the French colonial system also embedded negative stereotypes of Americans into the minds of Vietnamese who associated the two western powers as sharing colonial ideologies. This chapter lays the ground work for the remainder of the dissertation by illustrating how French views of their colonial subjects as sexualized, and the ways they represented this to the rest of the world, framed early American experiences and interactions with civilians in Vietnam.

Chapter three follows sexual relationships between colonial women and western men through the end of the first Indochina War by examining the role of French military brothels on the front lines. From the end of the first Indochina War, the chapter analyzes the creation of the post-colonial government in South Vietnam and the support it received from the Michigan State University Vietnam advisory group who helped create the police force and write laws. Morality ranked highly on President Ngô Đình Diệm’s priorities.
With additional pressure from his sister-in-law Madame Nhu, the implementation of family and morality laws in South Vietnam prohibited most forms of public social interactions including dancing and prostitution. Although the laws were slowly dissolved or ignored over time, these policies shaped social relations in the early years of U.S. intervention in Vietnam and framed the dialog for the relationships throughout the war.

Chapter four describes the escalation period of the war and flooding of American service members and money into South Vietnam. Culminating with the 1966 “American Brothel” debate, this chapter argues that despite clear signs that the industry was growing quicker than anyone could contain it, the Johnson administration chose to sweep the issue aside. The repercussions of Johnson’s policies are examined in chapter five with the transition from Vietnamese eradication campaigns against prostitution in the mid-1960s to what I have called the Americanization of politics tied to sexual encounters. By the end of the decade, safety and medical concerns forced the hand of the Nixon administration who worked around RVN laws to both maintain the morale-building practice of prostitution while not completely undermining Vietnamese morality laws.

The sixth chapter steps back from the world of prostitution to assess how the United States and RVN negotiated policies for sexual relationships beyond the brothel. Looking at practices of employer’s relationships, dating, marriage and paternity, the Johnson administration similarly waited to take any major action on the issues. During the Nixon administration, however, he worked as closely as possible with South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to ensure both nations’ laws were followed. The layered bureaucracies created from these policies, particularly in regards to marriage, caused headaches for young couples but worked fairly smooth between the governments.
In chapter seven, the darker side of sexual encounters is analyzed through a study of rape and sexual violence during the Vietnam War. Reinforcing my argument that Nixon managed far greater responsibility in the maintenance of GI-civilian social relationships, rape only becomes a major concern for the United States after news broke of the Mỹ Lai massacre in 1969. Within Vietnam, however, women had feared rape throughout the war. While cases of rape were dwarfed by instances of prostitution, publicized instances of rape provided the more valuable weapon in the hands on anti-American propagandists. Finally, the epilogue traces the crashing blow of the Paris Peace Agreement on sexual relationships in South Vietnam. Between 1973 and 1975, the withdrawal of American troops eliminated the majority of clients for prostitutes and resulted in a complete dismantling of the industry as it existed for the previous decade and forced many former civilians with American ties into destitution or worse.

Post-war representations, popular memory, and themes of collective trauma weave throughout each of the chapters. International power relations are foregrounded in the study, but I argue that gender and sexuality were central to military life in Vietnam. In a tenuous alliance where the RVN constantly sought legitimacy at the right hand of the United States, American treatment of Vietnamese civilian women threatened their ability to work together. The significance of the bar girl, the bride, and the rape victim in Vietnam ran far deeper than popular culture has given them credit for.

An effort has been made to use Vietnamese tonal and diacritical marks when used in the sources. If the marks are not used for names in the original sources and are not commonly known, they will be left off in the text. In cases where Vietnamese names are commonly known in English, like Ho Chi Minh or Saigon, they are not included.
CHAPTER TWO
PROSTITUTION, INTIMACY, AND POLITICS IN COLONIAL VIETNAM

Introduction

Before the earliest advisors to the South Vietnamese government, from Michigan State University, began to arrive in Saigon in 1955, and long before the first U.S. ground forces landed a decade later, Americans already recognized Vietnam and its people through a colonial lens. After more than sixty years of colonial rule under the French beginning in 1887, a World War under the Japanese Empire and the return of the French, Vietnam found itself again in a state of transition. When, in 1945, the French returned with U.S. financial backing to fend off global decolonization, they sparked anti-colonial sentiment strong enough to engulf the region into what became known as the First Indochina War and once again the Vietnamese sought their independence.

During this time, increased financial support meant increased American presence and influence among Vietnamese politicians sympathetic to or reliant upon the West. Throughout earlier French colonial control over Indochina, the U.S. had remained physically distant. Rather, they learned about Vietnam and its people through the imagination and representations of the French. These perceptions built an image of a colonized people similar to any other portrayed during the height of European imperialism. Even during decolonization, this left an image of weakness in the mind of American leadership that strengthened U.S. commitment to Western control in the volatile region. Their perceptions of Vietnamese social behavior as exotic and feminized guided their interactions with local populations from their programs for civilian aid to their sexual encounters with local peoples. It was during these years of viewing French images of the
colony before the World Wars, and the years of supporting the French in country after World War II, that many Americans first built their perceptions of Southeast Asian peoples.

To understand Vietnamese sexuality in the imagination of early American advisors and their complex relationship with the later morality laws during the Vietnam War, it helps to look back at this inherited perception of Vietnamese exoticism through the eyes of the French colonizers. This chapter uses anthropological and cultural sources including contemporary examinations of Indochinese sexual behavior, public displays of colonized people, literature, and material culture including sexualized images of Vietnamese women in dialog with diplomatic sources to address how Vietnamese relationships with Westerners were largely forged during this period. Americans first experienced Vietnam through these sources. In other words, many Americans first perceived the Vietnamese people as former subjects and not independent peoples. Civilians were generally seen as exotic “others,” and the women as even more primal and sexual. These factors compounded the attitudes of incoming American advisors who sought to turn this newly decolonized state into a capitalist democracy.

Power loomed large behind the processes of controlling sexual encounters in French Indochina, but deep seated beliefs concerning racial superiority and gender discrimination further framed the establishment of stereotypes regarding the popular memory of colonial, and thus post-colonial, sexuality. This chapter will examine how these notions of power, masculinity, and stereotypes concerning sexual and racial hierarchies developed in the former colonial regions of Southeast Asia, and how the subsequent morality regulations implemented in Vietnam during the post-colonial period fundamentally shaped how Americans interacted with civilians during their war in the
The purpose of this chapter is to outline the background of intercultural sexual relations in Vietnam stemming from the context of French colonial prostitution and American consumption of imperial images of race, sexuality, and power. The chapter will first address a framework to discuss these issues by looking at how representations of colonial peoples and sexualized behavior played into Western ideas of masculinity and power relations. Then, the chapter will look at the example of policing prostitution in the early colonial period to understand how the French dealt with issues of inter-national sexual encounters. Following this, an examination of French representations of colonial women as sexual and erotic will serve as a point to discuss the cultural transfer of perceptions concerning colonized women into the American imagination. Finally, the chapter will trace the realities of venereal disease as a threat associated with mass prostitution like that organized during the French colonial period. This section sets the stage for similar issues that eventually reached Americans once they arrived in 1965.

Through this examination, I intend to frame how the United States and South Vietnam developed their cultural perceptions of the other. Without understanding the long relationship between colonial portrayals of sexuality and American consumption, it is difficult to understand why U.S.-RVN politics over sexual encounters differed so drastically from their other East Asian experiences in the Philippines, Japan, or Korea where intercultural sexuality was promoted and regulated through legalized prostitution. While these other regions are not the focus of this work, the acceptance, or even promotion, of sexual encounters with locals in previous wars in Asia helped frame American ideologies regarding appropriate serviceman-civilian relations during the Vietnam War.
Colonial Intimacy, Masculinity, and Power

Foucault’s classic *The History of Sexuality: Part I* pinpoints sex as a commanding tool and dangerous distraction in the wielding of power. Foucault wrote, “Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin, for the most varied strategies.”1 This nexus of sex and power framed the U.S. experience abroad for numerous conflicts. In Vietnam from the colonial period forward, sexuality and racism paired in expressions of domination whether directly in the form of sexual violence or indirectly through the promotion of heteronormative masculinity. This section will illustrate how encounters with Indochinese women during the colonial period encapsulated the French concerns over sex, masculinity, and power. By examining sources written by a literary author who traveled extensively in the colony and an anthropological study of the sexual behavior of the Vietnamese people, this section illustrates the anxieties held by the French over sexual relations with colonized peoples. They indicate the larger trajectory of western views toward the region which the United States later reflected in their early policies toward Vietnam.

One of the first American cultural productions about Vietnam, Harry Hervey’s 1925 novel *Congai: Mistress of Indochine*, presents Asian women in a sexualized role to express how encounters between the populations quickly bridged the “other” and the familiar. In the first passage of the book, a French priest who sees a Vietnamese woman from his boat asks his traveling companion about the local women. The companion

---

responds, “Beautiful savages.”\textsuperscript{2} Quickly, the priest retorts that the man will soon not view them as savages, as too many became the wives of Western men and the women were far more complex than first interpretations. As Pico Iyer richly describes in the preface to the 2014 reproduction of the novel, the protagonist, Thi-Linh, “is never just a silly girl – or a calculating minx – but a confounding mixture of the two.”\textsuperscript{3}

Back in the boat, the two men debate the paradox of viewing the people they are in Indochina to colonize as potential wives. The French government does not “entirely approve” of living with concubines, the priest states, but also does not tell them to stop. The line between “savages” and equals seems to blur rather easily in the mind of Hervey, when the characters face decisions regarding sex. In summarizing the paradox of French relations with local women, the second man suggests, “Make soldiers of the men; marry the women. Long live France, the protectress!”\textsuperscript{4} In this way, masculinity and sexuality represent an undeniable element in the international discourse surrounding Vietnam in the colonial era, and one that even in 1925 was reflected in American literature.

Images like Hervey’s and other authors from the colonial period illustrate this perspective of a sexualized, but not fully comprehensible, Asian woman which served as one of few models available for Americans.\textsuperscript{5} These images were forged and persisted from French colonial representations of gender and racial stereotypes described in this chapter.

\textsuperscript{2} Harry Hervey, \textit{Congai: Mistress of Indochine}, Edited by Kent Davis, Foreward by Pico Iyer (Holmes Beach, FL: DatASIA Press, 2014 [1925]), 1.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., XIV.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 2.

\textsuperscript{5} Also, see Jean d’Estray, \textit{Thi-Sen: La Petite Amie Exotique} (Paris: Maurice Bauche, 1911); Harry Hervey, \textit{King Cobra: An Autobiography of Travel in French Indo-China} (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1927); Graham Greene, \textit{The Quiet American} (New York: Penguin Books, 2004 [1955]).
First, this chapter will present French colonial understandings of Indochinese sexuality and their efforts to regulate the prostitution industry using archival material collected from the General Sciences Library in Ho Chi Minh City and the Gallica archives of the National Library of France. Then, it will address how the images of Vietnamese sexuality were represented in literature and events like the 1931 Colonial Exhibition by the French and early American visitors to the colony for mass consumption by American citizens.

To understand how American servicemen viewed the Vietnamese people in the post-colonial era, it is critical to first understand the French notions of Indochinese femininity and sensuality, which as I previously alluded, are two concepts closely tied to race and masculinity. As Robert Dean asserts, masculinity strongly influenced U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War and in particular concerning Vietnam. Ingrained ideals of proper manhood, aggression and anti-communism drove many of the early policies regarding American policy.\(^6\) In addition to expectations set by their relationship with other Asian countries like Korea, viewing Vietnam as a sexual, effeminate space contributed to the broader assumptions of a sexualized culture. By obtaining a better understanding of how stereotypes regarding the Vietnamese were constructed as part of the colonial process, historians can better frame American policy officials’ behavior during the Vietnam War. This reflection on the colonial era and its representation around the world offers historians of the Vietnam War rich material for examining the significance of themes such as race, gender, post-colonial sexuality, and the transnational flow of culture and ideas.

***

\(^6\) Robert Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 4-7, 66.
Following the establishment of French Indochina in 1887, the colonizers set up de facto control in their protectorates in the northern territories of Tonkin and Annam, while the southern-most Cochinchina was made a formal colony of France. Stereotypes and heightened French interest in colonial sexual behavior can also be traced to early ethnographic studies of the people and their ways of life that seemed so foreign to French minds. In selections from the translated journals of Dr. Jacob Sutor, a French Army surgeon who wrote under the pseudonym Dr. Jacobus, he describes the sexual practices of the colonials during his stay in the 1890s. The work, edited alternately as *L’Ethnologie du sens Genitale, L’Amour aux Colonies (Ethnology of the genital senses, Love in the Colonies)* and *Wanderings in the Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, has been examined in numerous studies of French sexuality as both anthropology and pornography. The more than 300 page study explores several colonial spaces to quantitatively and qualitatively assess the sexual practices of colonized peoples. The work, published in French and later translated to English, attracted libertine and scholarly readers alike. His practice of closely observing and examining the behaviors of locals in their homes indicate a dehumanization of the colonial populations. Sutor portrays their actions as more animalistic than human.

Sutor describes in vivid detail the seemingly mechanical and silent sexual experiences he observed. In one report he depicts the experiences of a wife who literally

---


drops everything, in this case her child, to please her diseased husband. The mention of the husband’s illness suggests the lack of understanding regarding venereal disease or proper medical care. Sutor presents Vietnamese sexual behavior as something entirely without intimacy, lacking in even the most basic privacy as not only children are present but an anthropologist as well. In the roles described by Sutor, the woman acts strictly as a tool for the sexual release of her husband or the men she is paid to have intercourse with. These relationships appear to hold little meaning for her, as Sutor describes them. Instead, the encounter with her husband shown through the eyes of a Frenchman strictly represents her role as a wife being that of mechanical sexual object and mother, and thus how he presented the sexual role of women in Vietnamese society.

Sutor’s description of the wife’s sexual behaviors does not end with her encounter with her husband. Rather, he describes that her detached relationship with sex led her to act as a prostitute for the French military men at a nearby compound where she worked for the necessary monetary benefit. Unlike the Americans who would face a Vietnamese government who banned prostitution, the French established numerous Bordel militaire de campagne, the French term for military brothels positioned around active battle sites or military bases where the servicemen could purchase sex in a relatively secure location close to the front or their base. In one of the most telling portions of Sutor’s recounted story, the author describes the woman’s attitude upon returning home from her work with the

10 Ibid., 12.

11 French historians have published on interactions between French soldiers and Vietnamese prostitutes. Primary records on the Bordel militaire de campagne are held at the Societe de la defense, Vincenne, France; For published work in French on the topic, see Jean-Marc Binot, Le Repos Des Guerriers: Les Bordels Militaires De Campagne Pendant La Guerre D’indochnie (Paris: Fayard, 2014); Michel S. Hardy, De La Morale Au Moral Des Troupes Ou L’histoire Des B.m.c. 1918-2004 (Panazol: Lavauzelle, 2004); Pierre Journoud and Hugues Tertrais, Paroles De Dien Bien Phu: Les Survivants Témoignant (Paris: Tallandier, 2004).
Frenchmen. He depicts the scene as bleak, but rather than offering sympathy he states, “[t]hey find huddling room on a dirty mat, and use each other for futile protection against the decadence and deterioration which four thousand years of impotence has confirmed as their destiny.”12 The author further emphasizes racial superiority over the Vietnamese by describing the entire society as “basic” and relating those with darker skin as “developing.”13 For Sutor, colonial sexuality meant an impossibility to separate race and intimacy, a notion that would change little during the American Vietnam War.

Writing seventy years later in 1966 as the American Vietnam War captured the world’s attention, journalist Leland Gardner included Sutor’s descriptions in his exposé on the sex industry in wartime Saigon, *Vietnam Underside!: “Don’t Worry Mom... We’ve got Penicillin.”* He argues that the journals of Sutor are likely to represent fairly realistic events since Sutor wrote the entries primarily for personal use in 1892-93 and only later were they published in various forms in French until an English translation in 1898.14 While it is unclear how accurate Gardner is in interpreting Sutor’s writings, at the very least his American representation of these journals illustrates the persistence of these stereotypes into the 1960s when he published his book. As part of an American exposé on Vietnamese wartime prostitution, in particular, these accounts indicate the lasting effects of the French study, construction, and proliferation of indigenous and inter-cultural sexuality in the colonies. For colonizers, their findings merited increased regulation of colonial social behaviors.

12 Ibid, 14.
As the sexual expectations of colonizers became more prolific, they heeded the need for increased regulations of intimate encounters. Traveling colonial officials claimed sexual interactions as a necessity. For Frenchmen who chose not to, or could not afford to, take a concubine, the colonial prostitution industry provided another means for intimacy. Prostitution was also seen as the “politically safe” option for colonizers since they believed non-committed relationships were less likely to result in children or promote interracial marriage.\textsuperscript{15} As the desire for exclusively European marriages overtook concubines as the trend in Indochina, prostitution became a more viable option for single Europeans or those whose wives had not traveled with them. Over time, as the prostitution industry grew in Indochina, the colonial government felt the need to increase its regulation of it in similar ways to the British Empire’s programs in India.

Scholars have conducted research on the regulation of prostitution in other colonial regions, but the work on Indochina is relatively limited. Researchers in women and gender studies, feminist studies, and anthropology have conducted significant work on British India and Africa, providing useful models for Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{16} Women’s voices are

\textsuperscript{15} Stoler, \textit{Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power}, 51.

relatively absent in legal regulation documents, but it is possible to uncover much about how officials viewed the industry and sought to regulate problems while satisfying the sexual desires of colonial officials abroad. In the 1920s and 1930s, French officials reported unease concerning the prostitution industry in Indochina, allowing historians to pinpoint anxieties over social relations. Prostitution was not the only social blight troubling colonizers, however, as depression, suicide, alcoholism, and narcotics addiction also rose among the Vietnamese urban middle class in what Neil Jamieson has dubbed, “the darkening of the 1930s.”\textsuperscript{17} Despite this notable shift in social behaviors, reports from as early as the late nineteenth century mentioned prostitution as a prominent “social evil” among the rest triggering the slow development of regulation laws. This timing is significant due to the rising political tension within the colony between locals and colonial officials.

Increased French presence in Vietnam at the seeming height of their imperial prowess was met with grass-roots resistance within the cities. While France promoted the glory of French Indochina within the metropole, they simultaneously had to put down violent protests by student-led resistance fighters in Saigon. Uprisings in 1931 surrounding the launch of the Colonial Exposition and the Yen Bay uprising the year before led to a massive crackdown on the Indochinese colonials and severe repression.\textsuperscript{18}


\textsuperscript{18} Nicola Cooper, \textit{France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 91-105.
Regulating Early Colonial Sexual Behavior

Looking back as early as 1889, the publication of anti-prostitution regulations indicated the growing discourse within Indochina over how to handle sexual encounters between French soldiers and colonial women. In the report, the authors point to medical care as a primary concern. In French Algeria and maritime villages, medical and civilian doctors sent to help with the prostitution situation near colonial settlements recommend that, “in the interest of sanitation, parallel measures should be taken by the governor of Cochinchina” where they recognized similar health concerns would arise.19 As this indicates, other regions in the French colonies experienced similar problems concerning the health of those who purchased the services of prostitutes. Their views indicated a belief that sexual encounters with any colonial women would lead to a venereal disease problem. As a result of increased sexual contact the two societies increased regulations regarding women’s responsibilities in the sexual encounters between Europeans and natives. Placing the burden of safe sex on women persisted in East-West relations through the French and American wars in Vietnam.

Throughout the interwar period, the French bureaucracy in Indochina grew and colonial officials wrote and instituted more structured sets of regulations on prostitution. The periodical Bulletin administratif de l'Annam (Administrative Bulletin of Central Vietnam) traces the industry’s role during this period, providing evidence that the French administrators attempted many regulation strategies. Similar to the later American Vietnam War era, the perceived problem grew far faster than administrators knew how to manage

it. In 1921, for instance, the report declared, “It is forbidden for tenants of brothels to keep their establishments ostensibly open after midnight and to admit minors.”

The administrators repeated these time regulations throughout the 1920s in an effort to curb the behavior and limit negative repercussions such as disease. By the end of the decade, however, they decided to institute a system of expensive licenses and taxes for brothel workers offered at higher rates than other comparable license fees in the 1930s.

Sex workers, obtained slightly more job stability under the highly regulated system through their recognition. Colonials generally referred to the women as con gai, the Vietnamese word for young girl but used in this context to describe everything from concubines to wives to prostitutes during the colonial period. In the northern provinces of Vietnam, hundreds of women registered themselves as prostitutes. This centralization allowed dispensaries to openly treat venereal diseases in registered prostitutes. According to a January 1932 report, the colonial administrators began to regulate prostitution in ways that provided more protections for the prostitutes as well as the patrons. This included barring the employment of underage women in les maisons de tolerance, or brothels, and requiring the Madams to provide medical care for women who worked under her charge. This last point served more as a protective measure for the men visiting the brothels than

20 Gouvernement Général, Bulletin administratif de l'Annam, 13 (1 Juillet 1921), 574.


22 Walter Jones, “Gender as Colonial Exploitation in French Indochina: Concubines in Selected Pre-1965 Novels Published in or Translated to English,” War, Literature, & the Arts: An International Journal of the Humanities 24 (2012), 1-4.

23 Clandestine prostitutes failed to seek care and nearly the entire population was expected to carry a sexually transmitted infection by late 1920s; Phụng, Lục Thị, 34.

for the women working them, however, and the focus on their care illustrates a shift in how the French regulated prostitution.

The sex work industry had become such an ingrained part of society during the colonial period that prevention of disease and illness became part of the regulations rather than a policy of eradication. The piece presented several articles regulating their behavior such as, “Each prostitute will be provided with a booklet describing the results of each medical exam and be required to show it.”25 These requirements sought to protect those working in the brothels, as well as the Frenchmen visiting them. Licenses and health regulations allowed more oversight of the workforce. The image of very young girls working in brothels, for example, would hurt the image of grandeur and superiority the French hoped to promote with their empire. The rise in colonial prostitution’s notoriety across the world along with the births of mixed-blood children forced colonizers to take more care in how they represented their practices to the rest of the world.

**French Representations and American Adaptation of Indochinese Sexuality**

French colonizers reinforced their belief in racial superiority through their representations of the colonials as savage peoples and distributed those images to audiences around the world. For many in the west, including the United States, French representations of Vietnam and Vietnamese women were the first images they had of the region. The French engrained notions of gender binaries through their interactions with locals in Southeast Asian societies, and thus created stereotypes of hyper-sexualized native females through visual and written cultural representations they sent home. Scholars of Vietnamese culture and society paint a far more nuanced image of Vietnamese women as holding far

---

25 Ibid.
greater power within their home life, and promoting revolutionary and feminist ideals in the face of foreign occupation or oppression, but these actions were all but lost on western men. While not exclusive to Indochina, the perception of an exotic sexuality among colonial women struck interest. Westerners deemed their sexuality outside the confines of a touted, but rarely accurate, definition of proper “civilized” European behavior. French colonizers brought their sensitivities of femininity and sexuality to their colonial holdings after generations of easing sexual ideologies in Paris. As such, the representations fulfilled the fantasies and formulated the expectations of the Vietnamese female within French and American imaginations.

In France, the depiction of prostitutes became one of inherent contradiction. Authors represented them both in cautionary tales warning of the diseases they often carried, and then depicted them in tales promoting the erotic and pleasure-filled nature of Paris. French medical doctors argued that the only way to limit sexually transmitted


28 Cultural openness regarding women’s sexuality occurred slowly in elite circles, but booming prostitution in turn-of-the-century Paris indicates that the search for sexual fulfillment extended beyond sexually liberated Parisienne wives. The proliferation of prostitution did not go unnoticed by French authorities. Police records indicate that police des mœurs, a division seeking out moral issues such as prostitution and homosexual behavior, reported a sharp increase in arrests of women. Crimes committed by women, most often prostitution, reached their height in 1902 with more than 60 women for every thousand in Paris arrested, a steep rise from numbers that had stayed consistently below 20 in every thousand until the late 1880s. Arrests of prostitutes working alone or employed by brothels also increased, however, records only provide this information up to 1900 where there number are shown at their height with over 5000 individual prostitutes and over 6000 working in brothels; Statistics compiled in, Jean-Marc Berlière. La Police des Mœurs sous la IIIe République (Paris: Seuil, 1992), 264-265; Robert A. Nye, “Sex and Sexuality in France since 1800” in Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories, Edited by Frantz X. Eder, Lesley Hall and Gert Hekma (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 99.
diseases was through the promotion of chastity and marital fidelity in place of prostitution.\textsuperscript{29} The annual publication of the bulletin for the \textit{Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale} (French Society for Preventative Health and Morality) brought the discussion of marriage, morals, and sexuality to the fore.\textsuperscript{30} Reporting on the most recent testing and efforts to control disease across the metropole and the colonies, the issues kept the world aware of the severe repercussions to uncontrolled prostitution, including a 1919 account of raging levels of disease in Hanoi.\textsuperscript{31} Officials could not follow this program of promoting celibacy in the colonies, however. The nature of the colonial subject as “other” led colonizers to replace the discussion over class and marriage that took place in France with one concerning race in the colonies.\textsuperscript{32} Unlike those in France, relationships with prostitutes in the colonies were seen as more acceptable than engagement in long-term relationships with colonial women that could result in the birth of mixed-race children.\textsuperscript{33} These concerns over racial superiority often framed colonial relationships.

Examining colonial souvenir postcards from Vietnam provides one way to assess how the colonizers viewed Indochinese women, and how they chose to represent them to visitors and others in the metropole. A relatively new media in 1900, artists François-Henri Schneider and Raphael Moreau published 3000 postcards in one year of the first French

\textsuperscript{29} Alain Corbin, \textit{Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850}, Translated by Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 267.

\textsuperscript{30} Full text of issues of the bulletin of the \textit{Société française de prophylaxie sanitaire et morale} from 1901 to 1923 are available through the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s online Gallica Bibliothèque numérique.


\textsuperscript{32} While the turn of the twentieth century in the metropole represented a shift away from social conservatism in regards to female sexuality, a similar shift toward the “emancipation” of women did not occur in their colonial holdings; Tilburg, \textit{Colette’s Republic}, 5.

\textsuperscript{33} Ann Laura Stoler, \textit{Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule}, 69.
Indochina series. Anthropologist Janet Hoskins argues that the popularity of the images of exotic colonial peoples bred competition and caused the postcard industry to grow.  

Striking to modern sensibilities concerning souvenirs, approximately one quarter of the imagery of the postcards depicted erotic images. This large margin of erotic images provides a direct link between life in colonial Indochina and the sexual nature of natives perceived by the colonizers. 

As the images described below illustrate, the postcards sent from the colonies illustrate different forms of gender representation in the empire. Through these images of local peoples, nature scenes, and architecture, citizens in the metropole and beyond could peer into life in the colonies. Eroticized images of local women in “harem” poses offered a unique memento that highlighted French ideas of citizens in the colonies. According to historian Marie-Paule Ha, French soldiers in Indochina represented the primary audience for postcards being sent back to the metropole. Often lacking in their ability to write proficiently, the mementos offered images to reflect what their words might not be developed enough to do. Conversely, Jennifer Yee has asserted that the sexualized images of women were marketed for women as much as men. They formed a bridge between “other” and familiar through the sometimes Chinese or European stylization of the photos. 

34 Janet Hoskins, “Postcards from the Edge of Empire: Images and Messages from French Indochina” IIAS Newsletter 44 (Summer 2007), 16.
35 Ibid., 17.
Yee also argues that French women represented a primary audience for the images of erotic portrayals of colonial women, and thus removing the pornographic element of the images. Whether used for erotic purposes or simply out of curiosity of the bodies and sexual practices of colonial peoples, the prominence of sexualized images of women in the French colonies sent back for visual consumption in the metropole indicates the popular interest in intimately seeing those they viewed as “other.”

The first type of postcard [Figure 1] shows a popular scene depicting a beautiful woman in traditional Vietnamese dress, potentially a woman who might act in the role of wife or concubine. The image shown below offers no commentary, but functions as a sort of advertisement to the beauty of Vietnamese women. The second type of postcard shows topless women in various stages, either stepping out of a bath as shown in Hoskin’s work, or otherwise smiling at the camera. As the writing on the card discussed by Hoskin’s indicates, the sender intended both to show his significant other back home the exotic nature of Indochinese women, but also to describe how unattractive he finds her. He depicted her in that context to show her at once sexually-enticing, but overall unappealing. He admits to the sexual nature of the culture at large while putting his partner at ease over his potential indiscretions by examining her as an anthropological subject rather than a sexual figure.


Finally, a third postcard type depicts the most overtly seductive representations by showing women usually lying across a bed in a robe fanning herself or staring into the camera. In the image discussed by Hoskins, that specific postcard includes a phrase in broken French and Vietnamese which reads, “I’ll find you a pretty second wife!” The illusion to the availability of extra-marital sex sheds light on yet another means that openness regarding sexuality in the colonies was portrayed back home. These images depict the diverse ways Vietnamese women were presented to the French public. The photographer captured them in settings where they did not always look sensual, but certainly exuded a notion of sexuality. While not all images are overtly sexual, they illustrate French colonial directness in objectifying and discussing Vietnamese intimacy in their correspondences with their friends and family in the metropole. Overall, the popularity of erotic postcards as souvenirs exemplified the colonial notion of Vietnam as a

---

40 Hoskins, “Postcards from the Edge of Empire,” 16.
home of sensual women beaconing to western observers.

Tourism guides presented another way for the French to represent their colonies to observers around the world. In French travel literature for Hanoi in Northern Vietnam, images of young Vietnamese women wearing the traditional áo dài tunic over pants, elderly Vietnamese men, and scenes of mothers holding naked children are often depicted alongside descriptions of exotic vacations. The guide states, “The tourist who travels to Annam, can find natural sites incomparable in their rare beauty and their diversity, monuments which impose admiration on artist's and scholars with their original architecture, a population that has kept intact archaic usages, quaint customs, industry and the arts of the most primitive to the most sophisticated.”\footnote{Bureau du Tourisme de Hué, “Voyages et Tourisme en Annam,” Hanoi: Achevè D’Imprimer sur les Presse de L’Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1926, \url{http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5844518p}, Accessed 11 April 2012, 11.} As a whole, the advertised images of Indochina indicate a notion of something “quaint” and the representations of women and children create an association with vulnerability.

In a tourist brochure guide from 1926, published by the Bureau of Tourism in Hue, entitled “Travel and Tourism in Annam,” the author promises a trip to Annam, modern day central Vietnam, offered a “profusion of historical riches, imposing monuments, wonderful sights, rare exotic sensations.”\footnote{Ibid., 7.} The promotion of the exotic represents a significant theme in French tourist guides for the various regions of Indochina advertising everything from primitive art to wild, savage gorges and excursions to “regions of tribal savages.”\footnote{Ibid., 12, 15, 19.} In addition to profitability of rubber plantations, colonizers viewed tourism as another
revenue-earning draw to the region. Travel advertising exotic getaways allowed France to promote its empire transnationally, and one of the first ways Americans read about the colonies. The New York Times ran regular advertisements for cruises entering “the world’s exotic harbors,” including Indochina and other ports of call in Southeast Asia. As air travel expanded, colonials hoped that so too would trips to the colonies. To combat the economic hardships of the global depression, however, officials recognized the need to promote their most promising colony in popular fairs and expositions at home in Europe.

The depiction of imperial wealth at World’s Fairs and colonial expositions allowed France another means to promote the empire and tout its continued strength among fellow imperial powers in spite of economic instability elsewhere. These events drew massive crowds and global interest beyond Western Europe, including in the United States, where Americans continued to develop their perception of citizens in imperial holdings through a colonial lens. Through the production and distribution of colonial images, France advertised the beauty of women and children among lush Southeast Asian scenery along with exotic goods travelers could purchase on their trips to the region or their expensive

---

44 International travel to the colonies was made possible through innovations in technology like air travel. Promotion of travel between France and her colonies by plane revolutionized the connectivity between empires and their subjects.


46 Greg Seltzer argues that air travel between France and Indochina was widely promoted at the exposition despite its relatively rare nature in 1931. He argues that the formation of Air France in 1933 increased the volume of passenger trips significantly since the journey that formerly took weeks could be accomplished in days; Gregory Seltzer, “Aviation in French Indochina, 1919-1940” (presentation, Western Society for French History Forty-First Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, Octobe 24-27, 2013); Claudius Madrolle, Indochine du Sud: De Marseille à Saigon; Djibouti, Éthiopie, Ceylan, Malaisie, Cochinchine, Cambodge, Bas-Laos, Sud-Annam, Siam, 2nd ed. (Paris: Librarie Hachette, 1928), n.p.; André Reichel, “France-Indochine-France: M. Pasquier, gouverneur de l’Indochine[,] et les aviateurs Lalouette et Goulette arrivent à Marseille,” Le Figaro, December 7, 1930; “De Saigon à Paris: Le gouverneur Pasquier[,] Lalouette et Goulette sont arrivés au Bourget,” Le Petit Parisien, December 9, 1930.
imports from it. The 1931 *Exposition Coloniale* marked a significant step in U.S. relations with Europe’s colonies through their direct promotion and participation in the massive fair on the grounds of Vincenne outside Paris. In particular, it provides a useful case study for understanding France’s colonial representation of its colonies and its subjects, as well as the crucial ways that imagery found its way into the American imagination.

Expositions piqued the interests of Americans, both domestically and among expatriates, drawn to the glamor of the “old world” of Europe and their colonies from the turn of the century through the interwar period. Having resisted establishing a massive empire of their own, American’s viewed the institution of imperialism itself as something exotic. Through the various expositions, the colonies made their way into American popular culture. The French exposition of 1931 placed a particular emphasis on links between the colonies and the metropole. By 1931, the culture of empire had so captivated

---

47 Advertisements for a Hanoi Exhibition in Winter 1902-1903 from the Bibliothèque nationale de France illustrate Indochina with images of women and a baby. It is not noted if these advertisements were distributed in the metropole or the colonies.


49 While scholars have debated the nature of American Imperialism, or lack thereof, since the publication of William Appleman Williams’ iconic *The Tragedy of America Diplomacy* in 1959, the acceptance and shortly maintained control over the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century mark the most notable exception to America’s relative anti-colonial policy. Even scholars who adamantly oppose the notion that America’s held imperial desires, such as Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, identify the acquisition of the islands after the Spanish American War as a formal colonial entity; Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire*, 173.

American interests that President Hoover sent over a delegation to host booths and hosts for the colonial exposition to paint the United States as a colonial entity in and of itself. Alongside the empires of France, England, Belgium and others, the United States promoted itself as equal in power.51

The creation of “human zoos,” where natives acted out scenes depicting their lives before and after colonization caused humiliation to residents from the colonies shipped in to perform at the Exposition, but proved particularly popular to visitors.52 Overall, the displays brought to mind images of enslavement rather than lifting people up. Even more telling of the Western mentality toward colonized people, the “human zoos” drew in the biggest crowds of visitors from all over the globe. The exhibits captivated onlookers, including Americans, interested in what life in the colonies looked like, and who felt like they were viewing human progress before their very eyes. Colonial women, in particular, were assigned to act along the lines fulfilling the deemed appropriate gender binary instituted by the French. They performed femininity through dance, wore revealing clothing, and made traditional crafts for exhibition-goers. In short, the French government

51 For Greater France, the 1931 Exposition Coloniale marked a high point, albeit one that teetered at the brink of collapse from anti-colonial movements for self-determination in the empire and a spreading global depression. In response to decolonization movements, French officials felt the political need to address their treatment of natives. Colonial official and assistant coordinator of the exposition, Marcel Olivier defended the event and proclaimed that colonization “was the strength and pride of Western nations, which did sometimes get carried away by this pride that they abused their strength,” but he felt France had recognized its mistakes and “[c]olonization has righted its wrongs. The face that it is showing at Vincennes [the location of the Exposition outside Paris] has peaceful features.” Despite these claims that France had made up for her faults in the colonies, the establishment of exhibits portraying live colonials working and living behind cages throughout the event suggested a different image; Coverage of the exposition from the magazine L’Illustration pointedly addressed critics of the exposition, but their retorts were unconvincing to many; From L’Illustration, May 23, 1931, unpaginated; Quoted in Elizabeth Ezra, The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 16.

brought the colonies to the people of France by forcing colonial people to behave like caricatures of themselves for crowds of eager tourists.⁵³

Americans traveled across the Atlantic to get a taste of the colonies from the comfort of Paris and in part develop their interpretation of colonized people that would later influence their perception of decolonized Vietnam. The French government and tourism agencies offered perks and travel discounts including reduced transatlantic passage tickets to bring in more travelers from the United States.⁵⁴ In addition, they suspended the two dollar fee for a travel visa for the duration of the exposition so Americans could enter the country freely. Incentives for university and college students, those who would decide whether the United States would pursue imperialism in the future, helped increase youth attendance. Students enjoyed up to eighteen days abroad, including travel, meals, and accommodations for only five hundred U.S. dollars.⁵⁵ Foreign civilian participation allowed the French to show off their successes and expose visitors to peoples and cultures they had likely never had contact with before.

Americans participated in the exposition with conflicting feelings of curious interest and imperial admiration. Their proclaimed ideology of self-determination and freedom for all met a stark contrast with the colonial ventures of the other participants. In particular, the American pavilion clashed awkwardly with those of the other imperial powers presenting more traditional images of turn-of-the-century Empire. U.S. organizers


chose to exhibit the pre-Revolutionary War American colonies. They shipped over a replica of George Washington’s home Mount Vernon complete with one of the president’s descendants to provide a living link to the past. The use of American colonial architecture clearly had little to do with imperialism in the European sense, but sheds light on the significance the United States placed on maintaining a positive relationship with France through a projected willingness to embrace colonialism.

As diplomats and colonial overseers sought to rationalize the alliance between the United States and its imperial allies, a St. Louis born American expatriate to France, Josephine Baker, did more than most to sell the lure of the colonies to the U.S. public. Working as a bridge between the colonies and the United States, the beautiful African American performer captivated audiences, built an international following, and facilitated the transnational movement of colonial images of exoticism and sexuality, including those from Indochina, to the United States. In the 1920s, Baker moved to Paris to avoid racial discrimination. As a dancer, she appealed to those seeking something new and edgy in Parisian nightlife. For visiting Americans, her performances quickly became iconic representations of something at once foreign, but still seemingly familiar and thus safe.

Despite her American birth, Baker became a symbol for colonial sexuality more broadly, especially in the U.S. Baker’s burlesque dancing made her a popular figure in U.S.

---

56 The estate even sent Washington’s Great Granddaughter to work the booth as yet another extension of American interest in the exposition.

57 As one of the most famous members of the black jazz-age community living in interwar Paris, Baker resisted returning to the U.S. Even after Nazi occupation, she stayed as she felt persecution would occur wherever she lived. The large body of literature on Baker and blacks in Paris include, Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, Josephine: The Hungry Heart (New York: Random House, 1993); Tyler E. Stovall, Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); Straw P. Archer, Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s (New York, N.Y: Thames & Hudson, 2000); and Jennifer Anne Boittin, Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010).
newspapers, and wearing a trademark skirt of bananas she drew in crowds of tourists for her performances. At the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Baker’s association with colonial imagery reached its height. In March, the New York Times happily reported that U.S. native Baker had been crowned “Queen of the Colonies” in a beauty pageant hosted at the exposition. In a setting of colonial pavilions and human zoos filled with colonial women shipped in from around the world, what drove judges to name Baker as the “Queen of the Colonies”? Baker represented something exotic, but also familiar and Western. She looked the part of the colonial, but carried herself with French refinement. Associating Baker with the colonies meant associating sex with the colonies as well, from the African continent all the way to Indochina.

The seemingly bizarre act to name her “Queen of the Colonies” in 1931 helps illustrate the relationship between France and the U.S. during this period. Regardless of her place of birth, her race still separated her from mainstream actresses and performers. She remained a figure typecast to roles highlighting her blackness, and thus a perceived connection to the colonized global south. Baker’s sexuality tapped into Western fantasies and desires of colonial women. Through their eager participation in the exposition and excitement over Baker’s win, the United States illustrated that they were open and able to

---

58 The banana symbolism was surely not lost on her audience, representing both the colonial woman of color and an nod to overt sexuality; Boittin, Colonial Metropolis, 6-8; In a 1936, Baker responded to questions from American audiences about that notorious skirt sighing, “Those bananas were a great scandale [sic].” Baker seemed to find a great deal of humor in her celebrity; “The Legend Named Baker Comes Home” New York Times, February 2, 1936, X2.

59 In addition, Baker held international notoriety by 1931 and her naming drew even more attention to the exposition; “Josephine Baker Honored” New York Times, Paris: March 11, 1931, 8.

60 Her international notoriety was not always admiring. She sparked student riots in Vienna in 1928 and at a Yugoslavian University in 1929 opposing her race and exotic dance routines. Regardless of the controversy that surrounded her, she maintained a massive following of fans throughout Europe and the U.S.
understand a French view regarding the colonies.61

Most significantly, however, Baker represented a link between sexuality and the colonies in a package that Americans found comfortable. Her colonial-inspired performances, including her popular rendition of the song “La Petite Tonkinoise,” further tied her as a symbol to France’s empire in the American memory, despite the obvious disconnect.62 In 1936, *The New York Times* ran a long article dedicated to Baker and her life in Paris. The reporter recalls stunts where Baker led a leashed leopard down Parisian streets and performed with “savage rhythms and jungle motivations.” For her part, Baker smiles for the reporter and offers short responses. “The poor leopards,” she recalls, “they died.”63 Her popularity and ability to fuse the West and the colonial world provided Americans with a palatable association to colonial life, including Indochina, which exuded international sophistication and sexuality. Baker offers a useful link to how Americans idealized the women of Indochina, but as the next section illustrates, controlling disease on the ground proved to be a considerable headache for the Vietnamese that framed their perspective regarding western sexual encounters with local women.

**Prostitution and Venereal Disease from the Interwar Period to Decolonization**

When it came to the sexual relationships of colonizers within the colonies, the realities appeared far less glamorous than the fantasy. The debate over the ethics of sexual

---

61 Always dubbed as an American entertainer in domestic publications, Baker’s adventures across the continent were reported with fervor in the U.S. *The New York Times* reported everything from her appearances at popular events to the contentious crowds who greeted her in every city she visited, as well as any details they could collect on her personal life. During a tour in Yugoslavia, an impassioned fan stabbed himself to show his love to Baker and student riots forced her to cancel the trip; “Stabs Himself Over Josephine Baker” *New York Times*, Zegreb: April 30, 1929.


relations between Vietnamese women and Western men began during the French colonial period in the late nineteenth century. This section will address how the French and the Vietnamese worked to understand the impact of sexual encounters on Vietnamese society. This examination includes sources from the Vietnamese National Archives that show the progression of venereal disease during the French colonial period and the efforts to correct them. This section seeks to provide a framework that will help illuminate the Vietnamese perspective of sexual encounters between civilian women and foreign men. Through the study of venereal disease containment, in particular, it provides a direct link between the persisting major issues that occurred between the Vietnamese and the French, and re-occurred with the Americans during the Vietnam War.

As this chapter has already show, with the institution of French power in Indochina, sexuality became integral to intercultural interactions. As early as 1888, only one year into France’s colonial venture in Indochina, the Hanoi Municipal Council attempted to regulate prostitution through the establishment of license requirements and opening of medical dispensaries for venereal disease treatment.64 The numbers of sexual establishments in Hanoi, expanding from sixteen brothels in 1896 to only twenty in 1930, still appeared high for the time. The prostitution industry in the south, however, soon dwarfed these numbers when the focus of French control over Indochina moved to the southern region after France’s return at the end of World War II. It is also during this period that the Americans became active in Indochina and studies of sex work became more scientific.65

After decades of imperial control in Indochina, scholars at the end of the French period reflected on the problematic nature of the burgeoning sex industry servicing foreign men. As links between the industry, corruption, and disease became more well established, these concerns soon resonated to the highest levels of government. Looking forward to a study on sexually transmitted disease from 1953, medical doctor Đặng Văn Chin’s book *La Prostitution à Saigon-Cholon en 1952* (Prostitution in Saigon-Cholon in 1952) explains how the issue of prostitution effected the local population around the Vietnamese capital. The economic impact was particularly damning. Clandestine, or illegal, prostitution grew steeply, but brothels remained a prominent means for women selling their bodies. In a strange turn, Đặng asserted that his presentation was not a scientific study or “oeuvre litteraire,” but simply a report on the conditions that he had witnessed during the colonial period and the data he compiled. He hoped the publication would raise concern among the proper authorities and awareness among those who might be able to curb the problem under the young post-colonial regime of the Điệm family.

In addition to awareness, Đặng’s views coincided with the young governments expressed interests in establishing stricter moral codes. He desired greater protection and respect for Vietnamese women’s dignity through better regulation and education for social and medical staff working in the *Organization Mondiale de la Santé* (World Health Organization). Đặng’s report covers a sweeping time period, offering information from the changes of prostitution laws in the 1930s to the perceived causes, as well as detailed

---


67 Ibid., 5.
accounts of the medical outcomes and potential solutions looking into the post-colonial age. The work offers perspective of an activist who sought to promote consciousness of the challenges placed on Vietnamese culture from their intimate relationships with the Western world, past and present.

The preface of Đặng’s work includes a plea from the prefect for Saigon, Nguyễn Phuoc Loc, to use the information presented in the book to fight against the scourge of clandestine prostitution. Đặng offers five reasons why women in Indochina might turn to prostitution in his analysis: economics, family matters, social, political, or pathological reasons. He recognizes that much of the population felt sex work had its place. In particular, the relationship between the French and Indochinese military forces and their desires for prostitutes partially normalized the behavior, and military organized brothels legally offered relatively clean sex for deployed servicemen. Clandestine prostitution, however, presents concern as it was more difficult to monitor the health and wellness of the women or their clients. Based on the number of visits to anti-venereal disease hospitals, regulations concerning sanitation requirements failed to keep non-licensed women from working as 699 of the 1686 hospitalizations and treatments in 1952 were from clandestine workers.

Not only women working strictly as sex workers suffered from the effects of venereal disease. Hostesses, taxi-dancers, and bar singers all reported high levels of

68 Ibid., n.p.
69 Ibid., 31-33.
70 The number of women working in bordels militaires de compagne in 1952 was only ninety-five. As the First Indochina War escalated, however, these numbers increased significantly as I discuss in Chapter Three; Ibid., 41.
71 Ibid., 34.
venereal disease. These numbers indicate the fluid identity of prostitutes and the difficulty in suggesting a definitive number in any time period. Đặng estimates 5029 sex workers living and active in Saigon-Cholon in 1952, more than half of which were not licensed.\textsuperscript{72} When prostitution was made illegal entirely in the post-colonial period, the end of licensing created even more problems with trying to narrow down a specific number of women working in any form of sex work. Difficulty in tracking sexual exchange, volume, and post-colonial taboos concerning government endorsed sex work all contributed to the problematic nature of the prostitution industry during the American Vietnam War.

Likewise, Vietnam scholar Shaun Kingsley Malarney has established that dispensaries worked on the front lines of what grew into a heated debate over colonial intimacy in his research on colonial prostitution in Hanoi, located in northern Vietnam. The spread of sexually transmitted diseases presented the most immediate repercussion of prostitution and a seemingly safe point of contact between the government and sex workers. The structure indicates a system where even those practicing legally faced a hostile reception. After an initial visit, the \textit{Service Regional d’Hygiène} opened a dossier on each woman to keep information about their offenses, health, and lives. Fingerprint records were also maintained.\textsuperscript{73} Despite the legality of their trade, tabs kept by government and medical facilities indicated fear. Western nations began to ban prostitution which only further led to the criminalization of working girls in Southeast Asia. The late colonial period reflected the changing perception of prostitutes as age limitations in Indochina moved from eighteen to twenty-one in 1938, then lowered back to eighteen in 1951 after

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 34-37.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 16.
the French reasserted themselves in the region after World War II. Making the industry discrete became a priority in post-World War Vietnam. Laws were passed banning taxi drivers from taking men to brothels or from carrying men and prostitutes together.\(^74\)

From 1951 onward, lawmakers placed a striking emphasis on discretion. They accepted the existence of brothels and working girls, but restricted sex trade in efforts to make it invisible to locals or seemingly respectable. For one, the French required discrete outward appearances of brothels, since open advertisement could hurt the image of the empire. In addition, the law determined their acceptable age of European madams by marital status.\(^75\) Married women could run homes at as young an age as twenty-one, while single women had to be at least twenty-five to work as a maîtresse. This focus on what the public might perceive as acceptable social behavior for the brothels indicates a growing discomfort surrounding the already infamous prostitution industry.

At the heart of France’s colony in Indochina lay the glamorous capital of Saigon and its surrounding suburbs including the vibrant China Town, known as Cholon. These areas saw very high numbers of clandestine prostitutes hospitalized for venereal disease related illness. In 1952, a stark 1686 women were hospitalized with reports of illness reported at the local anti-venereal disease clinic with upwards of two-hundred hospitalized at any one time.\(^76\) Clandestine prostitutes were the more difficult number to monitor for

---

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{75}\) The title used refers to the *maîtresse de maison de tolérance européenne*. The brothel system offered more stability that clandestine street work as the women reported home to a Madame who helped to maintain their presentability. The focus in Đặng’s report on “European” Madames provides an interesting insight into the growing role of French women in post-1945 French Indochina. I have yet to see this issue discussed in detail in any other work, but it makes a striking divide with the post-1954 period where Madames are almost always Vietnamese or Chinese; Ibid., 19.

\(^{76}\) Ibid., 34, 47.
officials in Vietnam. Through their visits to the hospitals for medication, it became a way to judge a ballpark figure for those working outside state approved institutions with little access to preventative care, which was already poor. While these numbers are in no way perfect, they suggest that the numbers fell in the hundreds, but likely reached much higher levels since not all women visited hospitals out of fear, misunderstanding, or preference for Eastern Medicine to treat their illnesses.\footnote{Ibid., 65-72.}

In addition, these figures shed light on the fact that venereal disease education was lackluster at this time as the number of visits to the hospital more than doubled the amount of women making them. Statistically, each could theoretically be a repeat offender obtaining medical care but not the education required to prevent future visits. This failure of educating women about the causes and means of preventing venereal disease continued through the American Vietnam War. Many women feared obtaining diseases for loss of wages, but few understood the illnesses beyond their pragmatic impact. For colonial officials and aid workers, the imagined fantasy of “exotic,” “Oriental” women did not include providing adequate sexual education. That same fantasy, however, led outsiders to view the women as always harboring potentially dark or dangerous secrets, which made venereal disease part of the hazard.\footnote{I am forging this argument from materials collected from the colonial period through the end of the American War and persisting in popular culture. The most prominent examples can be seen in the distrust for Phuong in \textit{The Quiet American} and advertisements showing that prostitutes could simply be covert National Liberation Front, covert fighters supporting the North Vietnamese cause in the south and popularly known in the U.S. as Viet Cong, fighters in disguise; Heather Marie Stur, \textit{Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era} (New York: Cambridge, 2011).} Americans later embraced this in their military training as soldiers headed to Vietnam aware that relations with local women came with no shortage of risk to their health and their lovers back home.\footnote{Ibid., 65-72.}
Concerns over racial superiority often surrounded the framing of colonial relationships. Primarily, this fear of racial mixing dominated the discourse over casual sexuality in French Indochina. Leland Gardner, writing in 1966, shared the colonial mentality of his source, Army surgeon Dr. Jacob Sutor’s previously discussed writings on Vietnamese sexuality, *Ethnology of the genital senses, Love in the Colonies*. Gardner argued that the Vietnamese themselves resisted racial mixing in order to preserve their race. He reflected: “He polluted other, surrounding races without being polluted. He conquered and lost, traded and fornicated among other tropical races, but always his racial strain remained undimmed.” As such, he argues, French Indochinese mixed children who threatened this purity were often abandoned or placed in homes where they might not get the proper care or attention.

By 1931, the concern for these *métis*, or mixed-blood, children became a focus for French feminists examining life in the colonies. This, again, would be a trend in the early 1970s as the numbers of mixed children of Americans and Vietnamese skyrocketed. Under the French, as Ann Stoler has documented, these *métis* children became a pet project for European women looking to offer them a better life free from the harsh conditions that they faced in the colony, often without the support of one or both parents. In particular, the goal

---


became to make these children more French in their behavior and to keep them away from morally dangerous situations. Mixed children were even granted French citizenship through their fathers. Through what they perceived as civilizing Westernization, the children might obtain more opportunity. They grounded this education along gendered lines, Stoler argues, as girls were taught to “avert sexual promiscuity” while the boys’ education favored “political precocity” in their effort to avoid becoming “militant men.”

Such projects for French women indicate that the levels of mixed-race births were rising in the 1930s, Christina Firpo convincingly argues that these concerns existed since the turn of the century, and that the perceptions of these problems often lay with the women and their children, not the men who fathered them.

Despite these mounting concerns of public image, venereal disease, and mixed births, colonial officials saw the problems of prostitution and concubinage as preferable to bringing their wives with them from France. Mainly, they feared that housing their wives in the colonies might lead to financial ruin. Rather, they could have an alternate life, an alternate wife, to fulfill their needs and share their lives in the colony at a much more reasonable cost. The popularity of finding sexual and emotional comfort abroad in Indochina even found its place in literature including Henry Hervey’s previously mentioned 1925 novel, Congai: Mistress of Indochine about a Vietnamese concubine, or Graham Greene’s The Quiet American, a novelization of Greene’s experiences in Indochina during the early days of American involvement. Whether the relationships

82 Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule, 69.
83 Ibid.
84 Harry Hervey, Congai: Mistress of Indochine (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corp, 1927).
were long and personal or quick and mechanical, memories of successful long-term marriages are overshadowed by significantly more accounts where women are forgotten by their western lovers or men assume their trysts with a working girl meant more than a financial exchange. Regardless of circumstance, colonial-civilian and later civilian-GI relationships rarely fared well, and even worse so if either party perceived trouble, including pregnancy or financial insecurity.  

Finally, Indochina as a sight of recreation created yet another space where sexual encounters threatened the colonial establishment and forged its place in western memory on what to expect in Vietnam. For many Europeans, the colonies represented places for financial opportunity or exotic vacations outside the old world, in addition to places of great risk. One of France’s most prominent uses of their colonies for relaxation involved the creation and use of spas as they had done in their other holdings. Colonizers found “cleansing” locations like the picturesque mountain town of Dalat in central Vietnam to open spas that catered to the colonial elite. Colonial tourism and guidebooks promoted hygiene and sexual moderation in their territories, but, as this chapter has already displayed, sexual moderation failed to resonate with colonizers who viewed relationships

85 Greene’s protagonist, British newspaper writer Thomas Fowler, engaged in a relationship with a young former-taxi dancer, Phuong, despite having a wife in England. Phuong represented an escape, a pragmatic solution to his loneliness, and a fantasy growing into love. As a Catholic, Fowler’s wife refused a divorce and he felt trapped between lives. For Phuong, the inability of Fowler to marry her leads her into the arms of a young American man who promised her security. This fictionalized account sheds light on the prominence of available women in the Western imagination. The struggle over Phuong’s love reflects the struggle over Vietnam, more broadly. In some cases, like Fowler’s, men found themselves caught between two lives. Others moved forward much more easily, leaving the women, and occasionally children, behind in Vietnam. In another tie to the U.S. war era, relationships often ended abruptly and without warning for the women.; Jeffrey Keith offers a detailed overview of The Quiet American’s relationship to colonial sexuality, war reportage, and western memory in his dissertation, Between the Paris of the Orient and Ho Chi Minh City: imaginings and reportage in wartime Saigon, 1954-1975 (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2011).
with locals as both part of the draw of the colonies.\textsuperscript{86}

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the responsibilities fell on the colonizers themselves to keep free of all the threats, real or imagined, that they perceived in Indochina. Historian Eric Jennings argues, “When it was not the climate or the ‘exotic other’ that threatened to harm the fragile health of the colonizers, it was the behavior and lifestyles of the colonials themselves.”\textsuperscript{87} Fears of colonial sexual encounters did not prevent the French colonizers from engaging in prostitution with the colonized Vietnamese, but they instead contributed to the development of laws and regulations. French representations and advertisements from Indochina embedded the link between the “exotic” nature of the colonies and their women. Though a political interest in a western European nation like France to remain in control over Southeast Asia, the United States offered support and participated in events like the 1931 Colonial Exposition to make it known to the entire world. Through their foreign policy relationship with France and her colonies, the United States became a consumer of Indochinese sexuality.

In the wake of World War II, the First Indochina War between the nationalistic Viet Minh and the French prolonged contact between the cultures. Throughout the war, U.S. interests in the region increased as fears of spreading global communism grew. In spite of a new government and civil organization, Americans filled into the void of the French but carried over many of the ideas, stereotypes, and memories about Vietnamese civilians.

\textsuperscript{86} Historians have well documented that despite the portrayal of Dalat as a cleansing place where many went to use spas for relaxing or healing diseases, the humid climate and steep mosquito population actual lead to significant spread of disease; Eric T. Jennings, *Curing the Colonizers: Hydrotherapy, Climatology, and French Colonial Spas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 59-60.
Their memories of colonial sexuality, perhaps, burned brightest of all.

Examining how the French viewed colonial subjects as sexualized and how they represented this to the rest of the world frames the early American experience in Vietnam. Based on early ethnographic reports like that of Sutor, the French portrayed Vietnamese sexuality as mechanical and directed at meeting male satisfaction. In popular representations of the colony, authors and officials marketed the exotic nature of Vietnam through both the setting and the women. Built up in literature and public events like expositions, the sexual nature of colonial life was displayed widely for the world to see. Throughout the French tenure in Indochina, the Americans paid attention. As the colonial grasp on the colony weakened, U.S. interests only grew. In the face of these stereotypes, the Vietnamese fought for and achieved decolonization from the French, but as the next chapter shows the war only further embedded the western perception of Vietnamese women as exotic and erotic. After independence, the South Vietnamese worked with the Americans to secure their power but faced unexpected challenges from the social views and behaviors of their closest ally.
CHAPTER THREE

BROTHEL CULTURE IN THE FIRST INDOCHINA WAR AND THE RISE OF POST-COLONIAL MORALITY

Introduction

After the final battle for Vietnamese independence from the French at Diên Biên Phu in spring 1954, French soldier Paul Manzer reflected on the complexity of the French relationship with Vietnamese prostitutes by noting, they “had a more than respectable role during the battle.”¹ He recalled them acting not only as sex workers and lovers to soldiers, but also in tactical roles as nurses and or as companions to keep up the spirits of the troops. Manzer’s comments corroborate military records emphasizing the significant role played by prostitution in the decline of French control over Indochina just as they had in the formation of the sexualized images of colonial culture. In the same way that imagining sexually promiscuous native women framed the world's perspective of the colony, it influenced the way the war was fought. When the First Indochina War began with the return of the French and their colonial ambitions to Vietnam in 1946, the proliferation of military brothels, known as *Bordel militaire de campagne*, or BMCs, again brought Vietnamese women into close proximity with western men. After spending World War II under the control of the Japanese empire and obtaining a short lived liberation, Vietnamese nationalists opposed the return of the French colonial institution. During this decade of transition, the First Indochina War's proliferation of military brothels introduced yet another problematic element in the social, racial, and territorial power struggle of post-

World War II decolonization.

In the years running up to and immediately superseding the defeat of the French at the Battle of Điện Biên Phu, the United States helped forge an infrastructure in South Vietnam in the name of communist containment. At the beginning of the decade, Mao Zedong had led the Chinese communists to victory over the Guomindang nationalist party and proved its willingness to fight in Korea. Vietnam seemed a likely place for the next move in the developing Cold War. With a popular, and communist-supported, North Vietnamese government seeking reunification, the Americans helped support the French as long as they could to avoid direct conflict and moved their support to South Vietnamese Ngô Đình Diệm once the French were gone. There would be no Normandy or Inchon invasion in Southeast Asia, only a slow build-up of advisors, intelligence, and money.

Following the ouster of French imperial leadership after Điện Biên Phu and territorial division along the seventeenth parallel, Vietnam underwent a major political restructuring. In 1955, Diệm ascended to the newly established office of the President of South Vietnam. As President, Diệm, the former Prime Minister to Emperor and Chief of

---


4 Scholars obtaining access to Vietnamese archives have revised the historiographical paradigm regarding Diệm’s relationship with the U.S. Previously orthodox historians including Stanley Karnow and Robert Buzzanco have portrayed Diệm as a figure chosen by Washington as a puppet to their whims, and an incompetent one at that. In contrast to this view, scholars including Philip Catton, Jessica Chapman, and Edward Miller have presented convincing reseach that Diệm achieved power independently through shrewd political strategies against corruption orchestrated by him and his brother, and held that power until the coup through a sincere dedication to modernizing Vietnam; Edward Miller, “War Stories: The Taylor-Buzankan Debate and How We Think About the Vietnam War,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 453-484; Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin, 1997 [1984]), 251; Robert Buzzanco, “Fear and (Self) Loathing in Lubbock: How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and
State Bảo Đại, merged the connections he and his family held within Vietnam with those he made while living in the United States to assist in forging a new infrastructure to organize the south. Faced with the creation of a new government, Diệm reached out to the political science and criminal justice faculty at Michigan State University (MSU), where he had once worked during his exile in the United States, for guidance on the institution of everything from the organization of administrative offices to the structure and laws of the police force. His liaison with MSU represented one of the first and most intimate of Diệm’s political relationships with Americans.

In addition to political maneuvering in Vietnam, Diệm found U.S. support in his efforts to consolidate power and forge an independent South Vietnam while ignoring the First Indochina War’s Geneva Accords settlement caveat to hold a vote in 1956 to reunite the nation under a singular government. Following the inability to peaceably reach a solution, reunification took nearly another two decades and an extraordinarily bloody war with the U.S. by their side. Diệm only held power until a 1963 coup, but passed two items of long-lived and influential legislation relevant to this dissertation project, the Family Laws and the Laws for the Protection of Morality. Both restricted personal and social behaviors. With pressure from his nominal First Lady and sister-in-law, Madame Ngô Đình Nhu, Diệm enacted the series of morality-based laws to protect the new South Vietnam from overwhelming Western cultural influences. They also supported the Ngô family’s Catholic faith. These regulations banned practices including polygamy, abortion, divorce,


5 Chapman, Cauldron of Resistance, 60-66, 163-164.
gambling, and prostitution. Some southerners resisted, ignored, and resented these laws, but the attempts to restrict vice failed most notably following the expansion of the American presence in the region.

This chapter will trace these transitions from the brothels of the First Indochina War through the establishment of morality laws under Diệm and his family. Using the lens of gender, foreign relations and war to examine archival sources from the Michigan State University and French Service de la defense archives, I examine the nexus between the French and post-colonial eras in Vietnam to assess how this intersection influenced U.S. ideas regarding politics and social relations in Southeast Asia. In part, the violent power-struggle of colonization resulted in the perceived need for colonizers to simultaneously uplift and repress colonial women, and through them colonial society. Americans adopted a European colonial perception of Southeast Asian women as exotic or erotic, but always a potential threat. Following decolonization, early U.S. advisors believed women could still not to be trusted to control their own fate without outside influence.

The female figure the Americans came to know most intimately in those early years, the bold and sometimes notorious Madame Nhu, challenged their outlook that Vietnamese women were weak but only further propagated their suspicions about their potential threat. Additionally, sophisticated corruption rings anchored in gambling and prostitution concerned American advisors working to train police forces of the newly established Republic of Vietnam (RVN). Diệm and Nhu's pro-Catholic and pro-morality agenda designed to empower the women of South Vietnam sparked instant tension between the United States and the young RVN. Prostitution was banned and dating was not, but the encounters rarely fell so cleanly within the laws and foreign advisor, diplomat, and
soldiers’ respect for Vietnamese social and moral policy was limited at best. These rules and the methods to circumvent them became the core of the American GI’s relationship with civilian women.

Assessing the impact of French military brothels during the First Indochina War indicates the further embedding of the stereotype of an exotic and desirable Vietnamese sexual behavior into western memory. This manufactured use of Vietnamese women as tools for sexual relief contributed to a belief in Vietnamese society that western men viewed them a less than human. This chapter seeks to trace this decolonizing shift as it illustrates the culmination of the colonial exploitation of Vietnamese civilians first outlined in chapter one. In addition, it will examine the moral policies of the post-war Vietnamese-led government which represent a direct reaction to this behavior, shown most clearly through a study of French military brothels and the coming to power of Diệm.

The role of the United States in the midst of these changes is central to understanding the contradiction that arose between U.S. support for French colonial domination, and later assisting the Diệm government in forging their new laws. Extending this contradiction, the Diệm laws formed the apex of U.S.-South Vietnamese disagreements over social and sexual policies after American military escalation in 1965. By tracing the decline of French colonial power in Indochina and the rise of Vietnamese-designed post-colonial morality, I argue that this period sets the stage for social conflict as the Americans began to escalate forces. During the time period covered in this chapter, roughly 1946 to 1960, American interests in Vietnam sharpened and as the Eisenhower presidency gave way to Kennedy, the specter of the Cold War pushed the U.S. to remain engaged in the dialog in Vietnam even if that meant shifting their allegiances.
Brothels and the defeat of the French in Indochina

In his 2014 work, Le repos des guerriers: les bordels militaires de campagne pendant la guerre d’Indochine (The rest of warriors: military brothels during the Indochina war), Jean-Marc Binot argues that long tours of service during the French Indochina War led to the creation of an industrialized system of military brothels working in line with the larger war effort. Consistent with concerns of Americans in the next decade, French archival records indicate a significant preoccupation with venereal disease spread and treatment as it related to interactions between soldiers and prostitutes. The role and legacy of BMCs both influenced and mirrored U.S. military politics regarding sexual encounters throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Deemed in 1946 as the best solution to the problem of clandestine prostitution and venereal disease spread, the institution of BMCs provided sex to soldiers in and around bases in Indochina. In the memo from the superior command of French troops in the far east that established the potential of BMCs to solve the venerial disease problem, Chief of State-Major de Guillebon argued to Army General and Senior Commander of the French troops in the Far East LeClerc, that morale could be kept high and disease rates low through this proposed monitoring of les quartiers réservés (red light districts) in urban spaces and BMCs for isolated units in the field. Unmonitored clandestine prostitution was seen as the main problem causing disease and distraction among the men, but not something deemed

---


7 Binot, Le repos des guerriers, 42-43; Memo from Chief of State-Major de Guillebon to le Général de Corps d’Armée LeClerc, Commandant Supérieur des Troupes Françaises en Extrême-Orient, 25 May1946, 10 H 2099, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, Service historique de la Défense, Centre historique des archives, Vincennes, France (henseforth SHD-CHA), 2.
too difficult to solve.\textsuperscript{8} Prior to the large-scale implementation of BMCs in Indochina, the French had used similar methods in their colonial campaigns in Africa and felt confident in their use of the program for Asia.\textsuperscript{9}

The report deemed that the location, ease of transportation, and shift schedules would determine how and by whom the brothels should be established, but suggested that forming the BMCs as needed at the battalion-level would provide enough locations to satisfy soldiers.\textsuperscript{10} Finding women presented the next immediate challenge in the formation of the military brothel industry. Guillebon wrote in his report to LeClerc, however, that “prospecting for girls is, in general, in the Asian world, a simple affair.”\textsuperscript{11} He assured him that with compensation, delicacy, and the involvement of local authorities, including the local police as well as brothel owners and madams, collecting women to work in the BMCs would not prove difficult. Busier BMCs could hire larger populations of women as needed, including Saigon which controlled around 200 to 250 of the 400 total women employed licensed to work in Indochina in 1947.\textsuperscript{12} By 1954, Hanoi controlled about 110 women.\textsuperscript{13} Poverty proved the most significant factor in women choosing to work as prostitutes. As Christina Firpo has argued, organizations including the Federation of Foundations for

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 1.

\textsuperscript{9} Binot, \textit{Le repos des guerriers}, 7-8.

\textsuperscript{10} Binot, \textit{Le repos des guerriers}, 42-43; Memo from Chief of State-Major de Guillebon to le Général de Corps d’Armée LeClerc, Commandant Supérieur des Troupes Françaises en Extrême-Orient, 25 May 1946, 10 H 2099, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, SHD-CHA, 2.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.


French Children of Indochina believed that poverty led to prostitution and prostitution led to mixed-race children who would likely be raised to be social deviants once abandoned by their fathers and thus contribute to a persisting cycle of vice.\textsuperscript{14}

Once locations were selected and women procured, the next most significant element in the establishment of the sex-for-morale industry revolved around the maintenance of good health. Guillebon insisted that prior to the official hiring of each woman she must have undergone an extensive physical exam to prove she had “perfect health.”\textsuperscript{15} Beyond a standard vaginal exam, he recommended more sophisticated laboratory testing to ensure the utmost health of the women and in turn, the French soldiers. Still, Guillebon recognized the impossibility of removing all disease and required that red light districts and brothels be equipped with military police guards and prophylactic cabins with medicine and supplies. During the war, medical commandants sent regular confidential reports to battalion leaders concerning exams and blood tests performed on women working in the travelling BMCs when they passed through cities like Saigon.\textsuperscript{16}

As the war progressed, the BMC industry grew and women were examined as often as twice per week.\textsuperscript{17} The decision to use a Vietnamese doctor, initially Dang Ngoc Trong (the French documents do not include the tone and diacritical marks for Vietnamese names)

\textsuperscript{14} The name was settled on in 1949; Christina Firpo, “‘The Durability of Empire:’ Race, Empire and ‘Abandoned’ Children in Colonial Vietnam” (PhD diss., University of California – Los Angeles, 2007), 61, 225, 211.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Memo from Le Medecin Commandant Robet to Monsieur le Chef de Bataillon, Commandant le 8eme Tabor, 28 December 1948, 10 H 2099, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, SHD-CHA.

\textsuperscript{17} Compte-Rendu D’Inspection, No 194, 9 November 1955, 10 H 4583, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, SHD-CHA, 4.
in 1946, to direct the anti-venereal disease clinic in Saigon illustrates the desire of the French colonials to make the BMC process work in line with Indochinese interests and help their morale program function as seamlessly as possible.\textsuperscript{18} As I discuss in chapters four and five, the U.S. attempted similar strategies during the 1960s to considerably less success. For Indochinese prostitutes who worked outside the BMC system, the French military could not intervene directly in civilian hospitals and thus they relied on local interlocutors to keep track of repeat offenders and inform them of the status of VD outside the camps.\textsuperscript{19} With local support, the French kept a vigilant eye on the industry and its repercussions on society.

The effort that the French colonial forces and their advisors placed into choosing and maintaining “clean” women for the BMCs and brothels, however, failed to eliminate disease at any meaningful levels.\textsuperscript{20} Working throughout the war to provide the best care possible, the constant reevaluation of methods to treat disease represented a major component of the BMC project in Indochina. Hundreds of pages of memos were exchanged throughout the war detailing soldiers, their diagnosis, and the newest methods to prevent illnesses including the much feared syphilis.\textsuperscript{21} In addition to disease rates, the French also kept exceptional records of women working in BMCs as well as the medical attention given

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{18} Note sur le controle de la prostitution to Mr le Ministre de la Sante, 1946, 10 H 2099, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, SHD-CHA, 1.

\textsuperscript{19} Note de Service from Le Médecin Commandant Le Hénaff, Directeur du Service de santé de la 3e D.M.T., No 210, 30 December 1954, 10 H 2099, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, SHD-CHA, 1.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Le Medecin-Lieutenant Delmas, Medcin-Chef du 21e Bataillon de Tirailleurs Algeriens to Monsieur le Medecin-Colonel, Directeur du Service de Sante des T.F.I.N., 4 December 1948, 10 H 2099, Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense, SHD-CHA.
\end{flushleft}
to troops after visiting either licensed or unlicensed clandestine prostitutes. They even monitored the race and location of the soldiers to create a thorough record of how prostitution was consumed and the impact of its related diseases on their larger war efforts.22

In many ways, the establishment of military brothels by the French in Indochina mirrored the U.S. designed brothels in occupied Japan, Korea, and elsewhere in Asia during the 1940s and 1950s.23 This association between colonial activity, fantasies of Asian women, and military forces provided a link for much of the U.S. military in the 1960s regarding the acceptability in brothel culture in Vietnam. In the interim from Diên Biên Phu to American escalation in Vietnam, however, the political restructuring and passage of Western and Catholic morality-based legislation in what became South Vietnam changed the way Vietnamese leadership viewed brothels, especially those instituted by western military forces.

“Dancing with Death is Sufficient”: Diệm and the Forging of Post-Colonial Vietnam

In the wake of the newly decolonized Vietnam, many in Washington recognized that they would need to establish new allies in Southeast Asia. The United States, however, lacked any substantive understanding of Vietnamese traditions and culture apart from what they learned from the colonialists. Still they opted to support the South in their independence with Ngo Đình Diệm in control as it seemed their best option, and one the

---

22 These records exist through the 10 H files in the Vincenne SHD-CHA archives, but the most fruitful I witnessed reoccurred throughout the 10 H 2099 and 10 H 4583 files.

French even indicated they once considered. Working with the first South Vietnamese President, Diệm, the United States sent academics and advisors to help establish a civilian infrastructure and collaborate toward a system of what both nations hoped would be mutually beneficial nation-building programs. Diệm needed allies and money, and the Americans wanted to keep a footing in Vietnam. The similar but politically contrasting ideologies toward nationalism of Diệm’s counterparts in the North, in addition to Diệm’s anti-communism and American support, stalled all efforts at reunification in their tracks. This section will examine the role of Diệm’s government in the forging of America’s relationship with South Vietnamese civilians during this period.

Diệm’s power in Vietnam derived largely from the prevailing stance he took against social and political corruption syndicates in 1955. Standing up to the notorious Binh Xuyên crime syndicate gave him the confidence to push aside the nominal Emperor Bảo Đại, living in Paris at the time, and take control over the south. Historians once viewed Diệm’s grasp on power as tenuous at best, but scholars like Edward Miller have pointed out that the leader’s achievements resulted from a much more calculated plan of action than previously understood. Rather, it grew out of considerable agency from within his administration. Through his efforts, Diệm also helped guide the United States in their early decision-making as they moved forward in Vietnam. American preconceptions, civil

---


26 Jessica Chapman’s account of Diệm’s relationship with the Binh Xuyên illustrates the instrumentality his reduction of their power played in his rise to power in the 1950s in her recent work, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 2013.

27 Miller, *Misalliance*, 1-10.
advisors, and the Ngô family’s focus on corruption drew civilian life onto center stage
during the coming war with stories of sex and intimacy capturing the imaginations of on-
lookers. The relationship with Diệm’s administration and the impact of the West’s presence
in Saigon shaped their relationship for the subsequent decade and had a far greater impact
on foreign relations and the war than has been previously acknowledged by scholars.

For the United States, many questions persisted after the First Indochina War over
whether or not the South Vietnamese should keep Diệm in power. What he lacked in
holding the confidence of the Vietnamese people, however, he seemingly made up for in
his hesitation to alienate the Americans politically in the early years. Acting Director of
the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs, Kenneth T. Young, stressed to the
famous General J. Lawton Collins, then serving as Special Representative to Vietnam, that
keeping Diệm in power and making it look like a Vietnamese idea was the best plan they
could forge moving forward. In 1954, keeping Diệm as a mouthpiece and letting the
Vietnamese phase in more apt leadership on their own time seemed like the only stable
solution.28 This transition happened much more slowly than Americans anticipated and
from their perspective Diệm held a tenuous grasp on power for close to a decade. Yet, as
Miller has convincingly argued, Diệm’s hold to power was far more calculated. Diệm
pushed his own ideals against the U.S. creating struggles in their ability to work together
through their differing perspectives on the purpose and goals of nation building projects in
Vietnam.29 As the President focused on restructuring the south politically, his first lady
turned her attention to building a new society.

28 Letter From the Acting Director of the Office of Philippine and Southeast Asian Affairs (Young) to the
29 Miller, Misalliance, 12, 70-84, 148-157.
Madame Nhu against the World

When a young Trần Lê Xuân married the far older Ngô Đình Nhu in 1943, it was not entirely clear that the family would reach the heights it achieved in only the few short years after her brother-in-law became the first President of South Vietnam. After 1954, Madame Nhu forced her way into the spotlight to dictate the direction of much of the nation’s social policies while the men oversaw their interactions with the Americans and their preparations for war. Still, the Kennedy administration observed Nhu and recognized the power she wielded within the government.30 What the United States did not anticipate, however, was how severely her policies would influence their interactions with civilians and their approach to the Vietnam War years later. As they alienated much of the urbanizing southern population in and around Saigon, Diệm and his family lost their ability to maintain control of their support base.

Since her brother-in-law took office, Nhu has captured the imaginations, and scorn, of many. Her arrival onto the political scene as the de facto “first lady” of Vietnam placed her in marked contrast to her counterpart in the United States. Where Jacqueline Kennedy felt women should stay outside of the political realm, Nhu worked her way in to the corrupt and dangerous world with little fear.31 Always pushed aside in her youth as the middle of three children, and the second female at that, the so called Dragon Lady was unafraid to participate in decision making in her adult years. Through marriage and strong will, she found a voice for herself within the administration.

Following the 1963 coup against her husband and brother-in-law that left the men

---


31 Miller, *Misalliance*, 150-151.
bound and murdered in the back of a RVN military vehicle, Nhu had little choice but to remove herself from public life. The laws she encouraged over the previous half decade bred frustration out of their contradictory nature. Her first well-publicized effort, the 1959 Code of the Family, brought about new opportunities for women while at the same time trapping them in bad marriages.\(^{32}\) Her 1962 Law for the Protection of Morality set out to restructure women’s role in society yet again, while turning already struggling working girls and dancers into criminals.\(^{33}\) These originally civilian-based restrictions grew to have far greater consequences on South Vietnam’s political relationship with the United States than either government ever imagined.

If Nhu’s anti-vice regulations challenged the shifting societal norms taking place globally, their effects were particularly at odds with the growing number of Americans living and working in South Vietnam. Beyond the obvious vices of prostitution and gambling, the laws also banned blue (pornographic) movies, beauty contests, sentimental songs, and dancing.\(^{34}\) Dancing was the most notorious of these regulations and often mocked in the media. Nhu’s always colorful comments did little to calm the public concern. She reportedly told the press that, “dancing with death is sufficient” to entertain the minds of soldiers.\(^{35}\) To her, social activities seemed imprudent, violating not only her traditional Vietnamese values but also her religious views as a Catholic. The combination of these


\(^{35}\) Quoted in, Heather Marie Stur, “Dragon ladies, gentle warriors, and girls next door: Gender and ideas that shaped the Vietnam War” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 2008), 67.
sensibilities left the first lady opposed to all immoral behavior. As Monique Demery has argued, unlike her husband and his brother, Nhu possessed a certain flair, sense of theater, and stomach for the fight that they did not. Like the image below illustrates in a newspaper cartoon from Bill Mauldin included in the MSU records on her reputation, the American media viewed Nhu as controlling the “reins of government” in Vietnam with the danger of this represented in her embodiment of a black widow spider. In the image, Nhu’s head is attached to the body of a large black widow spiders with each of her eight arms holding on to a different rope. This image of her illustrates not only the vile and dangerous nature that westerners perceived her to embody, but the abilities she had to control multiple parts of the South Vietnamese government run by her brother-in-law. The popular photos of Nhu holding or firing handguns likewise illustrate a sense of toughness that she offered to the administration.

Applying these personality traits to her political behavior, she stood steadfast against resistance to the value-driven laws she promoted. She pressured the administration to keep promoting them until they received enough votes to pass, regardless of their lack of popularity among the civilian population or their American counterparts. In particular, the regulations attracted the attention of the American press who ran stories offering a lighter-side to the political corruption and nepotism surrounding the Diệm regime and escalating Vietnamese hostilities.

36 In her 2013 biography, Monique Brinson Demery obtained unprecedented access to Nhu and previously unreleased stories of her life. Demery’s interviews with Nhu offer considerable new information to unveil many of the mysteries surrounding her life, but failed to remove it completely. Even with the publication, numerous questions remain, especially regarding her social policy; Demery, Finding the Dragon Lady, 85.

37 UA 17.95 Bx 1223 Fl 41 – Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu cartoon, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University Libraries, East Lansing, MI (henceforth MSU).
Part of Nhu’s social influence came through her well-documented work with local women’s organizations who found a new voice alongside the influential First Lady. Her association with these organizations and the passage of the 1959 Code of the Family provided women with pathways to legally achieving equal rights with men at work or home.\textsuperscript{38} Nhu feared the ability to make money quickly by working for foreign men provided a major temptation for many struggling women. As head of the Vietnamese Women’s Solidarity Movement, Nhu warned members, “we cannot accept swells (rich people) humiliating our common prestige by seducing Vietnamese women into the path of decadence.”\textsuperscript{39} In this sense, she was completely right. After a long war with the French, the resulting socio-political turmoil in Vietnam drove young women to the cities in an effort to financially support their families. Westerners often provided a means to this end. They represented potential consumers for both legal and illicit goods and services, alike. Few American advisors saw their interactions with civilians, especially young women, as having any potential impact on their work to reorganize South Vietnam into an independent democratic state.

Nhu saw past this, however, by recognizing that overturning social norms challenged those in power. When those once rich and in control had less opportunity than prostitutes and black market dealers, corruption challenged the status quo. In addition to the practical, illicit relationships with Western men also challenged her strict Vietnamese and Catholic moral values. If women were to obtain any leverage in the new South Vietnam, it should be through involvement in politics and promoting women’s issues like

\textsuperscript{38} Demery, \textit{Finding the Dragon Lady}, 109.

\textsuperscript{39} "Yank Wooing Upsets Vietnamese" \textit{Detroit Free Press}, April 12, 1963, 2-B; All text original, in, Folder 41 – Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, Box 1223, UA 17.95, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, MSU.
the right to own property and control finances. She took her own role in the government very seriously, connecting herself to prominent Vietnamese women from the past including the Trưng sisters, and used her influence over Diệm to secure her place in Saigon by remaining relevant to both the RVN and the Americans.\textsuperscript{40}

The first prominent legislation Nhu worked to pass, the 1959 Code of the Family, restructured traditional Vietnamese life to provide women with greater agency within marriages and more mobility within society. In her Preamble, Nhu reminded readers that since the passage of the 1956 Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam that, “all citizens, without distinction as to sex, are born with equal rights and duties and shall conduct themselves in their relations with each other in a spirit of love and cooperation,” and further, that the RVN “recognizes the family as the foundation of society.”\textsuperscript{41} Prior to the Code’s issue, three colonial-era pieces of legislation legally regulated family life.\textsuperscript{42} To revise and correct these contradictory programs in association with the new constitution, Nhu orchestrated the Family Code which entered into law by 1959.

The Code included four major components to either secure or restructure family life. The policies eventually shaped how Americans interacted with civilian women by eliminating polygamy, relaxing arranged marriage rules, eliminating divorce, and empowering women within Vietnamese society. The first chapter of the law related to “marriage” as an institution. It abolished polygamy and eliminated the practice of arranging marriages and allowing for each party to choose the other based on their own desires and

\textsuperscript{40} Stur,\textit{ Beyond Combat}, 27-28.

\textsuperscript{41} Quoted in, Republic of Viet Nam, “Preamble of the Bill on the Family,” \textit{Code of the Family} (Saigon: 1959), 1.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 1-2.
not their family.43 While official polygamy rates went down after the passage of the law, the policy did not prevent married women from working as bar girls while their husbands were away fighting or unable to make enough money to sustain their entire family. By the mid-1960s, most of the women working in bars were married or involved in committed relationships outside their work.44

The illegality of polygamy failed to produce a strictly monogamous culture, as desperation proved a more powerful determinant regarding social behavior rather than Nhu’s morality laws. The abolition of the practice also created a window for young women to leave their families prior to marriage, sending many into the cities unwed. Women who ended up working as bar girls, in particular, supported this component of the law. In a 1967 study, only sixteen percent said they would marry the person their parent selected for them.45 While sixty-one percent felt women should marry, forty-six percent felt women should not marry a man she did not love. The remaining thirty percent reported they had no opinion on the issue.

The second chapter of the code related to the “marriage property system,” to set in place a practice similar to a prenuptial agreement wherein each party outline the legal rights regarding property.46 With the restructuring of property ownership within marriage, women were to be treated as economic equals to men within marriage. While this law


offered great possibility for women, it failed to immediately change their stake in society which was largely determined in the 1960s through the RVN’s alliance with the Americans. U.S. service members in Vietnam continued to stenotype the Vietnamese as inferior to themselves, with women’s role in society viewed even lower than that of the men. Even Vietnamese women failed to view themselves as equal to the men in their lives, many reporting in 1967 that they viewed men as having more professional abilities than themselves. A standout among this data relates to the views of bar girls who saw more potential for women to take on education and professional jobs if they so desired. All bar girls surveyed thought women should attend school, and most thought they should also attend university when possible. When asked which careers were most desirable for women they chose pharmacist and small business owner as their top choices.47

Nhu also insisted on a stipulation in the code that labeled divorce as an unethical practice which worked against the interests of families. The third chapter on “legal separation” lays out specific instances in which a legal separation might be allowed, but according to the first article forbidding divorce, notes that the government put the law in place to “encourage the unity and cohesion of the family.”48 This portion of the law can be linked to Nhu’s Catholicism, but also reflected her desire to maintain power.49 These rules on marriage factored into the behavior of Vietnamese civilians during the Vietnam War. Women often stayed married when their husband’s went fighting even while working in

49 Demery’s work sheds light on the importance of divorce for Nhu, a portion of the law which limited women in bad marriages more than it freed them. Through interviews and rare documents collected from the former First Lady, Demery uncovered that the divorce regulations were likely for very personal reasons.
bars or as prostitutes.

The First Lady struggled to keep her personal life together in order to maintain her security and power.\(^50\) And Nhu held far more power than her Western counter-parts. Her influence swayed elections in 1959 to elect a candidate she favored.\(^51\) In 1960, she demanded meetings with Edward Lansdale, a deputy for the Secretary of Defense, to discuss her concerns over the U.S. role in Vietnam and their unwillingness to play by the Ngô family’s rules or defend her to the press.\(^52\) Through keeping a firm finger on the pulse of the regime to ensure her security, Nhu gained a reputation as corrupt that resonated within Vietnam in groups like the Cân Lao opposition party and critical Americans who distrusted this woman of power.\(^53\)

The final portion of the laws also sought better care for women in society by making “violation[s] of marriage obligations” illegal.\(^54\) The articles within the law emphasize that either spouse could be held accountable for adultery. Punishments included from three months to two years in prison, fines ranging from 1,000 to 100,000 piasters, or a

\(^50\) Personally, Nhu’s sister, Le Chi, flaunted an affair. Nhu prevented the divorce because Le Chi’s cabinet member husband knew far too much about the Ngo family to be cut loose. The State Department knew of this tie early on, however, as her husband Chau reported his desired divorce and Nhu’s interception of his resignations from Minister of the Interior as well as Secretary General to the Presidency. In addition, she feared that her own potential divorce would leave her with few options and no security in a growingly tumultuous political atmosphere; Telegram From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State, February 25, 1958, *FRUS, 1958-1960*, Volume I: Vietnam (Washington: GPO, 1986), p. 15; Demery, *Finding the Dragon Lady*, 104.


combination of the two. Repeat offenders could face “local banishment.” In one of the most telling additions to the law, the first article (Article 71) indicates that, “Publications in the press concerning adultery cases are strictly forbidden.” By making the discussion of adultery illegal in the press, cases such as that of Nhu’s sister who flaunted an affair, could not be widely publicized and used as political capital against the family. The law even allowed spouses to dictate that if their partners engaged in “too free” of relations with a member of the opposite sex, and prevent their interaction or pay a fine.

In conjunction with the fourth and final chapter on marriage obligations, the law “strictly prohibited” concubinage. The South Vietnamese later created a new category of laws which allowed for cohabitation between American GIs and Vietnamese women as a work-around for this anti-concubinage legislation. Like the first three portions of the law, the purpose of the legislation was to discourage immoral behavior within or outside marriage, whether in the form of extra-marital sexual relations, divorce, or pre-marital sex. This final portion, in particular, created considerable stress on the U.S.-RVN relationship during escalation as few advisors and GIs sought marriage during their tour in Vietnam. The remainder of the Family Code refers to rights regarding children and adoption, another topic that would be complicated with soaring numbers of interracial orphans during the

55 Assuming the 1954 rate of thirty-five piasters to the dollar, this would equal $28-2,857 US. Adjusted for inflation, these amounts would range between $478-25,143; The conversion from piastre to dollar for 1954 is quoted from globalfinancialdata.com via an email from Dan Tsang to the Vietnamese Studies Group Listserv, October 7, 2006, https://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/elist_2006/Piastre-dollar%20Exchange%20rates.html.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 16.

Vietnam War. The code ends with the general provision, Article 135, that, “All provisions contrary to this law are abrogated.” In this way, Nhu ensured that the laws regarding family life during the colonial era no longer dictated social relations in South Vietnam.

Nhu, no stranger to bad press, received considerable criticism for her role in guiding the policy from the start with her influence over Diệm to the hypocrisy many associated with her personal behavior. Despite intentions to work with and for Vietnamese women, the growing number of women turning to prostitution resulted in the prosecution of many who worked in illegal occupations under what western papers viewed as “puritanical” laws. Like many public female figures, Nhu’s own appearances do not go unnoticed. Her “discreet but eye-pleasing low neckline” attracted reporters and formed a stark contrast to her conservative social policies that forged public resentment towards her and the entire Diệm regime.

Following the implementation of the Code of the Family, the Laws for the Protection of Morality used vague language to ban what the American Department of the Army translated as a ban on “voluptuous activities” in the continued effort to reshape southern social relations to fit an image Nhu deemed respectable. The laws needed support in the National Assembly and from Diệm, however, to take hold. They spent months moving back and forth, beginning in December 1961, until their final passage in

---


63 Prugh, Law at War: Vietnam, 23.
May 1962. According to contemporary reports, South Vietnamese politicians feared the repetitive and difficult to enforce laws would alienate significant portions of the population rather than bring together the nation for a united fight against pro-communist forces. Alternatively, Americans from the U.S. Army to the media framed the bans on everything from sex work to dancing, abortion to divorce, and many things in between as an attack on progressive civilian culture, and Nhu as the Dragon Lady leading the vanguard.

The anti-dance, prostitution, and contraception elements of the laws spurred considerable animosity and amusement among American observers. The Army reflected that the laws were part of a pattern of executive decrees meant to stabilize the nation, “as a means of controlling the people and resources and preserving order in the state.” The Detroit News called Nhu an “unusual woman politician” who disliked when the foreign press referred to her as a “tigress.” Her comments at press conferences regarding the legislation did little to ease the external pressure on her behavior. When confronted about the potentially harmful effects the restrictions would have on “dance-hall girls,” the New York Times interpreted her response as, “hunger would oblige them to mend their ways and perhaps take up nursing or teaching.” According to Nhu herself, “The problem is not so much how to find work for the taxi dancers, but how to starve them.” She reportedly told listeners, “Only starvation can steer them into jobs that require hard work. We need nurses badly, for we now have more than 1,000 casualties weekly. We build many schools, but

65 Prugh, Law at War: Vietnam, 23.
there is a great shortage of teachers.” She insisted that dancing in public promoted promiscuity, which she assured the audience was something “Asian people are not used to.” She hoped the law might encourage the American GIs to lead more austere lives. Continued resistance to the laws by both South Vietnamese and Americans, however, made enforcement increasingly difficult.

Nhu’s outspoken attitude against immorality and her position in the Diệm government to encourage action frustrated Americans. In archives, her bleak relationship with the American press constitute the majority of records kept on Nhu by Western advisors, including the Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group who worked closely with Diệm. The U.S. media distrusted her influence over Diệm and she “condemned ‘pseudo-liberalism’ and ‘certain elements in the West’” for working to undermine her brother-in-law and through him Vietnamese sovereignty. In relation to her morality programs, Nhu directly pointed to Americans as the cause of social decline in the country. The act of dancing had a place in private life, she assured her audience, but did not belong in public where the Americans where bringing it.

Nhu’s favored laws and her public persona challenged the growing American presence as a threat to Vietnam’s social and moral fiber. As the war progressed, these concerns grew more rampant, and more real, but the Ngô family fell from power before the largest influx of Americans took place.

During his tenure, however, Diệm invited hundreds of U.S. advisors to aid in the

---

68 Quoted in, Ibid.


development of modernized police and administrative infrastructure for the new Republic of Vietnam. These advisors, primarily from Michigan State University, recognized the threats of vice and corruption on the young government, but over time the impact of more Americans in South Vietnam compounded social issues and strained foreign relations.

**Michigan State University Goes to Saigon**

As it found its Cold War footing in the mid-1950s, the United States struggled to identify and justify its role in Southeast Asia. Diplomats and advisors debated whether they should take the lead in Vietnam along with the potential costs they might endure. With the funds the United States had already pumped into Indochina, it questioned whether it could afford to abandon its investment. After officials failed to agree upon and schedule reunification elections in 1956, Vietnam remained divided and the South at risk for communist takeover. After Diệm secured power in the South, he called upon an old friend, Professor Wesley Fishel from Michigan State University (MSU), to help stabilize the RVN. Fishel, who helped provide Diệm with a job back in 1951, saw the young leader as a beacon of hope for the war-torn country. After French rule, Diệm called on his former colleagues to help outline and establish his new government. In 1955, a small group of faculty from MSU developed the Vietnam Advisory Project, obtained the necessary permissions, and headed to Saigon.72

The MSU Vietnam Advisory Project contract with the Vietnamese government

---


72 Secondary research on the MSU Vietnam Advisory Group is relatively limited with focused studies including Scigliano and Fox’s 1965 study and John Ernst’s *Forging a Fateful Alliance: Michigan State University and the Vietnam War* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998); Significant research on the role of Michigan State University in development projects and the Diệm administration respectfully can be found in James Carter, *Inventing Vietnam: The United States and State Building, 1954-1968* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and Edward Miller’s *Misalliance* (2013), introduced above.
specified significant responsibilities. These included “establishing and operating a comprehensive research and reference program in the problems of government in Vietnam” to provide guidance in matters related to everything from the training and purpose of police forces to the role and methods used by the President. In their effort to organize and stabilize the young government, the MSU group contributed broadly and engaged in dialog with Vietnamese researchers and politicians. The group of academics even explored issues related to Vietnamese culture. In particular, their focus on civilian life and Vietnamese culture marked a sharp contrast to the French who cared little for maintaining local values for much more than their kitsch value. Regardless of these efforts to research Vietnamese society, the studies changed little about the impact Americans had on the region in the coming years. French colonial definitions of Vietnamese sexual behavior and cultural norms regarding issues of gender had far more lingering effects on outsider views of Vietnam than these reports garnered. The colonial interpretations of Vietnam provided much of the basis for American policy attitudes moving forward, most notably in regards to sexual behavior.

Evidence suggests that a steady and continuing vice culture in South Vietnam failed to halt under pressure from the Diệm regime to restore traditional order in and around Saigon. In order to instill this new sense of law and order in the south, the MSU group knew they needed to understand the world they were entering. Their ability to curb vice and corruption provided an indication of whether or not they could accomplish their

---


74 Within the files of the MSU project, researchers collected numerous studies and presentations about and by Vietnamese people to help broaden their understanding of Vietnamese cultural behavior from family life to political histories.
broader tasks. Ralph Turner, Professor of Criminalistics, along with Fishel, a Professor of Political Science, engaged in extensive research on Vietnamese traditions as background to their work. Cultural views toward women lingering from the colonial era concerned Turner and his staff and pointed to the larger problems at hand in reshaping not only how corruption functioned within Vietnam, but also how the West engaged with the Vietnamese.

Part of this research involved assessing the foreign sex trade industry that seemed to flourish in Vietnam prior to the passage of Diệm’s 1959 Family Code or the Laws for the Protection of Morality in 1962. Part of their findings included the Saigon “Girl of the Week Club,” an escort service for Western men which allowed Foreign Service officers to indulge in the city’s erotic nightlife without ever needing to enter a brothel. As part of the duties of the MSU group in aiding the new South Vietnamese President in the establishment of law, order, and a more culturally sensitive dialog, they obtained a brochure for this service termed, “Sex by Subscription.” The flyer illustrates the ubiquity of vice culture and sheds light on the sexual perceptions and expectations of officials working abroad in Southeast Asia. As such, even the earliest of American advisors in Vietnam contended with an already established culture of sexual expectation, and the related political and social concerns of corrupting local women and spreading disease, in the midst of legislation, elections, and nation building efforts. To change the vice culture in Vietnam would mean to change how Western men interacted with local women. This

75 While the origins of the document are not known, even as a spoof it would point to the same belief system regarding sexual expectations of Vietnamese women and their relationships with Western men; “Sex by Subscription,” 1956, Box 1192, Folder 17, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, MSU.
change, much to the chagrin of Vietnamese officials and lawmakers, eluded them throughout their alliance with the U.S.

Foreign Service officers in Saigon were encouraged to bring their wives to combat the perception that sex with locals was common-practice, seen as no more uncommon than unwinding with a stiff drink. Americans bringing their families in the 1950s made venturing out to illicit brothels less than respectable behavior. 76 Briefing materials provided to MSU project members traveling abroad estimated that a quarter of a million American wives lived with their foreign service husbands abroad, and described their role as vital to the operation of the “government, business firms, churches, and foundations.” 77 In addition, wives were encouraged to travel with the husbands to Southeast Asia to overcome the cultural images portrayed in works like Greene’s Quiet American or William Lederer and Eugene Burdick’s The Ugly American (1958). Both of these works painted American interests in negative lights and show them interacting almost exclusively with local women in business and personal settings.

A piece on traveling with families, written by Harlan Cleveland and published both in talks for advisors and in a 1959 issue of Harper’s Magazine, titled “The Pretty Americans (How Wives Behave Overseas),” offers a contrast point to these works of literature to show the men that their wives were not only welcome but necessary to their lives abroad. Bringing their families meant Foreign Service officers and advisors could maintain their lives, avoid distractions with local women, and still conduct their work to


77 Ibid.
stabilize South Vietnam in a way that the U.S. government approved of. Wives were instructed to be “good will ambassadors,” and husbands told that their wives would adjust quickly to “their abundance of servants and little else.”78 The illustrations in the pamphlet show the mothers as capable of protecting of her children from local threats likes mosquitoes, to mirror that she was also there to protect her husband from threats against their nuclear American family [Figure 2].

Figure 2: "The Pretty Americans: How Wives Behave Overseas” by Harlan Cleveland
Copyright © 1959 Harper's Magazine. All Rights reserved.
Reproduced from the March issue by special permission.

Accordingly, the authors of “Sex by Subscription” instructed husbands that, “they must be discrete” if they bring their wives, because “Scandal has wrecked more homes and careers in Foreign Service than you can shake a chopstick at.”79 Indulging in sex in the brothels was not easy to engage in openly for married men whose wives accompanied them

78 Ibid., 2.

79 “Sex by Subscription,” 1956, Box 1192, Folder 17, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, MSU.
in country. As a result, the advertisement suggested, the married men could not enjoy the “thousands of slender ‘Annimates’” in the same open manner as the “bachelor soldier or clerk” working in Saigon. To better tap into this market, the advertisement boasts, men could simply have women delivered to hotels or private apartments at a desired time on a subscription basis. The authors directly pointed to the “canny French colonialists” who learned their way around the trade as their access point to the sex industry. Their guidance made it possible. For about fifteen dollars American, three women could be sent over the course of the week.80 The program offered both fantasy and convenience.

To ease the mind of the subscriber, the advertisement even walked the men through their forthcoming encounter with the women of their service. She would arrive dressed in a way not meant to intimidate the man. As part of her paid service, she helped them through the awkward first moments of contact. She, after all, was a professional. After “siesta time” was over, the authors even provide instruction for the man to call his wife to casually inform her of the official luncheon he had been attending. The perceived sexual needs of a Foreign Service official living in Southeast Asia could be met with the utmost ease and discretion.

The representation of civilian women in the advertisement indicates the acceptable language of Foreign Service officials.81 The women are referred to as “dolls” who need to arrive “dressed in European clothes” that make them more accessible to their clients. Much like Josephine Baker as a bridge between Indochina and the West, they appeared as an


81 While the origins of the document are not known, even as a spoof it would point to the same belief system regarding sexual expectations of Vietnamese women and their relationships with Western men.
exotic fantasy, but not overly so. Ethnic differences between Southeast Asian women displayed in the advertisement illustrate that the stereotype of the eroticized East was more complicated than simply that. Each ethnicity had characteristics that might make them more attractive to any particular man. It describes Annamites as slender, Cambodians as voluptuous, and Laotians as sensual.\footnote{82} While these distinctions reveal little about the actual nature of Southeast Asian women, it says quite a bit about not only how foreign advisors likely viewed the women, but also the material collected as research by those sent to help establish the civilian infrastructure. Prostitution was hidden from wives and families, perhaps, but it represented a very present element of society for Western men living and working in South Vietnam. Formal escort services, however, were only one small part of the larger efforts to eliminate vice.

As part of MSU’s Vietnam Advisory Group, Ralph Turner’s work consisted primarily of aiding in the establishment of Public Administration offices including Police Administration. American specialists were sent to the region beginning in 1955 to work alongside “a staff of qualified Vietnamese personnel” for the purpose of “in-service training, consultation, academic instruction, and research.”\footnote{83} The primary listed responsibility for the Police Administration officials was for American Aid control, but their services virtually helped to design and establish all South Vietnamese police structure in and around Saigon. While the staff was small, expanding to a maximum of fifty-one Americans by 1957 according to their project brief, they had the potential to make an impact on the infrastructure of the new government’s civilian operations.

\footnote{82} “Sex by Subscription,” 1956, Box 1192, Folder 17, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, MSU.

\footnote{83} “Introduction to MSUG Saigon,” n.d., Box 679, Folder 42, Police Administration Paper, MSU.
The MSU Group shaped daily life through the establishment and training of the South Vietnamese police forces. Intercultural interactions with the West had long impacted Vietnamese society by introducing new economic markets and challenging perceived traditional life, but with the exit of the French and a young government balancing on uneasy footing, the possibilities for change seemed more palpable. Through his firm handling of corruption, Diệm established dominance but recognized that it could not last without a powerful infrastructure. During the same period he invited the MSU group, he worked to eliminate the Binh Xuyên crime syndicate from their position of control at the head of the police and security agency. Furthermore, Diệm established what Jessica Chapman has called a “culture of fear” as he used violence to eliminate “seedling parties” who threatened his leadership. The more and his advisors tried to limit and regulate corruption, however, the more the mere presence of western advisors likely bred the behavior in regards to the more minor vices of gambling and prostitution. As more Americans moved into the area, the more corruption became a primary concern. The Vietnamese were particularly worried about social repercussions. Unease threatened Diệm’s grasp on society. Legislation like the Code of the Family and the morality laws meant to strengthen Vietnamese traditional structures, limit corruption, and weed out vice only drove the problem underground and made eradication more elusive to U.S. and RVN officials.

In their research on vice, the MSU group kept two reports in their files, one on

---

84 Hue-Tam Ho Tai’s insightful 1992 *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* has proved to offer a persisting historical study of the formation and life of Vietnamese revolution that came to its height in the early twentieth-century. Likewise, Neil L. Jamieson’s concise overview of Vietnamese response to Western intervention in his 1993 *Understanding Vietnam* sheds light on internal debates over modernization, maintaining traditional values, and revolution.

85 Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance*, 90.

86 Ibid., 170.
gambling and the other on prostitution. Local authorities found these linked industries of organized crime particularly worrisome. In a series of talks on these two industries, Carl Rumpf from MSU spoke at a Civil Guard academy near Vũng Tàu southeast of Saigon, a popular resort area known for its links to corruption. The talks hoped to educate the Vietnamese about the standard definitions and problems related to each perceived threat and how these could be understood in the Vietnamese context. Not all gambling was illegal. Popular activities of horse racing and participation in the National Lottery qualified as gambling, but represented legalized forms. Since laws varied so heavily from region to region, the explanations of gambling fell fairly flat. Within gambling, the link between the practice and other crimes drove government concerns due to their firm belief that “Communities in which gambling flourishes attract criminals.”

With prostitution, the fear of venereal disease and organized vice represented two of the main reasons advisors suggested avoiding the industry. The promise of massive profits margins that both industries dangled in front of proprietors often led to corruption through brides, influence, and access to people in high places. Like prostitution, the profitability of the industry made it that much more difficult to work around. Since the victims of crooked gamblers might turn to crime themselves, Rumpf argues, “The existence of gambling and prostitution in a community … greatly increases the task of policing.”

These earliest of organized American advisors recognized the potential pitfalls of not

---

87 Carl Rumpf, “GAMBLING: Lecture at Civil Guard Academy, Cap St. Jacques” n.d., Box 685, Folder 38, Police Administration Files, MSU, 3.

88 Carl Rumpf, “PROSTITUTION: Lecture at Civil Guard Academy, Cap St. Jacques” n.d., Box 685, Folder 38, Police Administration Files, MSU, 2.

89 Ibid., 1.

90 Ibid., 3.
containing vice culture.

Part of the MSU group’s goals involved the recruitment and training of Vietnamese citizens both in Vietnam and the U.S. The creating of the Vice Squad included police officers and former tax-collectors. Prior to the formation of the South Vietnamese police forces, the tax collectors were responsible for settling debts. By establishing a dedication division for vice crimes, the officers collected intelligence and closely track potential violators. Undercover work and the use of informants offered the Vice Division a means to attack the industries from the inside and take down the leadership. Without focus on the head of vice organizations, the cyclical process of arresting “expendable” employees often failed to resolve the problem.

In monitoring prostitution, the MSU group stressed the potential for corruption within police ranks. By recommending that a small unit report directly to the Chief of Police, some American departments curbed the problem. They hoped to replicate this in Vietnam. Due to the likelihood that “mayors, councilmen, and high police officials” might get caught up in the industry, Rumpf stressed to his audience, the officers should respect confidentiality. He recommended hiring a youthful leader of utmost honesty supplemented by small units of plain-clothed male and female officers, and possibly a criminal lawyer. The proposed role of women officer offers an insight to the methods proposed for the Vice Division. Women only made arrests under the most extreme of

91 Addendum to the Report on MSUG Police Participant Program [Manuscript],” 1960, Box 1694, Folder 16, Ralph Turner Papers, MSU.


93 Ibid., 6.

94 Ibid., 8-9.
circumstances. Female officers worked undercover in order to relieve paid informants.\textsuperscript{95} Their work undoubtedly allowed for close proximity to corruption and allowed for intelligence collection prior to arrests. Like all vice units, Rumpf stressed, regular transfer of officers would be necessary to avoid notoriety in dens, bars, or brothels.

In addition, Rumpf supported Vietnamese caution about licensing prostitution. He referenced failed American efforts focused on keeping medical records for working girls. Efforts to reduce sexual violence or disease both failed dramatically during World War II. In spite of prophylactic stations and government organization, neither the city government nor the military could control the actions of men in areas like Honolulu, Hawaii where large populations of stationed American military service personnel frequented brothels.\textsuperscript{96} With the prostitutes themselves, medical treatment proved unsuccessful as well. Methods failed to prevent the spread of diseases among the licensed and their “unlicensed sisters” continued to work illegally.\textsuperscript{97} Two decades later, as this dissertation will show, the debate over how to deal with prostitution looked much the same. Disease, corruption, distraction, and the uncomfortable presence of the military at its center haunted Americans and Vietnamese alike through the war years.

The increased demand for prostitution from foreign visitors brought the issue of inter-cultural sexual intimacy back into the discussion. During the height of the colonial period, as shown in the translation of Vũ Trọng Phụng’s histories of prostitution in Hanoi in the 1930s and the examples in the previous chapter, administrators across Indochina had

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 10.

\textsuperscript{96} Rumpf, “PROSTITUTION” n.d., Box 685, Folder 38, Police Administration Files, MSU Libraries, 6; Also, see Beth L. Bailey and David R. Farber, \textit{The First Strange Place: The Alchemy of Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii} (New York: Free Press, 1992).

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 7.
struggled over how to control such an unwieldy industry where medical checks did not seem to work and demand never seemed to wane. Colonial administrators and their subsequent Vietnamese leaders and American advisors marked the sex industry as a social evil, but recognized the potential to profit off its popularity.

The Orientalist perceptions of a historically eroticized East created an expectation among Western men concerning the sexual prowess and sensual nature of the women they might encounter in Vietnam. Like the trend that continued long after, the conflicting views between the fear of threats to the social and moral health of the Vietnamese people along with the desire of foreigners to indulge in fantasies of Eastern sensuality created a dialog between the MSU group and the RVN over how to handle the issue. In the West, women gradually fought for and earned more rights during the Third-Wave Feminist and Civil Rights Movements, but this came much slower to a Vietnam disrupted by war. Many women did take arms and fought for Vietnam on battle fields and across diplomatic tables, but rarely did they shape American ideas of Asian women more broadly. As the next chapter will outline, financial necessity and limited opportunity led many to work in bars and brothels, providing fuel for Western fantasies. As the Diệm administration dug in their heels and sought to forge a new Vietnam in the South, their association with the West and treatment of sexuality stirred up significant animosity.

---


Conclusion

By the time the Vietnam War escalated in 1965, the situation on the ground in South Vietnam regarding social policy had been crafted and developed as a direct result of decades of colonial governance and western influence. Industrialized and regulated brothel culture during the First Indochina War contributed to Vietnamese attitudes of western men and the image of weakened morality for those who worked with them. The Family Laws and the Laws for the Protection of Morality enacted under the Diệm administration shaped social relations and made most of the relationships engaged in during wartime, like prostitution and intercultural marriage, illegal. In the wake of the 1954 division of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, the increase of U.S. advisors that came at the invitation of Diệm aided in the establishment of the new government including the infrastructure designed in part to uphold these laws.

Eisenhower and Kennedy placed U.S. interests in keeping communism out of the region as their main priority in Vietnam during the First Indochina War and early post-colonial era. By 1963, they no longer trusted Diệm entirely with their interests and failed to prevent his coup and assassination. Despite the restructuring of the government, new national and city officials continued to uphold the morality laws, keeping prostitution illegal during the Vietnam War. When the war escalated, the strict social laws and policing efforts partially designed by the Americans worked against the U.S. military belief that seeking sex for morale occurred as a natural part of warfare. The subject of the next chapter, the steep increase in prostitution in Vietnamese cities, occurred due to inflation, poverty, urban overcrowding, and lack of opportunity. Like the French before them, American servicemen provided eager buyers for sex services. The contradictory factors of viewing Southeast Asia as an erotically desirable and sensual people in western culture, while the
Foreign Service collaborated with a socially conservative young government to uphold political and security interests in the region left the United States facing laws they helped implement. The diverging views on social relations provided significant obstacles for U.S.-RVN foreign relations from escalation to long after the war ended.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE ARRIVAL: MORALE, MORALITY, AND THE “AMERICAN BROTHEL”

Introduction
The morality laws of President Ngô Đình Diệm far outlasted his control over South Vietnam. The assassinations of Diệm and his brother and political advisor Ngô Đình Nhu were followed by the exile of Madame Nhu and a crisis of leadership marked by the short-lived presidencies of three military leaders before the decade long tenure of General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. The uncertainty following John F. Kennedy’s assassination a few weeks after Diệm’s coupled with the instability of South Vietnam’s leadership created a sense of heightened risk to American goals in Vietnam. These circumstances placed Lyndon Johnson and his advisors on the path to choosing war in 1964.1 With South Vietnam veering toward war with the North and their priority on reunification, the morality laws remained in place supporting Vietnamese ideals of tradition and modesty. The rejection of westernized culture associated with colonialism also complimented the Catholic beliefs of the Diệm family and the thousands of Catholics who relocated to the South during the division of Vietnam.2 The disunity of the early 1960s encouraged the United States to prepare for more active intervention in the region. By undermining the

---


2 From 1954 to 1957, the percentage of Vietnam’s Catholics in the southern provinces increased from roughly 27.4% to 61.6%; Peter Hansen, “Bắc Di Cu: Catholic Refugees from the North of Vietnam, and Their Role in the Southern Republic, 1954-1959” Journal of Vietnamese Studies 4, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 176-177.
abilities and legitimacy of the South Vietnamese leadership, however, the United States set the stage for conflict with their allies.

The number of American ground forces in Vietnam expanded to 23,300 by the end of 1964, marking an increase of roughly 7,000 men that year. Still, these numbers were dwarfed by the first escalation after the U.S. declared war in the wake of the contested Gulf of Tonkin incident. The number of servicemen in Vietnam reached 184,300 by the end of 1965. American bases first built in Saigon were gradually moved out and away from the city as a result of security, social and economic concerns. The GI presence overtook urban economies, challenged social norms, and laid the groundwork for the political disputes over sexual behavior that shaped the trajectory of the social and cultural wars in Vietnam. For military planners, concerns among the allies ranged widely from troop movements and political coups to changes in popular clothing and Vietnamese hippies. The long-term, high-volume American presence in Vietnam led to an influx of western cultural standards, and as the second and third chapters argued, sexual expectations, despite stated resistance beginning in the Đại Việt period. In addition to the black market trade of everything from air conditioners to Coca-Cola, sex became a means of connection between the nations. At the outset of the war, sexual encounters were evaluated right alongside the war’s legality, politics, and economic influence. The culture of indulgence and sex that arose with the war mark the central theme of this chapter.

---


4 Roughly one year into the war, in October 1965, the black market was already a reported concern for Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ who pushed for the first movements of American troop barracks out of Saigon’s city center; “Military Barracks to be Removed From Saigon: PM,” Sài Gòn Post, October 23, 1965, 1, Lưu trữ báo [Newspaper Archives], General Sciences Library, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (hereafter GLS, HCMC).
From 1965 until 1969, the political discourse over sex in Vietnam was marked by American resistance to acknowledge the scope and severity of the sex industry and Vietnamese inability to enact effective policies to combat it. This chapter will examine memoir, literature, poetry, media, and diplomatic sources from both U.S. and Vietnamese officials to take a look at life on the ground for both American servicemen and Vietnamese civilians. From newspapers and travel books in the hands of U.S. servicemen to the economic and corruption reports that challenged Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam advisors, the breadth of sources seeks to give a sweeping view of a dynamic, and constantly adapting, world of sex behind the front lines. Through this analysis, I am able to frame how popular culture and western ideas concerning proper social and sexual behavior intertwined with the war and became a foreign relations concern.

American media often portrayed sex workers as harmless elements of an otherwise difficult war, reporting that the prostitutes in miniskirts added “brilliant splashes of color to the drab, war-tinted thoroughfares.”5 Vietnamese newspapers of the same era reported with more concern over the raids on brothels and the associated theft, violence, corruption, and infiltration of western culture in Vietnamese society. Both nations understood the opportunities seen by women in urban spaces in correlation with demand, but the perception of the industry as harmless by U.S. observers and as a risk to traditional life by some Vietnamese positioned women at a critical nexus where social and cultural exchange played a direct role in their ability to work together. One nation’s need for morale-building,

---

that they saw satisfied by free and easy access to sex, faced off against the other’s proclaimed beliefs in a society anchored by strict moral values.

With their history in Vietnam, U.S. officials failed to recognize the need for a change in relations-as-usual at the start of escalation in 1965.\(^6\) The countryside grew more volatile, causing civilians, in particular women, to move to urban spaces seeking physical and financial security.\(^7\) Civilians, however, could not ignore the presence of GIs as numbers in country swelled nearly eight times between December 1964 and December 1965.\(^8\) Their visibility was especially notable as the U.S. military viewed urban spaces as relatively secure and with better access to resources than the rice-paddy and jungle terrain surrounding them. As a result, bases for rear echelon troops were generally grouped in those areas.\(^9\) Bars and massage parlors targeting GIs flourished in Saigon and their advertisements littered English-language newspapers and travel guides. Prior to the 1968 Tet Offensive, few attacks occurred in the major cities, especially Saigon.\(^10\) Saigon offered a relatively secure space situated on the brink of war. An increasing foreign population and linked inflation eventually destabilized the urban economy, but those willing and able to

---

\(^6\) Relations-as-usual relates to pre-war access to prostitution discussed in chapter one, as well as amicable politics over sexual encounters in occupied Japan and Korea to be discussed later in this chapter.

\(^7\) For a discussion on the movement of peasants from the villages into cities, see David Hunt, *Vietnam’s Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008).

\(^8\) Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, 654-55; In 1968, the number of American troops peaked at 542,400.


\(^10\) Attacks on American establishments were not completely absent, however. By late 1965, hotel and bar violence from brawls to bombings resulted in disruptions and mass casualties that placed Saigon officials on alert; “Everything is News - Explosion in Bar,” *Saigon Post*, September 25, 1965, 8, GSL, HCMC; “Military Barracks to be Removed From Saigon: PM,” *Saigon Post*, October 23, 1965, 1, GSL, HCMC; “Everything is News - Metropole Hotel Bombed,” *Saigon Post*, December 29, 1965, 8, GSL, HCMC.
could profit off GIs flaunting expendable income. Saigon is not the only location discussed in the chapter, but serves as a launching-ground of sorts. It represents the first location where the changes began to take place before the impact of the war spread to regions across the country.

To frame the shifting society in South Vietnam, this chapter will also examine its position in relation to the global Sexual Revolution of the long 1960s. The Vietnam War took place in the midst of a myriad of social and sexual revolutions worldwide. In a time of civil rights, second-wave feminism, Cold War nuclear fears, the rise of the third world and the spread of global communism, generational conflict in the United States often manifested in debates over sexuality. Who slept with whom, and under what (marital) circumstances, created a point of contention over which these issues could be discussed. Sexuality became a regular subject on the floors of the House of Representatives and the Senate in response to the Women’s Liberation Movement. As part of molding his “Great Society,” President Johnson supported birth control as a method for helping to control poor, urban populations, and by 1965 the United States legalized birth control pills for married couples. In roughly five years, the number of women taking “the pill” in the United States rose from half a million to over 6.5 million.11 By the time prostitution in Vietnam became front-page news back home, Americans were well acquainted with changing norms regarding sexual behavior as members of Congress struggled over if and how to regulate sexuality abroad.

---

Finally, the chapter turns to the congressional record to examine the response to sex and the Vietnam War from the executive branch of the U.S. government. During the 1966 Senate Foreign Relations Hearings on Vietnam, Committee Chairman J. William Fulbright brought the idea and terminology of an “American Brothel” in Saigon to the domestic public for the first time. The comment and subsequent public discourse came during a barrage of accusations against the legality of the war. The administration quickly pushed this aside publically as a non-priority, but their decision to ignore any serious debate over sex, social behavior, and their related policies and politics in Vietnam allowed vice to grow more unwieldy throughout the Johnson years.12

This chapter will examine the rise of brothel culture in mid-1960s South Vietnam and Saigon as a distinct urban space that came to epitomize GI-civilian relations in popular culture. Through an analysis of South Vietnamese society and the sex industry before the 1966 Congressional “brothel debate” and its fallout, I argue that American resistance to participating in political discourse over sexual encounters in the early war years allowed the industry to grow to all areas of South Vietnam where Americans resided in large numbers. This in part derived from the United States’ failure to understand the Vietnamese cultural ideas about sex and kinship that overlapped with Diệm’s Catholicism, and an inability to see that the war would evolve into a protracted conflict. These misunderstandings only added to an increasingly strained and distrustful relationship between the United States and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN).

12 To reiterate my definition from the introduction, for the purposes of this dissertation, when I refer to sexual or social policies and politics, I am not using the term as defined by Kate Millett. I use the term generally for the Vietnam War to address all political and diplomatic exchanges related to intimate, romantic, or sexual contacts between members of either nation through the duration of the war.
Boots on the Ground

In 1961, President Kennedy ordered additional military and nation-building advisors to Vietnam to help stabilize the South Vietnamese government in the face of growing unrest. Political conditions deteriorated leading to the much-debated military coup and assassination of Diệm and his brother Nhu in 1963. The destabilized government cycled through numerous leaders until Army General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and Air Vice Marshal Nguyễn Cao Kỳ took control of the military junta in 1965 and won a much contested election in 1967 establishing Thiệu as President, an office he would hold through the end of the war. As Mark Atwood Lawrence argues, the 1965 ascension of two figures with no previous political experience convinced the United States of the RVN’s instability and motivated increased deployments. During these years of transition, city-level officials struggled with vice as military disagreements between Thiệu, Kỳ, and the United States took focus from social welfare issues. After Kennedy’s assassination, the Johnson administration hesitated diving into the Vietnam conflict, but insecurity over the RVN’s abilities ultimately led them to expand efforts to include ground forces. Johnson’s landslide Presidential election in 1964 and the controversial Gulf of Tonkin incident put him position

---

15 Lawrence, The Vietnam War, 96.
to pursue a far more aggressive policy toward the Cold War abroad.\textsuperscript{17} By the end of 1965, the United States deployed 190,000 troops to Vietnam. The number soared to 400,000 by the end of 1966, and continued to rise.\textsuperscript{18}

The often repeated timeline of American escalation shows the steep influx of troops in abstract numbers, but ignores the impact on society. By moving beyond the American military lens, researching the war from the ground up illuminates the tangible effects of servicemen on the ground and their interactions with civilians. In doing so, we better understand what the governments and militaries are responding to in their policy. As a result of U.S. escalation, the social climate in South Vietnamese urban spaces changed to cater to U.S. servicemen. Those changes are the focus of this section.

Foreign troops and the arrival of the U.S. dollar created a market for the exchange of sex in Saigon, and then all major cities in the country. The demand resulted in a vibrant sexual culture built on the expectations of Asian women derived from observations of French colonizers and U.S. experiences in occupied Japan and Korea as discussed in the previous chapters. In addition, the changing global views toward sexual behavior and acceptable social relationships encouraged a more open dialog regarding sexuality. Money flowed into urban spaces, inflated economies, upset social structures, and set the stage for disputes over sexual and social policy. As a captured communist leaflet dropped in Saigon described it, “American presence is synonymous with aggression, terrorism, arson, pilferage, outrage, widespread inflation, developing prostitution and a harder life for people

\textsuperscript{17} For a detailed account of Johnson’s decision to escalate the war see, Logevall, \textit{Choosing War}, 1999.

in the cities… Elephants are being brought in to trample on the family tomb.”¹⁹ The United States quickly altered large parts of Vietnamese social life.

GI stations near cities experienced daily contact with civilians competing to sell goods or offering services from washing laundry to the exchange of sex. From ideas engrained in their military training to their experiences on the streets of Saigon, GI experiences were products of both their expectations and the realities of war. Sex workers proved particularly high in demand, despite the illegal nature of their trade. GIs wanted prostitutes for the experience and to disconnect from their life at war. Recognizing this desire, Vietnamese women and procurers flooded the market with available sex. Domestically, this behavior provided news editors with palatable human interest stories for American media outlets.²⁰ As more servicemen landed in Vietnam and purchased illegal sex, sexual encounters among the two populations increasingly threatened the U.S.-RVN political and military alliance, put civilians at risk, and ultimately changed the way the war was fought and remembered in the United States and abroad.²¹


²⁰ Many GIs who spent the majority of their time in the cities never saw direct combat, but worked on supply lines, in communications, or as Military Police. Troops coming in from the fronts to hospitals or on leave typically spent less time in the cities and were more likely to visit a prostitute rather than establish a girlfriend or concubine-style relationship that will be discussed in chapter five.

²¹ This is not to say that foreign militaries did not similarly challenge Vietnamese society, but the numbers of foreign troops were negligible when compared to Americans. More work needs to be conducted regarding Vietnamese troops and their relationships with non-combatant women during the war. Many documents point to a confusing system where multiple marriages, open marriages, and even human trafficking of wives and daughters complicated social structures during the war. Willingness or coercion related to brothels openly serving both Americans and RVN troops in addition to North Vietnamese forces and the National Liberation Front would be rich for scholars. Sources lacking corroboration allow me to speculate that these activities occurred, but more detailed research would shed significant light on war and society in South Vietnam during the war.
American cultural conceptions of Vietnam contributed to disagreements over social concerns. Prior to their arrival in Vietnam, military training rooted ideologies of dominance and compartmentalizing of trauma into the minds of GIs. In general, soldiers need to be able to kill enemy forces and complete assigned tasks without question while in a war zone. To achieve this, military training is designed to prepare servicemen and women to follow orders, believe in the necessity of their actions, react quickly on their feet, and sharpen their physical abilities.\textsuperscript{22} In addition, paternalistic themes in Vietnam-era military training engrained a belief of American supremacy and dominance.\textsuperscript{23} Training encouraged a culture of masculinity prominent during this period not only in military circles, but also in Cold War politics more broadly. The feminized Ho Chi Minh figure, for example, sheds light on the sexualized and paternalistic attitude American advisors projected onto the conflict as a whole.\textsuperscript{24} Johnson and many of his advisors, it seems, viewed Vietnam as a nation that needed to be saved from the evils of communism with a population of sensual women and weak men.\textsuperscript{25} The well-worn stories of Johnson’s phallic confidence recounted previously


and his desire to emasculate Ho Chi Minh characterizes some of the most overt promotions of masculinity during the war.

The popular focus on Johnson, however, ignores the larger importance of gender in determining the trajectory of Cold War policy now established in the historiography. In particular, Robert Dean and Kyle Cuordileone have illustrated how cultures of masculinity dictated interactions and shaped decision making during Vietnam and the Cold War in their respective studies.26 As scholars more willingly acknowledge the role of gender in war making, they are only beginning to examine the impact of sexuality. A solid body of scholarship on the World War II era juxtaposes the historical context of sexual encounters with civilians across Europe with the forging of more secure alliances.27 In Korea, the sexual alliance went even further due to the cooperative efforts of forging a society where sex openly represented both recreation and reward.28 During the war in Vietnam, in contrast, open sexuality shocked very few in the United States as the nation moved away from a more conservative post-war society towards the more socially liberal era in the later 1960s, and shocked even fewer in the Foreign Service who promoted sex as a perk to service. Many still resisted the unprecedented sexual openness of the era, but available

26 Both Dean and Cuordileone place an emphasis on the establishment of the post-war culture of masculinity and brotherhood as part of the establishment of the U.S.’s anti-communist identity that extended from 1945 through the Vietnam War; Robert Dean, Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); Kyle A. Cuordileone, Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War (New York: Routledge, 2005).


women continued to provide a welcome distraction to men heading off to war. Illustrating the acceptability of prostitution in the mind of American military leadership, when Major Bill Arthur wrote to reassure his replacement Colonel Paul W. Child Jr. in 1969, he was confident Child could make “anyplace fairly livable” but encouraged him to “find booze and women,” to ease the transition. Paternalism, masculinity, and traditions of wartime prostitution left the U.S. with different views regarding appropriate GI-civilian encounters than their RVN allies.

Global public attitudes toward acceptable sexual behavior changed during the Vietnam War era, but the belief that soldiers away from home would engage in affairs with civilians had long been seen as acceptable behavior. Basic training even seemed to prepare them for it. Part of the training involved the development of recruits into men. Kyle Longely argues that for ordinary combat soldiers, masculinity during training led to the promotion of heterosexuality through the ridicule of perceived homosexual traits and the feminization, or further, dehumanization, of the enemy. Through this method of training, this view of the enemy made homosexual behavior between recruits seem wrong. Through the common use of a sexualized language where recruits were labeled as “girls,” “ladies,” or “pussies” engrained in men their perceived dominance over women or men who failed to complete military training. Drill Instructors further berated those who performed poorly


30 Goedde’s GIs and Germans: Culture, Gender, and Foreign Relations, 1945-1949 (2002), and Hegarty’s Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II (2007) both do an excellent job illustrating the military’s accepting attitude toward the male soldier’s need to satisfy sexual needs as a part of wartime morale building.

31 Longley, Grunts, 47-49.
in boot camp by questioning their sexuality. GI memoirs similarly recall the sexualized elements of military training. As John Ketwig recalls, Drill Instructors used sexuality to isolate and then rebuild the men in their new military identity. First, they needed to break the men of their former lives. Ketwig recalls that during this phase of basic training, instructors told recruits that their girlfriends back home were already sleeping with their best friends.\textsuperscript{32} Shifting their focus away from home helped some GIs focus more clearly on the war that waited for them.

Venereal disease training meant to discourage the men from intimate relations in Vietnam also reminded the men that they would have access to sex. The process of basic training resulted in feelings of isolation and loneliness and the pent-up desire for human contact and relief after deployment. Through the breakdown and reconstruction process of boot camp, the instructors attempted to instill a heterosexual and gendered hierarchy that awarded aggression and violence as means to an end. The cult of masculinity in military training not only sought to prepared men to fight and kill, but also to compartmentalize their war experiences from their personal lives through detachment and separation. The civilians they would encounter in Vietnam, they were instructed, were weaker, in need of masculine protection, and overall feminine. This dehumanization partially contributed to the scope and, more significantly, the behavior of consumers of the sex industry in South Vietnam.\textsuperscript{33}


\textsuperscript{33} This, most certainly, is not the only factor contributing to the scope of the industry. In part, the industry already existed and demand led to expansion. Expectations, boredom, excessive money, peer pressure and dehumanization also represent critical factors in the expansion of the sex trade.
As the previous two chapters iterated, from the colonial period to the American Vietnam War, popular culture created an expectation that exotic Asian women awaited men in Vietnam. While the last chapter illustrates the movement of advisors into the region, the influx of troops following the 1964 declaration of war had a far greater effect. The 1959 Vietnamese Code of the Family and 1962 Laws for the Protection of Morality promoted by Madame Nhu banning lewd activities including dancing, prostitution, and adultery placed America’s newly forged relationships with civilian women under scrutiny.\(^\text{34}\) These immediate dissimilarities over what Americans viewed as mundane social relations laid the foundation for the significance of cultural disagreements throughout the conflict. The openness of sexual exchange seen in other U.S. war and post-war environments like France, Japan, and Korea failed to take root in the same ways in Vietnam. Political and social corruption together with larger structural and military problems resulted in the sex industry developing in illicit settings throughout urban spaces. Foreign soldiers, primarily Americans, forged the market as they elevated demand in close proximity to a population whose opportunities were limited by the war.

By 1967, U.S. Deputy of Pacification in Vietnam, Robert Komer, estimated that more than one-third of the South Vietnamese population lived in urban areas. The most striking urban shift during the war resulted in a thirty-five percent increase in the population of Saigon. The size of Saigon and its position as an ARVN and U.S. stronghold contributed to the population boom of mostly young women since they were not drafted into the military like men and their elders needed to remain on their ancestral lands.\(^\text{35}\) Most

of the peasants entering into the cities came from “the lowest income categories.” Less than two years into the war, population shifts altered social dynamics that challenged established “hearts and minds” programs. Komer’s report to the Secretary for Housing and Urban Development, Robert Weaver, recognized they had designed pacification and military efforts to focus on the countryside. In turn, urban areas “lagged far behind” and needed immediate attention. He appealed to Weaver to find an approach to the problem that addressed social problems and not simply engineering ones. Komer’s report illustrates that a focus on infrastructure and rebuilding alone failed to address the root social problems that threatened to destabilize cities in Vietnam.

Urban development in South Vietnam in the mid-1960s linked directly to the rise of inter-cultural intimacy and resulting foreign policy concerns. Refugees and peasants who relocated to cities required reliable security, infrastructure, and steady employment to survive and reorganize their lives. An observer and advisor in Saigon, John H. Nixon, urged the U.S. mission working on pacification efforts that in order to win over the “hearts and minds” of the Vietnamese public they needed to recognize the importance of providing material support to the RVN. He argued this was the only option if they hoped to establish

35 In addition to citations for the migrations by historians, memoir accounts also indicate similar behavior. See, Hunt, Vietnam’s Southern Revolution; Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman’s Journey From War to Peace (New York: Plume, 2003 [1989]); Jim Stewart, The Angel from Vietnam: A Memoir of Growing Up, the Vietnam War, a Daughter, and Healing... (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2007), Kindle, Ch. 17.


37 The contracted Doxiodes surveyed Saigon in 1964 when pacification officers first recognized “urban needs,” but Komer argues that urban development suffered from chronic “failure to move pragmatically and quickly enough to give sustainable impetus to a difficult undertaking;” Ibid., 2.

long-term stabilization and popular support. Housing projects, anti-inflationary programs, and even traffic and storm drainage ranked high in priority for maintaining peace in growing urban spaces.

**The GI Economy**

The war and lack of available employment for under-educated women led many to seek work as “snack bar girls” serving food or pushing drinks. Some women in these circumstances unofficially worked as prostitutes, using the title bar girl to avoid jail, while others simple did work as hostesses without the intent to engage in a sexual exchange with customers.\(^{39}\) The financial strain American escalation placed on the economy, however, made the act of having sex for money a possibility for a quick profit. Prior to exploring the urban geography of prostitution in more depth, recognizing non-sexual forms of inter-cultural interactions at the start of the war sheds light on the economic and social realities of South Vietnamese cities.

Women who chose not to work in bars or as prostitutes still found opportunities to profit from the American presence. Skilled laborers benefited from changing consumption patterns including desires from “tourist” servicemen. Luxury items like embroidery and silks brought in large profits.\(^{40}\) English-language newspapers advertised souvenirs with special payment and shipment options back to the United States. Most notably for non-sexual businesses, black market activity during the war increased and contributed to

---

\(^{39}\) The rise in bar girl culture did not completely negate more traditional forms of work. With most men forced to fight in the war, women and children did have more opportunities to work than before, but the rapid population growth and economic instability still meant more workers that jobs. Often, working as a bar girl, particularly one willing to act as a prostitute, meant far higher wages.

economic inflation. Women made up the core of black market sellers. Their ability to access P.X. items through American contacts or thieves placed them at an advantage over Vietnamese selling more traditional goods. While the price of all goods increased during the war, black market items represented considerably higher profits. By 1966, black market sugar and flowers already earned ten to twenty times more money for sellers than they were making off local items two years prior. Overall daily earnings increased even more drastically from roughly 10 to 50VN$ on standard goods in 1964 with the black market items reaching 100-200VN$ or higher by 1966.41

Sellers of the older generation without access to soldiers and American goods suffered from their limitations to tap into this new market. One Vietnamese woman reported that she cried when her husband told her to give up selling to stay home to care for her children as her daughter now earned enough for the entire family. She knew staying home meant she would be bored and lonely, but also that she would no longer be contributing financially to her family.42 Others did whatever they could to evolve with the market. During their fieldwork for the Southeast Asian Development Advisory Group, Allen E. Goodman and Lawrence M. Franks conducted an interview with a man in Da Nang who insisted, "I came here selling bananas, now I sell stereos and radios. If I have to, I can sell bananas again but I shall never leave the city."43 For those involved in the sex industry or not, most South Vietnamese civilians found the need to constantly adapt in order to survive the changes brought on by the war and inflation.

41 Ibid., 10-11.
42 Ibid., 11.
In 1974, Goodman and Franks surmised that smaller urban areas felt the impact of the war more than larger areas like Saigon.\textsuperscript{44} The impact on medium cities affected all inhabitants, but for those moving to Saigon from the countryside, the move presented striking challenges. In addition, the rise of brothel and black market cultures replaced the existing social structure with one where family heritage and respect were overtaken by the ability to profit off Americans. Neil Sheehan described the prostitution industry in the same way he once saw it depicted in an unnamed Saigon newspaper, at the top of the new social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{45} With prostitution up top, all other traditional careers and families of wealth suffered to find their new place. One’s livelihood, Sheehan explains, relied upon the ability to find jobs serving American needs or to beg on the streets near refugee slums. Sheehan recalls asking a Vietnamese reporter about the meaning of some words written on the sidewalk near a pile of garbage. The reporter told him the words said, “This is the fruit of American aid.”\textsuperscript{46}

In addition, transactions between civilian women, often young women, and both American and Vietnamese servicemen upset the established social structures already threatened by the economic strains of the population boom. One woman feared the risks for Vietnamese men who might already fail to care for their families, “is emphasized when the young men go away from home into the military and must find recreation at the bars where they meet and fall in love with bar girls.”\textsuperscript{47} In some instances, Vietnamese soldiers

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 199-214; For full report, see Allan E. Goodman and Lawrence M. Franks, \textit{Between War and Peace: A Profile of Migrants to Saigon} (New York: Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group, 1974).


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 626.
in the field even took bar girls on as second wives. The interviewee recalled a story where a Vietnamese serviceman brought the second wife into their family but kept her in separate housing. The second wife, a former bar girl, arrived pregnant and caused the first wife to leave her husband. When the bar girl was killed in an accident, the first wife returned to raise the child in her place.

The mobility of women in this account relies upon the man in their life. The bar girl is able to marry out of her work in service and the wife is able to leave her husband, but she is tied to him in the end. As the war progressed, however, women gained more mobility and agency within urban space. In particular, women previously from lower classes had the potential to earn higher incomes depending on their willingness to work with or for Americans. While sex work remained illegal, the industry offered women the fastest income without relying on a spouse or family member to care for them, even though many remained married to Vietnamese men as well. Openness regarding extra-marital sex and prostitution during the war reflected two distinct causes: the pragmatism of poverty in a wartime economy and the establishment of sexually liberated counterculture ideals as part of the global norm.

“Women, taxi drivers, and pedicab pimps”: Saigon’s Sex Market

Over the course of the Vietnam War urban spaces changed radically to accommodate social and economic shifts and the ascension of “women, taxi drivers, and pedicab pimps” to some of the highest paid members of society. Service and

---


entertainment industries targeted troops in need of distractions and morale. Staffed with mainly lower-class, poorly educated or recently relocated snack bar girls, taxi dancers and hostesses, Saigon’s bars and clubs recruited young women by offering loans or apartments that they would pay off through their work. Not all establishments expected or advertised sexual exchange, but the potential for higher earnings seemed to offer the promise of a way out of debt quickly and encouraged many women to pursue prostitution either officially or unofficially.\(^{50}\) Other bars explicitly sold sex as a service with girls mechanically cycling through clients on a timed fee schedule.\(^{51}\) Once in the system, however, leaving life as a bar girl proved difficult. The reliance of bar girls on barkeepers or madams for financial support sheds light on the nature of sexual encounters in these spaces. The illegality of the practices resulted in coded advertising, prison threats, and a complex network of protection services established by women or their employers to avoid jail or fines. The later will be discussed in chapter five, while the advertising and strategies targeted at enticing and protecting clientele are examined below.

GI s recorded their memories of sexual encounters, or those of their comrades, in their recollections of the war. These moments of human contact amid days of military chaos or mundane rear echelon work provided servicemen with a break from their daily routine, and for many, first time experiences to bring them into manhood that complemented the

---

\(^{49}\) This quote is taken from a pamphlet for American GIs abroad in Taiwan for R&R trips from Vietnam and distributed by the U.S. Air Force; “V.D. is Especially Easy To Get in Taiwan,” April 9, 1966, Calvin Chapman Collection, TTU.

\(^{50}\) According to a 1967 survey, bar girls and older women represented the two wealthiest categories of women in South Vietnam; Advanced Research Projects Agency, “Findings and Recommendations Based on Two Reports on Insights into the Role of Women in South Viet Nam,” ARPA Order No. 887, Appendix, 19.

\(^{51}\) For an example of the mechanical attitude toward sex with prostitutes in Vietnam, see Ketwig, ... And a Hard Rain Fell, 77.
sexualized messages of basic training. Accounts of sexual experiences are found most readily in memoirs, diaries, newspaper articles, and exposés. As with any bedroom story, bragging or guilt-ridden writing require additional scrutiny to uncover the more serious concerns embedded in the memories. Military and coming-of-age memoirs overlap in this genre requiring the need to analyze the stressors of these major life events as the author reflects on them, sometimes decades after they occurred. In addition, reflections on Vietnam also reflect men working through their experiences of what developed into a far less popular war domestically than the World Wars or Korea. Recognizing the problematic nature of the sources, they also include significant value when examined as sites of memory. Vietnam War memoirs that mention sexual encounters share many similarities in how servicemen chose to represent their encounters with civilian women. Within these themes, certain elements arise as truth or commonly remembered experiences that are further reinforced through additional sources. In almost all of the accounts written by GIs, for instance, men often corroborate each other’s claims of the overwhelming accessibility of sex near any base across South Vietnam.

In one of the central themes in written reflections of the war, authors share a sense that sexual exchanges in Vietnam were far less joyful and carefree as they are portrayed in films like Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). Vietnam Veteran and established poet, Yusef Komunyakaa wrote of his observations of bar girls in multiple poems. Komunyakaa’s work, “Saigon Bar Girls, 1975,” sheds light on the bleak realities of

---

prostitution. In this instance, he is looking at women still working in the latter days of the war after most U.S. servicemen had returned home:

You’re on Tu Do Street with whores. Unmirrored, they sigh & forget their lists of Mikes, Bills, Joes, & Johns, as they shed miniskirts thinner than memories denied, letting them fall into a hush at their feet —

In this excerpt from the poem, Komunyakaa’s captures the intimate details of the GI experience with local women, and also sheds light on the detachment between the actors. As a representation of Saigon’s wartime society, he portrays the image of the prostitutes as one of defeat and the inability to overcome.

Like many of the memoir accounts of prostitution, the inability of the men to converse with the women during their encounters as a result of the language barrier or simple disinterest leaves them equally silent in most GI representations. In a poem by an American civilian living in Saigon, Wendy Wilder Larsen, she reflects how a westerner viewed the perspective of a Vietnamese bar girl, “I love you beaucoup. | You love me titi. | You give me baby. | I give you V.D.”

A primary goal of this work is not only to understand how American military and government entities understood the industry, but also to uncover the voices of Vietnamese women to better understand what made the


industry so influential on foreign relations. While these voices are not always present in the records, those that are available help us complicate this simplistic perspective of how Americans viewed the thought-process of Vietnamese women.

Finding access to sex in Saigon was not difficult throughout the war, and even less so before the 1968 Tet Offensive resulted in significant limitations on off-duty servicemen. Restaurants, clubs, and massage parlors advertised extensively in English-language newspapers and travel guides. During the war the illustrious status of Saigon as the Paris of the Orient could no longer bring in the tourist revenue it once had, so owners rebranded their establishments to reflect familiar American names and food, including burgers and fries. Still, GIs recalled popular culture from their youth to prepare them for the sex markets of Saigon. As David Holland recalls in his memoirs, “Sex was a big part of my year in Saigon.” He pushes aside the notion of “good-hearted whores,” for a more pragmatic explanation for his experiences. “No,” he writes, “I went basically for the sex, and the whores went basically for my money.” Holland, an MP in Saigon, did not fear venereal diseases, and did not feel obliged to the moral reasons for abstaining from sex with local women.

From New York to San Francisco, city named bars proved particularly popular options for bars around the city. Bars and brothels worked just like street vendors to sell GIs a memory of Vietnam. As Meredith Lair has convincingly argued, “In Vietnam, consumerism was a force so powerful that military authorities could not excise it from the


56 Ibid.
lives and will of the soldiers they led; they did not even try.”  

Even while picking up bar girls, GIs were confronted to make purchases, including the much remembered Saigon Tea that the women would encourage the servicemen to purchase in order to have a conversation with them.  

The cost of the non-alcoholic, watered-down tea added up as the men became more intoxicated. The combination of alcohol and pretty women encouraged GIs to overspend, making bar girls some of the wealthiest members of South Vietnamese society in the mid-1960s.

The tourist guide *Saigon Roundup* contributed to the “tourist” soldier culture by highlighting bar establishments as world class attractions offering members for the Foreign Service and the military options for rest and relaxation in Saigon even prior to escalation.  

“The loveliness of pretty girls,” like the food and architecture, became part of the lure of Saigon as a destination to entice GIs to sign up for, or request R&R during, the Vietnam War.  

The large population of Americans stationed in and near Saigon could visit the locations advertised in the guides on a regular basis in the early years of U.S. involvement, and their spending made them the primary target for owners. Looking at two issues from 1962 and 1966 as examples, the cover art illustrates the changes in advertised sexuality. The first, from March 1962, shows a sketch of a woman wearing a bright yellow *áo dài* aside a sepia-toned photo of a temple above a lake covered in lily pads.  

The March 1966

---

57 Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 147.  


59 *Saigon Roundup*, n. 12, March 9, 1962, Box 1192, Folder 22, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, University Archives and Historical Collections, Michigan State University Libraries [Henceforth, MSU].  

60 *Saigon Roundup*, n. [illegible], November 8, 1963, William Colby Collection, TTU, 34.  

61 *Saigon Roundup*, n. 12, March 9, 1962, Box 1192, Folder 22, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, MSU.
issue, in contrast, shows a young and heavily make-upped woman dancing in a bare mid-drift top with bangles hanging from her breasts. The cover story reads, “Miss Clementine performing in American Military bases Mess and NCO.” The traditional imagery of a quiet garden and modest female figure depicted in 1962 is a far cry from the overtly sexualized entertainment figure on the cover in 1966. As the war escalated, the advertisements adjusted for their audience.

Likewise, the English-language Saigon Post newspaper advertised for the various entertainment venues around town. Some hid their connection to sex culture better than others. Bars advertised hostesses, music and air conditioning. Often, the ability to speak “fluent” or “beautiful” English also accompanied the descriptions of the entertainment. Always, however, the ads boasted about the beauty, youth or grace of the hostesses. The popular Salvador American Bar, which advertised in the Post throughout the war period, promised “[y]oung and attractive waitresses satisfying service.” The Palace American Bar publicized “lovely and excellent hostesses.” Glancing to the right, the White Horse American Bar boasted “the best looking Bargirls in Dakao.” GIs looking for a more relaxing sexual encounter could visit the various steam and Turkish bath parlors throughout the city which invited men to, “enjoy private tub with pretty girls massage.” Bath parlors were especially known for their links between relaxation and sex work. Finally, other

62 Saigon Roundup, n. 221, March 12, 1966, Box 1192, Folder 22, Wesley R. Fishel Papers, MSU.

63 The Saigon Post was one of the most popular English language papers available in Saigon during the war and along with other tourist magazines such as Saigon Roundup targeted Americans in their promotion of bars with names like “American Bar” or “Cowboy Bar.”

64 Saigon Post, January 1, 1969, 5.


establishments advertised musical entertainment or explicitly told readers “no hostesses” to avoid any misunderstandings about the waitresses. Despite the efforts of the South Vietnamese government, GIs had plenty of options for entertainment, sexual or otherwise, on any given night in the city.

As the war escalated, advertisements became more conspicuously sexual and numerous, filling the advertisement pages and even venturing onto the cover of a few issues. While some aspects remained constant, such as the importance of enjoying a relaxing time in a secure environment, the advertisements of brothels became more overt. In a later advertisement from January 1969, for example, a local mistress known as Miss Lee offered to help Americans meeting young girls for whatever purpose they needed.67 The interchangeable nature of office work, companionship, and prostitution in some circles reflected the broader loosening of sexual taboos over the years. Examining the overt culture in advertising can distract from the large portions of the population who adamantly opposed inter-cultural relationships with Americans.

Western journalists in Vietnam, in particular, reported widely on access to sex in their writing at the time as well as in their memoirs. As journalists and not military, they had the opportunity to observe with civilians more closely. Ron Steinman of NBC reflected that for him Saigon represented a, “center for glitz and corruption.”68 Expanding on this, he described the culture in a far more negative light than most memoirs or contemporary advertisements. He wrote,

67 Ibid.

Taxi-dancers and prostitutes, often one and the same, were everywhere, and drugs were openly sold and openly used. Free-spending, often drunken construction workers from everywhere in the world squired very young, slim, and once shy Vietnamese girls who had no pride in their heritage. It had become more important to feed themselves and their families than to honor the past. War and its uncertainties made it easier for these young women to forget their strict, conservative upbringings. Corrupt Vietnamese military officers, who never heard a shot fired, gulped Napoleon cognac well past the ever-changing nightly curfew. Get-rich-quick Vietnamese and Chinese profiting from the war completed this scene of grotesque, pre-World War II Berlin transported to Southeast Asia.69

The descriptions of nightlife, sex, and drugs recur throughout the literature, but Steinman’s description of Vietnamese women as “once shy” girls with “no pride in their heritage” makes sweeping judgments about the lives and circumstances of all sex workers. Failure to understand women at the center of this story and their role in making the industry flourish has hindered our ability to study the topic as more than the two-dimensional prostitute trope seen on film.

Looking beyond what the women represented to American men and examining how they became prostitutes sheds considerable light on the industry and the failures of both governments to shut it down. Female agency was exhibited in diverse ways throughout the war with the basic organizational structures of prostitution at its core. In examining how Vietnamese women viewed prostitution, their perspectives illuminate the crucial roles plays by issues like race, class, war migration, and feminism.

69 Ibid.
In one act of agency, Vietnamese women used race to segregate their clients. Brothels catered to what they saw as majority American views on race. They saw race as an avenue toward higher profits and catered to white GIs through the segregation of African American troops. Racial segregation within bar culture contributed to the division and meaning of space in South Vietnamese urban areas. African American soldiers reported their access to sex was less private than the brothels and bars that catered to white troops, with soldiers in the field recalling purchasing prostitutes who simply lay in ditches for lines of waiting GIs, or perhaps had a location behind a wall or water buffalo.\textsuperscript{70} Those with better access to urban areas like the infamous “Sin City” vice district outside the military base at An Khe reported taking women out behind fences for sex. The exchanges were not always monetary either as the exchange of military currency with locals was illegal. One soldier reported trading a c-ration dinner instead of cash.\textsuperscript{71}

Komunyakaa, the African American soldier and poet, reported the ease of finding sex in spite of the sexual segregation imposed in many of the bars and brothels marked “white only.” After being turned away from bars by the so called “mama-san” who employed the bar girls, the soldiers only needed to walk down the street to find other women willing to offer sexual services. He writes in his poem, “Tu Do Street,” referencing the famous main street in Saigon known for its bars and prostitutes:

\begin{quote}
… Down the street
black GIs hold their turf also.
An off-limits sign pulls me
deeper into alleys, as I look
for a softness behind these voices
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 26-27; For an in-depth examination of the culture surrounding “Sin City,” see Stur, \textit{Beyond Combat}, 64-65, 90-93, 146, 162-166.
wounded by their beauty & war.\textsuperscript{72} Komunyakaa could not simply walk into any bar in Saigon and pay for the services of a hostess for a few hours or the night. Even still, his account illustrates the relative ease of purchasing the services of prostitutes for American soldiers. The need to resort to side streets and outdoor make-shift brothels for sex placed African Americans apart from whites in ways that were no longer legal in the U.S. These methods, while seemingly catering to the desires of white GIs, illustrate how Vietnamese women working in bars and brothels forged the rules and geography of the sex industry in their favor. By segregating they were able to keep their clients satisfied and increase their profits. In turn, this led to a stratification of prostitutes with those who worked the streets at a lower social level than those working at establishments.

The geography of Vietnamese sex markets, whether brothels, back bar rooms, or a stretch of grass along the side of the road offered diverse but ample possibilities for GIs seeking a sexual partner. The purchases could be public or private, like one instance shared by Specialist 4 Robert E. Holcomb who remembered being first in line for a girl grimacing on the side of the ditch. Once undressed, Holcomb could not perform with other men watching him.\textsuperscript{73} In other recollections, private brothels for officers or other well-paying foreigners offered men privacy and a high-class experience.\textsuperscript{74} Even if women were able to profit off the American presence, however, they struggled to sustain themselves in the long

\textsuperscript{72} Komunyakaa, “Tu Do Street,” 29.

\textsuperscript{73} Terry, Bloods, 210.

\textsuperscript{74} For an examination of sexual experiences available in Saigon, see Philip Marnais, Saigon After Dark (New York: MacFadden-Bartell Book, 1967).
run. Women’s rights promotors referred to the prostitution industry as creating a “spiral of dependency and corruption,” that would inevitably only benefit the Americans.  

The impact of the sex industry on Vietnamese culture does not seem to have been part of the consideration for soldiers. Rather, prostitution and bar girls seemed part of the South Vietnamese geography as much as the áo dài. For servicemen, sex with local girls represented one of the most desirable forms of recreation. For most GIs, convenience dictated what form of sexual encounters they sought. Among the ranks, troops viewed intercourse and fellatio as the most socially acceptable interactions. Convenienc appears in other accounts of sexual behavior as well, where soldiers simply sought the women most readily available to them.

Sex and the American Morale Problem

Despite evidence of economic inflation, wide-spread corruption and powerful vice industries, U.S. officials did not see the booming industry as much of a problem, aside from early reports of growth in venereal disease rates. Locally the problem created higher levels of concern as the actions violated RVN laws and challenged cultural taboos. The disregard for these laws seemed to many observers in South Vietnam to mirror a wider problem of American disregard for Vietnamese interests. The North Vietnamese certainly used this message in their propaganda, denouncing Americans as predators of Vietnamese women.

Even among western-supporters, intimate violations of Vietnamese society provided a point of tension and one that they deemed worth defending. The lines within Vietnam,

---

75 Arlene Eisen-Bergman, Women of Vietnam (San Francisco: People’s Press, 1974), 82.


however, were not as clearly drawn. While the United States faced an official Vietnamese policy of eradication, they also heard from lower level officials that the industry was not off limits. In one report collected by a women’s group, a South Vietnamese government employee stated, “The Americans need girls; we need dollars. Why should we refrain from the exchange? It’s an inexhaustible source of U.S. dollars for the state.” With so much confusion and political corruption within the RVN leadership, the United States managed to ignore the issue as a foreign relations concern for several years.

Several issues unraveled out of this massive influx of U.S. servicemen in Vietnam from 1964 to 1966. In one of the most pressing concerns for the U.S. military, the large number of conscripted soldiers serving in the harsh conditions of a protracted war led to chronic morale problems for the Americans. In part, their military training contributed toward ingrained attitudes toward Vietnamese society and expectations of sex as a source of stress-relief and privilege. Second, from the alternative perspective, maintaining control over society in South Vietnam required careful policing and arresting of prostitutes but not those they served. Third, while foreign military expansion in the region upset local cultures, the growing sex industry was met with little interest or foresights for how it differed from previous conflicts, and might thus challenge the war effort. The concern for Americans focused on minimizing the coverage in the press. These three early effects of wartime inter-cultural intimacy formed the foundation of later problems that would demand the attention of policy makers on both sides of the alliance.

Concerns over morale surfaced early in Vietnam but escalated as the war appeared to dissolve into an attrition battle. By the end of the decade, particularly after the Tet

---

78 Tranh Nam, quoted in Eisen-Bergman, Women of Vietnam, 82, 89n10.
Offensive, the need to shut down or heavily regulate the nature of Rest and Recuperation (R&R) in Vietnam was critical for reducing prostitution problems and ensuring men remained where they needed to be. 79 Those flying out of the Tân Sơn Nhất airport in Saigon, for example, were prohibited from entering the city. Rather, they had to remain in the area for departing R&R trips at the airport. 80 GIs were instructed to be respectful and “[m]aintain the best possible appearance at all times,” by refraining from “[l]oud, boisterous conduct and profane language.” 81 Depending on the location restrictions were in place, including the prohibition of Playboy magazines in Australia and Singapore. 82 GI behavior abroad could risk U.S. relations with allies throughout the Pacific.

The Department of Defense (DoD) provided pocket guides for R&R programs in various countries which included notes on the local people and their customs. The DoD’s A Pocket Guide to the Philippines is perhaps the most clear when referencing GI behavior with women when it states, “While young people in the cities are more modern in their ways, your behavior toward young ladies anywhere in the Philippines is expected to be formal. Don’t overstep the bounds of Filipino custom and propriety.” 83

---


82 Ibid., 6 of Annex B.

country R&R, morale programs within Vietnam meant to arouse the spirits of the troops also typically sold sex with performances by women, occasionally even Playboy Bunnies, as part of the entertainment. In other cases, these efforts to raise spirits were less warmly received as is evident by the scratched note on a memo attached to the itinerary for a U.S.O. show, Colonel MacDonald of the 101st Airborne Division asked one two questions. Before even checking if it was coordinated with another unit, he asked first, “[w]ho the hell is Gary Vincent?” in reference to the star of television’s The Virginian, Gary Vinson. The male actor did not seem to offer much excitement compared to coverage of popular female performers. As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, the long-term role of R&R and efforts to remove it from prostitution factored into the politics over sexual encounters during the war and more significantly after the Tet Offensive, and as part of the efforts to better control venereal disease during the Nixon Administration.

Turning to sex with local women for recreation sparked outrage and calls for change among the Vietnamese. As a Vietnamese writer in a poignant January 1966 editorial for the Saigon Post, “In countries where wars drag on, societies are shaken to their foundations and vices mushroom. Vietnam is no exception to the rule.” His comments shed light not only on what was happening in Saigon in 1966, but also on how it related to previous U.S. sex policies in the Pacific. “Experiences,” he offered, “can be learnt from both Japan and Korea, but unfortunately, previous Governments had done nothing to cure the disease let


alone to prevent it. Even now, measures are taken on a temporary basis, aimed at solving urgent cases only…”

Lamenting on the state of Vietnamese social life, he concluded,

If we look at our society today, we cannot help noticing an overall change in the order of social values. New ones have replaces old ones, we may say. It is no longer proper to divide our society into 4 classes (students, farmers, workers and merchants) as our ancestors did before, but it is also heartbreaking to see the new social values based on the capability of money making! It is time for the responsible authorities to pay attention to more social reforms. Leaders of a country must be also vanguard combatants on this social front.

Dat To’s concerns, and those of numerous others in the rapidly changing urban spaces of South Vietnam, contributed to the first official U.S. response to sexual policies in the Vietnam War.

**Sexual Revolutions, Anti-Americanism, & the Vietnamese Discourse over Sexuality**

The social and cultural transitions of the 1960s, an era of U.S. history known for political and sexual countercultures, resonated just as powerfully in the world of foreign affairs. Failed efforts to slow prostitution mirrored the larger failure to resist the impact of western culture in South Vietnamese society. Youth and students embraced western music, television, clothing, and luxury goods. The American Embassy in Saigon reported, “Tight trousers and miniskirts, long hair, brightly colored shirts, <mod> sunglasses and boots – these are the garb of the young urban Vietnamese.”

Coupled with changes in urban

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

space, assimilation into transplanted American culture disconnected youth from their cultural heritage. Among populations resistant to the cultural take-over, particularly women’s organizations, anti-Americanism flourished.

The fashions and behaviors that shocked socially conservative Vietnamese disturbed many Americans as well. The popularly dubbed Sexual Revolution unraveled not in any single moment or movement for more sexual openness in society, but through a slow evolution growing out of sexual research of the 1950s and 1960s. According to controversial studies conducted by pioneering sex researcher Alfred Kinsey among young women and men, he reported that by the 1960s half of women reported to engaging in premarital sex, and numbers for men reached eighty-seven percent.90 These numbers, and Kinsey’s other research on what were labeled unnatural sexual activities, illustrate the Sexual Revolution did not necessarily mean a change in sexual behavior but more willingness to first discuss and then exhibit the behavior in public.

Film and print cultures including magazines like Playboy and its iconic bunny logo, later associated with the Vietnam War, provided sexuality for mass consumer consumption.91 In 1964, author Pearl Buck wrote a piece for Ladies Home Journal on “our new ethics of sex” in the United States, and in particular what she saw as a woman’s revolution.92 She offers several examples of women telling stories that just a few years prior would have been shocking accounts of pre-marital sex or purely physical affairs with the husbands of close friends. Buck cites the impact of the World Wars and


commercialization as driving elements in the revolution but insists, “we Americans are not more interested in sex than other peoples are, nor are we more sexually demanding.”°° Rather, Americans were simply at the forefront of experimentation in a more public light, thus placing them at the center of the world’s embrace and resistance to the revolution. According to Buck the revolution’s part in assigning women as sex objects within culture, however, reinforced patriarchy and resulted in more sex but still limited opportunities for women.°°°°

When the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s merged with the economic and demographic realities of the new war in Vietnam, sex lost much of its earlier taboos for GIs and civilians.°°°°° It occurred openly in public and news cameras captured images of eroticized bar girls to share around the world.°°°°° The simultaneous rise in the feminist and women’s rights movements challenged the intentions and realities of the growing sex industry in Vietnam and worked with Vietnamese women’s groups to protest the practices.

°°°°° Ibid., 44.

°°°°° Birth Control Pills were an iconic part of the sexual revolution for women’s liberation, but were illegal and unpopular in Vietnam. Buck, herself, distrusted the effectiveness of new birth control methods including the pill and blamed the revolution for the growing numbers of orphaned children born to absent fathers and mothers who either were or felt incapable of caring for them. For those less skeptic of the pill’s abilities, new methods of birth control represented a sense of freedom for women, the Sexual Revolution and new wave of feminism, helped propel the revolution into family homes across America. Readily available treatments for sexually transmitted diseases and an oral pill to prevent pregnancy changed the attitudes of many young people regarding the dangers of premarital sex that may have previously prevented them from engaging in this behavior. By 1966, twelve million women were using the pill to prevent pregnancy; Heidenry, What Wild Ecstasy, 32; Petersen, The Century of Sex: Playboy’s History of the Sexual Revolution: 1900-1999, 146-148; Beth Bailey, Sex in the Heartland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002 [1999]), 3-9.

°°°°° For an interesting assessment of different Vietnamese women’s views on sexual relationships, see Advanced Research Projects Agency, “Findings and Recommendations Based on Two Reports on Insights into the Role of Women in South Viet Nam,” ARPA Order No. 887.

°°°°°° Magazines including Time published images of Vietnamese bar girls in their numerous exposes on the industry and its impact on the war industry; South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon,” Time, December 1, 1967, 27.
For the U.S. military, the changing social and cultural climate resulted in a dialog over the wartime sex industry like they had never experienced before.

In one example of scorn and impact of western sexuality on Vietnamese women, the “Ly Ly the Lovely” comic strip ran in the *Saigon Post* in 1965. The comics portray a frivolous girl more focused on fashion, money, and handsome tall men, presumably foreigners, over traditional suitors her parents encouraged. In the comics drawn by a Vietnamese author using the name Duc Khanh, Ly Ly moves through life with little consideration for the hardships she places on her family. In one strip, she seduces the math tutor her parents hire to help her with her studies, much to their dismay. In another she is asked how her engagement is going. She responds that she has broken the engagement, but when asked why she still wears his ring, she replies, “I don’t like him, but I still like his ring.” Reflecting on the changing fashions of the time Duc Khanh often shows Ly Ly in clothes or accessories that stand out in a crowd. She even complains of a sore neck from sleeping while sitting up for days to maintain her western-styled bouffant hair. Throughout the comics, her parents fear she is pregnant, she uses men for money, and eventually even her mother attempts to wear a short dress and heels to fit in. Read as a commentary on the impact of American escalation, Ly Ly represents a fear of feminine susceptibility to the westernization and sexualization of Vietnam.

---

98 Ibid., March 4, 1965, 8, GSL, HCMC.
99 Ibid., January 29, 8, GSL, HCMC.
100 Ibid., May 19, 1965, 8, GSL, HCMC; Ibid., May 5, 1965, 8, GSL, HCMC; Ibid., April 24 1965, 8, GSL, HCMC.
In one of the most blatant commentaries on the risk of associations between Vietnamese women and the easy sexual views of western culture, Ly Ly visits a doctor who tells her, “I am happy to tell you, madam, that you are expecting….” She exclaims back, “How terrible! I am not married….” In the final block of the comic, the doctor rephrases his assessment to tell her flatly, “Well, I am sorry to tell you you are going to be an unmarried mother.” ¹⁰¹ The absence of compassion in the comic brings a heaviness that is absent from earlier appearances and rather than the humor coming from the frivolousness of the character, the joke is seemingly finally on Ly Ly for her behavior. “Ly Ly the Lovely” ran daily in early 1965, but tapered off toward the end of the year to be replaced by American comics. Runs of “Dennis the Menace” likely appealed to a broader U.S. readership and removed the Vietnamese social commentary.

The highly profitable and easily exploitable sex industry, however, had less to do with societal openness toward sexuality in South Vietnam as it did in the United States. Necessity allowed for limited acceptance but equally limited stability. The industry proved particularly vulnerable to attacks from women’s groups who could link their cause to that of feminists worldwide, particularly those in the West, to obtain support in their protest against the impact of Americans in Vietnam. In a translated 1969 interview with the *Phu Nhu Vietnam* women’s magazine, Mrs. Nguyen Dinh Chi, the vice president of the Hue Alliance of the Popular, Democratic and Peace-loving Forces of Vietnam, Chi railed against the “cowboyism” and “social diseases” brought in by Americans turning hundreds

¹⁰¹ Ibid., September 27, 1965, 7. The doctor is named Dr. No in a humorous play on monosyllabic Vietnamese names and the villain of sexualized James Bond film, *Dr. No* (1962).
of thousands of Vietnamese women into bar girls and prostitutes. The only option, she assured readers, was for women in the cities to rise up in support of the war against the U.S. and the administration of Thiệu and Kỳ in the south. The American feminist organization Women Strike for Peace sent Cynthia Fredrick to Saigon that same year. She reported on the encouraging rise in women’s unions attempting to shed light on the impact of the war on women, and most notably on the rise of sex work. By forming a bridge in interests with women in America, anti-war women in Vietnam added a layer of resistance and violence to the already concerning foreign relations and health impacts of prostitution on the war effort.

This discomfort with the Sexual Revolution and the explosion of prostitution across South Vietnam is further evident in these records from women’s groups as well as in documentation of anti-American activity that seemed equally concerned with the levels of civilian casualties and the westernizing behaviors of youth. The war grew bloodier and the identity of enemy forces less straightforward in the months after Tet making anti-Americanism related to everything down to sex and clothing a potential risk to the lives of U.S. servicemen. In addition, the losing battle to control the medical repercussions of only treating one side of sexual encounters, the servicemen, compounded with threats of violence and anti-Americanism by the end of the decade. This policy later forced the United


States to alter its policy on prostitution, an industry so synonymous with warfare that medical advisors referred to as “a fact of life” in 1966.105

The “American Brothel”

Prostitution entered into the international dialog about the Vietnam War in 1966. After the initial Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearings on the legality of the Vietnam War, Senator J. William Fulbright famously brought reports of Saigon as an “American Brothel” to national attention for the first time, but the issue was quickly swept aside as an irrelevant distraction. Sex, politicians and military leaders felt, was simply a part of war.106 Despite efforts to downplay the industry and its effects on foreign relations, prostitution continued to raise concern and debate as it escalated along with the conflict.107 While the struggle within the alliance stretched far beyond inter-cultural sexual intimacy, unease grew out of the seeming disinterest of Americans in enforcing RVN laws regarding sex, despite their promises to do otherwise.108 In part, early U.S. policy toward sexual relations illustrates how the confident nature of U.S. power failed to initially take into consideration the significant roles culture and sexuality played in shaping Vietnamese attitudes towards Americans, and thus, American policy regarding sexuality.


106 This has been discussed in, among other sources, Lair, Armed with Abundance, 207; “Preventative Medicine in Vietnam, 1965-1966,” Proceedings of a Symposium of the Office of the Surgeon, United States Army, Vietnam, 27-28 June 1966, Robert Joy Collection, TTU.

107 Susan Brownmiller addresses the rising of American involvement with brothels escalating in line with the war in her classic 1975 feminist study, Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (New York: Fawcett Books, 1993 [1975]), 93.

Sex and war share a long and complicated history. Shifting cultural ideas challenged attitudes toward acceptable sexual behavior on a global scale during the Vietnam War era, but the belief that soldiers away from home would engage in affairs with civilians had long been seen as acceptable behavior.\textsuperscript{109} The combined promotion of masculinity in Vietnam War training and expendable income among troops seeking out distractions made prostitution popular business.\textsuperscript{110} Young women fleeing to cities for opportunities saw relationships with GIs as a chance for survival. Not all women who engaged in intimate relationships with Americans did so as prostitutes, but many outsiders viewed them as such.\textsuperscript{111} The rapid expansion of the industry following the Americanization of the conflict offers an unsurprising repercussion of the Vietnam War, but the scope of the industry presented new challenges that few scholars have explored from a policy perspective.\textsuperscript{112} The conditions of war favor promiscuity.\textsuperscript{113} In Vietnam, however, levels reached new heights and became a part of the war culture and reportage. Sheer demand for

\textsuperscript{109} Goedde’s \textit{GIs and Germans}, Hegarty’s \textit{Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes}, and Roberts’ \textit{What Soliders Do} all provide excellent analysis on the protracted belief of the U.S. military’s accepting attitude toward the male soldier’s need to satisfy sexual needs as a part of wartime morale building.

\textsuperscript{110} Longley. \textit{Grunts}, 47-49.

\textsuperscript{111} Bar girls typically had some minor choice in who she interacted with, but this was not always the case. Usually, the bar girls owed a debt to the owner of the bar for rented space or drinks, and worked to repay this debt and earn income.

\textsuperscript{112} Prostitution in Vietnam has received considerable attention in popular culture from films like \textit{Full Metal Jacket} or \textit{Casualties of War}, but few scholars have devoted serious attention to the topic. Prostitution and sexuality have arisen as themes in several recent publications on Vietnam from the colonial period through the war, including: Trọng Phụng Vũ and Shaun Kingsley Malamney, \textit{Luc Xi: Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi} (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Stur, \textit{Beyond Combat}, 2011; Keith, Jeffrey A. 2011. \textit{Between the Paris of the Orient and Ho Chi Minh City: Imaginings and Reportage in Wartime Saigon, 1954-1975} (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2011); Richard Bernstein, \textit{The East, the West, and Sex: A History of Erotic Encounters} (New York: Knopf, 2009).

\textsuperscript{113} Medical scholars argue that the disruption of normal social and family activities often leads to increased prostitution during wartime. See, Marcondes and Edmonds, “Heath Knowledge of Prostitutes in Saigon, Vietnam,” 18 and Hart, “Sexual Behavior in a War Environment,” 218.
entertainment drove the sex industry into the mainstream despite the bans on prostitution put in place under the Diệm Family and Morality Laws.114

For GIs in Vietnam, sexual encounters with prostitutes represented normative behavior. Studies on Australian soldiers revealed that seventy-two percent of single and fifty percent of married troops admitted to having intercourse with a prostitute during their tour of duty.115 Married men reported fewer encounters than their single counterparts, but the numbers still indicate a large percentage who participated in sexual affairs and were willing to admit it. By the later 1960s, the venereal disease rates in Vietnam outpaced those seen in Korea a decade previously and matched rates not seen since the World War I era.116 Based on the hundreds of thousands of troops sent to Vietnam over the course of the war, it is easy to see how the business of selling one’s body for sex could become such a lucrative career option for struggling young Vietnamese women. By the middle of the war, the industry had already made its mark.

The debate over sexual encounters in Vietnam first entered the mainstream with Senator Fulbright’s controversial lecture “The Arrogance of Power” and his claim two days later on May 8, 1966 that Saigon was, “[b]oth literally and figuratively … an American brothel.”117 Fulbright’s brothel accusation came in the wake of the Senate Foreign

---


Relations Hearings questioning the United States’ role and purpose in Vietnam which began in February 1966 to bring attention to the conflict and limit the escalation. Taking place midday, CBS and NBC initially aired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) hearings taking the debate over the war out of prime time. After they began to garner more than expected attention from the public, the Johnson administration put pressure on the networks to return to regular programming such as non-controversial reruns of *I Love Lucy* episodes. The story had already captured America’s interests, however, and captured public attention for months to come.

Fulbright argued that the Vietnamese resented “the disruptive effect of our strong culture upon their fragile one,” and cited reports of Vietnamese men forced to send their wives and daughters to work as bar girls and mistresses. He dubbed the possible problem of over-saturating Vietnamese society as one of “fatal impact.” Fulbright labeled this impact “of the rich and strong on the poor and weak,” as a primary cause of resistance to American power in the region. He, in part, blamed Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara for boasting about sending 9.2 pounds of goods per day for each GI, much of which ended up on the black market.

On May 11, Fulbright took his allegations to McNamara directly during the Secretary of Defense’s testimony in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. When asked to comment on the brothel allegations by press dispatches, McNamara “displayed indignation” at the question. He quipped, “I don’t think we ought to characterize our men by that name… I don’t think we ought to characterize the city by that name.

---


haven’t been to Saigon since November but it wasn’t a brothel then and I don’t think that it is today.” He concluded, “I don’t mean there are not prostitutes in Saigon. There are prostitutes in Washington. And I don’t mean that servicemen don’t patronize prostitutes there just as they do in the U.S. But nobody has called Washington a brothel.” Later studies would prove that the numbers in Vietnam were significantly higher than those at home, but McNamara despised the efforts to shift attention away from his prepared testimony on the effects of American bombing campaigns on the morale of their enemies.

The debate over the “American brothel” accelerated on May 17th, when Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy requested Fulbright’s lecture be introduced to the Congressional Record. This sparked a whirlwind of press coverage on the issue highlighting America’s shifting cultural anxieties regarding war and sexuality. Fulbright later claimed to regret his declaration of Saigon as an “American brothel,” but the damage had been done. He apologized for the way the media had reported his statements, but did not deny that the statements were true.

Prostitution had become a significant part of the war’s culture and the American military had to compensate for the activities of its soldiers. Sex in Vietnam would no longer be simply an acceptable means of morale-building for the United States,


121 This particular testimony was related to the effects of bombings on the morale of the National Liberation Front.

122 It was entered along with two of his other addresses challenging the White House intellectuals’ abilities to handle of the war *Vietnam Addresses*, 89th Cong., 2st sess., *Congressional Record* (May 17, 1966): 10803.

123 The media reported that Fulbright was speaking against the troops, but he contended that he was referring instead to “the inevitable impact on a fragile Asian society of Western soldiers … behaving in the way that is to be expected of men at war.” Although he claimed to regret the coverage, he followed up with members of the air programs in Vietnam who confirmed his claims; “Fulbright Declares He Regrets Charge of U.S. ‘Arrogance’” *New York Times*, May 18, 1966, 8.
but became a delicate point of contention over morale versus morality, discretion versus elimination, and the importance of safety to national interests’ on all sides.

Those who tuned into the Vietnam hearings before their censure witnessed the confusion and contradictions of a government struggling over their role in Vietnam and the world at large. The SFRC brought several star witnesses from the so called “father” of containment theory, George Keenan, who opposed the war, to the then retired Army General Maxwell Taylor who advised much of the Vietnam policy since 1961. *Time* magazine expressed disappointment over the hearings in late February. “It might, and should,” they reported, “have been a historic debate, a solemn, searching inquiry [sic] into the fundamental aims, origins and prospects of America’s deepening commitment to a land war in Asia.”124 Rather, they reported, the hearings fell short of this ideal, only raising limited concern over the war and sparking a reactionary defensiveness in Washington concerning their view of the necessity of their presence in Vietnam.

The media covered reaction to Fulbright’s claims throughout the summer of 1966. Immediately following his initial charges, the *New York Times* shared a report from Mrs. Oswald B. Lord, a representative who worked on various presidential committees to represent women, foreign aid and the International Cooperation Year. She also had experience working with the United Nations. Mrs. Lord reported that based on her recent visits to Vietnam, Fulbright’s claims were false. She argued that the GIs she witnessed helped at orphanages and rehabilitation centers, “not in town with the bar girls.”125 *Time* magazine approached the issue in a different way with a tongue-in-cheek slap at Fulbright’s


home state of Arkansas. In response to McNamara’s argument that the media should not publicize prostitution in Vietnam because the same vices existed in the United States, *Time* reported:

For that matter, not everyone in Fulbright’s own Arkansas cities of Little Rock and Hot Springs patronizes prostitutes either, though there is an abundance of whores, ranging from massage-parlor employees ($5) to $200-a-night hotel call girls. And at Little Rock Air Force Base, every airman so inclined knows that he has only to call FRANKLIN 4-2181, ask for “Rocket” or “Houston,” and find out in “the ice is on.” The price of ice starts at $15 a dish.126

The media poked quite a bit of fun at Fulbright’s morality claim in the midst of a sexual revolution, but, as the war escalated, this booming industry and its expanding clientele of American patrons would only work to add more fodder to the fires of dissent.

The media presented GIs just as generally frustrated with Fulbright’s focus on the moral implications of prostitution being more important than the morale of the soldiers. On 3 June 1966, *Time* magazine ran a letter sent in by a Private First Class working in the Marine Corps in Hue, South Vietnam. PFC Nye wrote, “Washington’s biggest problem concerning GIs in Viet Nam is their morale. It is not unlike the problem the U.S. had in the Korean War, and the good Senator isn’t helping.”127 Soldiers ascribing to this view did not see Fulbright’s attack on prostitution as a part of his distain over the morality of the war, but as a personal attack against the troops.

---


The exposé *Saigon After Dark* written under the pseudonym of Philip Marnais provides a gritty and often uncomfortable account of the industry as seen from the perspective of a brothel patron.\(^{128}\) Marnais’ work invites readers to judge for themselves if Fulbright’s claims that of an American brothel were true.\(^{129}\) He argues, “to an observer in Saigon it appears incredible that such a debate could have occurred in the first place. Saigon is obviously an American brothel, just as ten years ago it was a French brothel and ten years from now, if the Communists win, it will be a Chinese brothel.”\(^{130}\) Like other accounts from the time, Marnais stresses the ease of access and the lack of moral standards in war that make the industry so prevalent.

The “American brothel” accusations eventually passed away without much focus in the domestic press. The military had long condoned, even organized, access to prostitutes for GIs.\(^{131}\) They openly promoted sexuality in Vietnam through events such as Playboy Playmate “kissing tours” and sexualized USO performances, but prostitution proved a more difficult to negotiate.\(^{132}\) For the most part, the American public showed limited concern over GI interactions with Vietnamese civilians. The South Vietnamese government, however, openly condemned and fought to shut down the industry. The majority of U.S. officials held the view that, in a war where over a quarter of the soldiers

---

\(^{128}\) Marnais is noted as a travel journalist of sorts, contributing *Saigon After Dark* as part of the “After Dark” series on nightlife in major cities around the world.

\(^{129}\) Marnais, *Saigon After Dark*, cover.

\(^{130}\) Ibid., 15.


were conscripts, a little morale could go a long way. A primary outcome of policy fears was the constant repetition that sexuality and war had long gone hand in hand.\textsuperscript{133} Regardless of the strain prostitution placed on Vietnamese society, U.S. dealings with prostitution become masked in discussions of their broader significance of problems of corruption, inflation, and disease in Vietnam.

\textbf{Conclusion: A Storm Brewing}

In the wake of American escalation, unmanaged growth led to inflation and a market for vice to flourish. Loosening global ideas about the roles of women paired with the need to support families and made prostitution not only a means to earn money but a way for some women to rise up the social ladder. Disease and other dangers made prostitution an industry of considerable risk. For GIs, a lingering colonial ideology about the sensual nature of Asian women added to the already intense sexual desires of wartime, providing a consistent demand regardless of RVN social and morality laws prohibiting the practice. For servicemen, the women became part of the geography of their tours in Vietnam. Citing a French adage, “There are no crazy professions, only crazy people.” A study assessing the validity of prostitution as a career references this quote to illustrate that what the French once allowed the practice.\textsuperscript{134} To many Vietnamese citizens, it was painfully obvious that yet another population of white men viewed their nation as inferior. By 1966, the battle for their legitimacy over sexual policies was well established.

In terms of congressional action or shifts in war policy for the United States, the 1966 Fulbright hearings and the declaration of Saigon as an “American brothel” had little

\textsuperscript{133} Brownmiller, \textit{Against Our Will}, 93.

immediate impact on American sexual or social policies in Vietnam. As Meredith Lair has suggested, the Johnson Administration opted to take on a sexual policy that consisted of little more than a “nod and a wink.” The breaching of the topic in the U.S. news media, however, put the topic of sexuality and war up for discussion. As they steadily reported on the theme of inter-cultural sexual intimacy after the hearings, the South Vietnamese increased their police assault against illegal social practices. Only much later in the conflict did policy-makers begin to acknowledge that a process much likely what Fulbright anticipated as “fatal impact” seriously threatened the war effort leading the United States to take a more aggressive stance toward their treatment of sexual encounters.

135 Lair, *Armed with Abundance*, 207.
CHAPTER FIVE

UNEASY ALLIES: VIETNAMESE ERADICATION EFFORTS AND THE AMERICANIZATION OF SEXUAL POLICY

If the military aspects of this war could be separated from the political, social and economic -- and they can't -- I'd say we have come a long way in a year.¹

– General William C. Westmoreland,
Commander, U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, 1966

Introduction

What Westmoreland and his contemporaries living in Vietnam had already recognized in 1966, few in Washington chose to fully engage. U.S. nation building efforts in South Vietnam focused on the countryside by securing hamlets or promoting the growth of more hearty rice crops, but the practice of side-stepping urban problems when the majority of U.S. troops serving in-country lived and worked among civilians allowed economic inflation, corruption, and the sex trade to flourish.² Westmoreland’s comment above came after the first round of Fulbright’s Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearings on the legitimacy of the war in Vietnam, and only days after the “American brothel” accusation as the Whitehouse quickly swept the issue aside as an irrelevant distraction.³ Sex, they felt along with many others, was just a part of war. Kentucky New

¹ “Quotes by General Westmoreland at Press Conference,” 2 July 1966, #7 History File, 29 May - 17 July 99, Box 8, Papers of William C. Westmoreland, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.

² Meredith Lair argues that depending on dates of service, up to seventy-five to ninety percent of U.S. soldiers “labored in supporting roles, out of danger, and in relative comfort,” Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5.

Era, for one, reported, “officials say the situation is nothing new -- that all this has existed before, in Paris, Rome, Naples and the bombed-out cities of occupied Germany after World War II … and back into the mists of the history of war.”

They failed to recognize in those early days, however, that the sexual behavior of GIs and the ways they handled the issue wove into many aspects of South Vietnamese society and upset traditional social and power boundaries, as well as disrupting political relations. I occasionally use the term sexual policy or politics to generally refer to political or diplomatic exchanges between diplomats, government officials, and U.S. or South Vietnamese militaries, as well as North Vietnam, over the various encounters of sexual or inter-personal intimate relationships that formed between foreign servicemen and civilians in South Vietnam and their repercussions. This includes, but is not limited to, debates over the legality of prostitution and the penalties for the purchase of sex. By looking at the U.S.-RVN relationship through their diplomacy over sexual behavior, I assert that we are able to see how each nation wielded power in their attempts to show legitimacy and dominance in their alliance.


5 My use of the term sexual politics or policy does not relate to the feminist definition coined by Kate Millett in her 1969 work Sexual Politics, but is rather a generalized terms regarding the political debates and issues linked to political decisions made regarding GI sexual behavior during the war. Mary Louise Roberts uses the phrase “sexual relations” in her book on sexual encounters in World War II, What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). I have chosen to use the term “politics” as the relationship between the two countries over how to handle sexual or romantic encounters allude to a prolonged power struggle between the two that “politics” expresses more directly than “relations” in the Vietnam War context. I argue that Johnson’s views of sexual policy stemmed from his views on Vietnam and his administration’s gendering of the nation as feminine, but the gendered aspect of sexual policy is far less prominent during the Nixon period.

6 Beyond the brothels, those ordered to handle international politics surround sexual behavior in the military also struggled to determine how to manage daily in-country contact between GIs and civilians, inter-cultural marriage laws, the placement of rest and relaxation facilities, punishment for crimes of sexual violence, and the laws regarding the adoption of orphaned children born to foreign fathers.
Foreign policy anxieties over the so called “American brothel” in 1966 evolved into a far more complicated series of concerns for President Richard Nixon and his advisors only a few years later. Skyrocketing venereal disease rates, rape, Amer-Asian orphans, rampant corruption, economic destabilization, and pleas to reunite lost lovers characterize some of the diverse elements of the politics disagreements surrounding sexual encounters that officials negotiated later in the war. Nixon, his generals, and his advisors struggled to recover from years of the Johnson administration half-heartedly following South Vietnam’s lead in eradicating prostitution-related problems. The early war years’ pattern of largely unregulated sexual interactions negatively affected American relations with their Vietnamese allies and threatened to sabotage psychological warfare tactics aimed at American hopes of winning the “hearts and minds” of civilians.7

The slow shift toward more active American participation in sexual and social policy moved briskly forward after 1969. As the war underwent military and political Vietnamization, social policies regarding GI-civilian personal relationships followed a reverse trajectory in the Nixon era which I have dubbed an Americanization of sexual policy. The Americanization of sexual policy refers to efforts conducted by American military and diplomatic personnel to enact policies to curb the negative effects of sexual relationships between U.S. forces and Vietnamese civilians. This includes but is not limited to the increases in prostitution rates, but also how to manage inter-cultural dating, marriage, rape, and children born to GI fathers and civilian mothers. By the late 1960s, the United States took a primarily offensive position in regards to new social policies, with a particular emphasis on prostitution, and the Vietnamese were forced into a reactionary response as a

7 The U.S. military used the term psychological warfare when referring to their interactions with civilians, who they recognized as a crucial element in stabilizing to succeed in the larger war effort.
result of their inability to maintain political stability, pressure to achieve military 
Vietnamization, and feelings of not being able to control and stabilize society in urban 
spaces. The size of the industry and the fundamental social disagreements over GI-civilian 
intimate relations challenged U.S. military and government officials unlike the earlier wars 
of the twentieth century.8

When Nixon inherited the Vietnam War, not long passed until he faced questions 
on the fall-out over the Johnson administration’s decision to ignore the significance of 
inter-cultural intimacy between American GIs and Vietnamese civilians. In August 1969, 
Al Aigner, a businessman visiting his son stationed in the city of Vũng Tàu south of Saigon, 
a location often used for training or rest and relaxation (R&R) purposes and known for its 
bars and nightlife, wrote to Nixon to ask if he had seen similar “distressing things” on his 
recent visit to South Vietnam. In particular, Aigner seemed worried by the juxtaposition of 
“an awful lot of civilians riding their motor bikes all day long as though they didn’t have 
to work” amidst visible corruption culture. “There are obvious cases of poverty seen on the 
streets,” he recalled, “but there is a great deal of money jingling in the pockets or purses of 
‘B’ girls, pickpockets and prostitutes. The only crime acknowledged by the local 
Vietnamese is their failure to take more from the Americans.” The upsetting of Vietnamese 
social structures and domestic frustration with failures to control social issues South 
Vietnam came as a direct result of early war sexual policies. By not acting on known issues

---

8 Prostitution in Vietnam has received considerable attention in popular culture from films like Full Metal 
Jacket or Casualties of War, but few scholars have devoted serious attention to the topic. Prostitution and 
sexuality have arisen as themes in several recent publications on Vietnam from the colonial period through 
the war, including: Trọng Phụng Vũ and Shaun Kingsley Malarney, Luc Xi: Prostitution and Venereal 
Disease in Colonial Hanoi (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011); Heather Marie Stur, Beyond 
Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); 
Keith, Jeffrey A. 2011. Between the Paris of the Orient and Ho Chi Minh City: Imaginings and Reportage 
in Wartime Saigon, 1954-1975 (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2011); Richard Bernstein, The East, the 
regarding military interactions with civilians, American policymakers found themselves in a war culture steeped in corruption, anti-Americanism and economic instability, as well as working at odds with their allies in the South regarding sexuality and inter-cultural personal relations.

As the protracted nature of the war became clear by 1969, so too did the risks associated with GI-civilian sexual encounters in their many forms, but most notably prostitution as Aigner’s letter highlights. The Johnson-era policy of checked support for RVN anti-prostitution laws including brothel closures and limiting the numbers of GIs allowed in urban centers, Americans took a more reactionary stance and only marginally reduced the encounters. They assumed that troops would inevitably engage in sexual relationships with the local women.9 During the Nixon years, the far more active posture of the United States toward sexual behavior came about through necessity rooted in the repeated failures of these reactionary policies. In addition, Vietnamization of the war and a push toward negotiations shifted the lens in South Vietnam toward the post-war era and brought the economic realities of American spending and aid into sharp focus amid the growing anti-war movements rising in the wake of the 1968 Tet Offensive.10

The United States and South Vietnam sought to reconcile their concerns over GI-civilian intimate relations following the 1966 “Brothel Debate” through two primary means. First, both governments tried to repress the industry through the closure of bars, round-ups of prostitutes, and restrictions on how American troops interacted with civilians.


The U.S. military, however, had little interest in fully pursuing a plan so potentially detrimental to troop morale. Conversely, they favored the treatment for the associated problems of venereal disease and corruption. Americans established clinics, nominally for the care and treatment of local women as opposed to their more direct purpose of helping eliminate disease among servicemen. Clinic organizers hoped to create opportunities for the education and treatment for women working illegally as sex workers, but occasionally struggled to employ Vietnamese medical workers who resisted any association with the illegal practices. In addition, the U.S. military worked to move R&R locations away from Vietnam to limit the economic and social impacts of soldiers on leave. Policies shaped under the conflicting ideologies of South Vietnamese laws on morality and U.S. interest in military morale led the nations to alternatively take on a leadership role regarding social policy in their uneasy alliance.

This chapter examines why and how the Americanization of sexual policy took root amid prominent corruption in South Vietnamese politics in the context of the global sexual revolution. It examines the shift from minimally successful Vietnamese eradication programs to the period of Americanization where U.S. military and aid officials took the lead in instituting education, control, and treatment programs for prostitution related problems. In this chapter, sources from the Vietnamese National Archives in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam are juxtaposed in relation to newspaper reporting on the issue and American archival documentation regarding U.S. concerns over venereal disease. In addition,

previously unused government reports regarding prostitution and the health knowledge of prostitutes helps set the stage about what the United States knew about Vietnamese sex workers during the war to forge their own recreational policies relating to sexual behavior.

While the Americanization of sexual policies succeeded in the establishment of more clinics and monitoring tactics, it failed to eliminate disease that only took a major decline after troops began to leave in large groups by 1973. In addition, the debates that typically took place among city-level officials and American aid or military health officials only proved to further strain the U.S.-RVN relationship as the Americans began more serious negotiations with North Vietnam to end the war. Sexuality became a somewhat level playing field as both governments feared the repercussions of limiting inter-cultural sexual encounters as much as they feared letting them continue.

**War on Corruption: The Vietnamese Eradication Campaigns**

Even prior to American escalation, the South Vietnamese government(s) actively participated as agents of social and cultural policy regarding the behavior of U.S. servicemen in Vietnam and not simply as a puppet state fulfilling American needs in exchange for military and financial support. As troop numbers in Vietnam grew, a focus on suppressing brothel culture ranked highly at the local level with city mayors and police

---

12 Historiographical debates over the role and agency of the South Vietnamese state extend beyond the scope of this chapter except to note that in relation to sexual and social policy, the governments, especially that of Nguyen Van Thieu, persistently resisted acting as a pawn to the Americans and took a firm stance against behavior he viewed as potentially detrimentally to Vietnamese moral culture. At the same time, the United States used the negotiations with the North Vietnamese to pressure Thieu to act in their favor. The most telling archival documents I have seen regarding Thieu’s pressure for continued American military and economic support are in the Kissinger Papers at the Nixon Presidential archives; Memo, “July 4 Meeting with Thieu,” Henry A. Kissinger, July 4, 1971; Box 103; Folder “Saigon – Background Documents [1 of 2],” National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Country Files - Far East, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Archives, Yorba Linda, CA; John Prados also shed light on this relationship in his 2003 article for the Vietnam Veterans of America website, “Diplomacy on Multiple Fronts,” [www.vva.org](http://www.vva.org), January/February 2003.
forces who dictated day-to-day eradication operations, especially in highly populated urban spaces. Their daily attacks against inter-cultural sexual intimacy, specifically prostitution, evolved from the illegality of the industry and the recognition that it often bred vice culture and police corruption.

The Diệm administration merged traditional Vietnamese conservatism toward sexuality with similar western and Catholic views toward prostitution insisting that extramarital affairs potentially threatening to the core values professed by the young government.\(^\text{13}\) Vietnamese officials pushed against demand for access to sex for foreigners by upholding this set of desired moral standards through proactive anti-prostitution campaigns, strict intercultural marriage policies, and resistance to venereal disease campaigns they feared might be misconstrued by GIs as legalizing prostitution. Even those at lower levels in the government stood up to Americans to an extent, although they typically acquiesced to some proposals as the war waned on. In contrast, many Vietnamese civilians, including peasant refugees who relocated to cities for safety, benefitted financially by pursuing relationships, sexual or otherwise, with Americans.\(^\text{14}\) Prostitution offered the fastest means to more financial stability but the unforeseen costs of the industry in terms of economics, health, and security which prompted more political and military attention.

Vietnamese police forces in Saigon had already established a practice of regularly raiding bars and brothels frequented by foreign servicemen. Through early fall, nightly raids by Vietnamese police resulted in dozens of arrests of prostitutes and occasionally brothel-owners. In contrast, servicemen were sent back to their barracks. During an August 11th brothel raid, six women were caught in the act of prostituting themselves. Only the women and the bar owner were taken into custody, their male patrons were not.\(^\text{15}\) The placement of blame on the women for repercussions of prostitution, like disease, further heightened tensions. The raids, meant to discourage the instantly popular Saigon nightlife, failed to hinder its growth. American currency proved too powerful, sparking a culture of black markets selling sex and goods in addition to the growing culture of protection and corruption funded by the inflationary economy. Fear of what might happen after the Americans inevitably left led some to suggest the government needed to enforce their laws more rigorously.\(^\text{16}\)

Due to the anti-prostitution stance of the South Vietnamese established under the Diệm administration, the U.S. reacted differently to the war and sexual relationships than they had in France during World War II, the occupation of Japan, or the Korean War. General Westmoreland initially allowed American forces to aid efforts to shut down bars in the cities, but at the same time gradually allowed a larger sex-work presence around bases. In some instances, the U.S. military helped bar owners move closer to military camps, or reorganized entertainment venues in secure areas like Long Binh, a base built outside Saigon in Biên Hòa to keep troops out of close contact with the city.\(^\text{17}\) The efforts

---


to move brothels and institute fines did little to discourage Vietnamese civilians from participating in the practices. Reports claimed bar girls and brothel employees working near larger bases occasionally received some forms of medical treatment from the medics that allowed them to continue working, but many of the transferred bars and brothels returned to their original locations along or near Tự Do Street at the epicenter of Saigon’s bar area within a matter of months.\(^{18}\) Vietnamese bar proprietors and madams viewed brothels set up near bases, like the infamous area known as Sin City in An Khê, as infringing on their profits as these condoned brothels were largely controlled by the U.S. military and requiring weekly check-ups for employees who may have been able to work elsewhere.\(^{19}\) Around smaller cities like An Khê and Pleiku, the “semi-official” brothels failed to become an acceptable model nation-wide.\(^{20}\) Even if brothels were not overtly sanctioned by the American government, the military attempted to control their actions when they were out of the city centers.

Following Fulbright’s brothel claims in 1966, South Vietnamese Welfare Minister Trần Ngọc Liễn revitalized efforts with a large-scale operation to “transfer” Saigon’s prostitutes to a “suburban colony” in one of the first plans to eliminate prostitution where they would be “kept in an enclosed area, away from the population and under medical control.”\(^{21}\) In line with the South Vietnamese government’s interests in eliminating vice,\


\(^{18}\) “Saigon’s Mayor Orders Bars to Quit City Center” *New York Times*, March 7, 1972, 6.

\(^{19}\) Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 64.


\(^{21}\) Ibid.
the minister predicted that isolation would help eradicate prostitution and provide an occupational purgatory before the women moved on to “earn a normal living.” Again, the profitability of the industry showed through in the boldness of public protests held in Saigon. Reports suggest that over 600 Vietnamese protested this plan to move the industry out to what they viewed as an underhanded attempt to “legalize” prostitution under state control.

These efforts persisted the following year when in December 1967 the new Minister of Social Welfare Nguyễn Phúc Que proposed a similar plan to relocate the brothels to the city limits. Under Nguyễn’s plan all visitors, American or Vietnamese would be required to pay direct fees to the South Vietnamese government. Like the plans in 1966, large sectors of the population adamantly opposed the transition. The relocation of sex-work outside the city would eliminate the potential of private profits from American spending, cutting them out of one of the most profitable options for those struggling to survive in South Vietnam’s inflationary economy.

Solving the difficult problem of sex work forced the United States to accommodate some changes in 1967, but they remained public quiet on the issue of sex work. Two hundred professionals representing a reported 50,000 bar girls and taxi dancers marched to protest General Westmoreland’s response to Vietnamese official pressures to reduce the negative impacts of U.S. servicemen in the cities, named “Operation MOOSE.”

22 Tone and diacritical marks not included with Nguyen’s surnames; “South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon,” Time, December 1, 1967, 27.

23 The term “taxi dancer” referred to women who danced with customers for a fee. Their services could also be purchased for longer periods of time, like an escort, but their services were not necessarily sexual; William Westmoreland, Vietnam War: After Action Reports – Lessons Learned Documents – Battle Assessments, (Beverly Hills: BACM Research, 2009); Also see, “South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon,” Time, December 1, 1967, 27; This represented at least the second attempt to move the majority of U.S. forces from cities. Westmoreland cabled about the concerns and challenges of such a move in August 1966;
military-directed program, standing for “Move Out of Saigon Expeditiously,” sought to reduce the presence of Americans in Vietnamese city-centers.\textsuperscript{24} Although the program reduced the number of troops in Saigon from 71,000 to 36,000 with plans for further cuts, it failed to eliminate the industry which flourished near surrounding bases in cities like Vũng Tàu, just south of Saigon, or by the Long Bình complex built to the north of the city to reduce the pressure of the war on the capital. The method of separating servicemen and civilians in MOOSE marked the first major effort to use distance as a means of solving the nagging social problems associated with the war in Vietnam. Attempts to remove the brothels continued throughout the war, including an attempt in March 1972 to close and move 100 bars to an area outside the city near the joint American and South Vietnamese Tân Sơn Nhất Airbase. This effort was instigated by Saigon’s Mayor Du Kien Thieu who ordered over 100 bars in downtown Saigon and its Chinatown neighborhood of Cholon to close or make the move. By this point, it seems, several of the bars were leaving downtown Saigon, but the industry continued to flourish until the Americans began to leave in 1973.\textsuperscript{25}

Enough GIs remained in or moved through cities, however, that bar owners felt their industry was safe even in the wake of MOOSE and subsequent separation efforts. Years after Vietnamese eradications efforts gave way to marginally more successful U.S.-led education and containment, a bar owner reflected, “[t]hey’ve tried to close us down for

\textsuperscript{24}“South Vietnam: Cleaning Up Saigon,” Time, December 1, 1967, 27.

\textsuperscript{25}Tones and diacritics not included for name; “Saigon’s Mayor Orders Bars to Quit City Center” New York Times, March 7, 1972, 6; Nick Turse, Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2013), 147; Lair, Armed with Abundance, 32-33.
years but we are still in business.”

After repeated failures, businesses no longer feared government crackdowns, only the prospect of the Americans, and American money, leaving town. Mixed civilian reactions to eradication efforts, including protest marches in Saigon, reflect the complexity of the industry’s impact on South Vietnam’s social structure. Not recognizing the disadvantages of the growing industry through mid-1960s, the U.S. military acquiesced to Vietnamese requests by reducing troop numbers in hopes that it might strengthen their relationship, but at the same time contributed in establishing bars nearer to bases and failed to punish servicemen who violated the laws. This disregard exemplifies their war-long struggle to collaborate effectively on social issues.

Vietnamese National Archives shed light on the level of concern within the South Vietnamese government by indicating that the elimination efforts extended beyond the day to day efforts to clean up cities from brothel raids to transitions, but rather pointed to an effort for a more long-term plan. An undated transcript from a workshop titled “Seminar on the Eradication of Prostitution” sheds light on a hearing where participants examined witnesses on their ages and the nationality of the patrons serviced in bars. The workshop

26 “Saigon’s Mayor Orders Bars to Quit City Center” New York Times, March 7, 1972, 6.


28 At the National Archives in College Park, I was temporarily given unrestricted access to FOIA protected Military Police Desk Blotter from Vietnam that indicate prostitution between American GIs and Vietnamese women constantly challenged officials who found ways to work around the problems. The women were often taken to the Le Loi Hospital in Vung Tau for V.D. screening while men were charged most commonly with curfew violations. In one particularly clever write-up, a man caught engaged in intercourse with a prostitute was charged with a uniform violation while she was arrested by South Vietnamese police; I uncovered numerous valuable stories like these before the collection was taken away. I was able to obtain access to: USARV/1st Infantry Division, Provost Marshal - Military Police Desk Blotters: 01/13/1967-02/17/1970, Boxes 5-8, Records of the US Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 0472, NARA II.
suggests that the participants viewed Americans as the leading source of demand creating the prostitution problem. They highlighted several bars and neighborhoods in downtown Saigon known for employing sex-workers and participating in illicit activities.29 Discussants, however, recognized that restrictions against overt advertising for prostitution consistently prove unable to achieve the goal of vice eradication and only sent the industry further underground.30 Still, the focus on social problems remained centered on eradication rather than changing the laws despite repeated failures and the flourishing corruption culture of an industry known for steep profits tied closely to the influx of American goods and inflationary spending.31

In the United States, public and government concern over the industry remained low. The global press and anti-war movements picked up on the growing prominence of social issues like prostitution in Vietnam while Johnson continued to downplay the importance of vice and corruption that might tarnish the American image abroad.32

---


30 Ibid., 2-3.

31 The term “bài trừ” for “eradication” or “elimination” of prostitution exists as a standard term in the titles of circulating records related to prostitution at the Vietnamese National Archive Center II in Ho Chí Minh City. Compiled reports focused on the industry’s links to social corruption and the need to eliminate the industries: Hồ sơ v/v bài trừ nạn số đuôi, mại dâm tại các tỉnh miền Trung Nam phần năm 1968-1973 [Documents related to the eradication of prostitution in the southern part of the central provinces, 1968-1973], Hồ sơ Phú Thủ Tướng [Prime Minister], Ký hiệu 31232, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chí Minh City, Vietnam; To Department of State from Am Embassy Saigon, Airgram, “RVN Anti-Corruption Campaign,” February 3, 1969, Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 1967-73 (4) NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other Reps NSA, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Amembassy Saigon, Airgram, “Corruption In Vung Tau,” November 10, 1967, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other Reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 69-73 CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Am embassy Saigon, Airgram, “Recent Events in the Fight Against Corruption,” November 24, 1969, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp/Box 2/ Gov’t of SCVN, Corruption, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; Lair, Armed with Abundance, 207.

32 References to the prostitution industry tarnishing America’s image in Vietnam came before the Fulbright hearings brought the industry’s scope to a national audience. In an article from December 1965, journalist Beverly Deepe discussed the perception of the industry as American “decadence” and the dangerous effects
long-standing U.S. tradition of intimately engaging with civilian populations abroad, including the large numbers of World War II war brides or the availability of prostitution after the Korean War, had helped his case and caused many to scoff at and belittle Fulbright’s 1966 “brothel” accusation and its repercussions.\footnote{The perceived connections between sex work and police or political corruption resonated more in 1966 and immediately after for the United States than the more pragmatic considerations of venereal disease that eventually took precedence in the campaign.\footnote{In regards to prostitution’s close relationship with corruption, President Johnson redirected the media to domestic problems, downplaying the importance the private/personal actions of GIs in Vietnam.\footnote{In contrast to the Administration’s downplay of vice, anti-war advocates used the issue in their favor. Democratic Senator Ernest Gruening argued that corruption in Vietnam was so widespread that, “it is shielded by its very pervasiveness.”\footnote{For the White House, the goal became not to eliminate, but rather to make the problems “less obvious” to outsiders\footnote{Corruption activities including the industry had on Saigon’s economy and American security; Beverly Deepe, “Bar Hostesses Present Social, Moral Problems,” The Tuscaloosa News, December 3, 1965, 11.}}}}


\footnote{Leland Gardner’s, \textit{Vietnam Underside!: “Don’t Worry Mom... We’ve got Penicillin,”} (New York: Publisher’s Export, 1966) pointed to the longstanding tradition of Western interest in Vietnamese sexuality, and as his subtitle suggests that venereal disease already represented a concern.}

\footnote{At a rally in Beaumont, when asked about corruption in Vietnam, Johnson proclaimed, “Certainly they have corruption and we also have it in Boston, in New York, in Washington and in Johnson City. Somebody is stealing something in Beaumont right now,” to a crowd in Beaumont; Gerald Ford Presidential Library. Vietnam Information Group Files: Box 2 - Folder “Government of [South] Vietnam - Corruption, 1967-73 (2)”}

\footnote{Ernest Gruening, \textit{Corruption in South Vietnam, IV - Must Our Boys Continue To Die To Protect It?}, 90th Cong., 2st sess., \textit{Congressional Record - Senate} (March 8, 1968): 5863.}
prostitution proved difficult, and in relation to morale, undesirable, to root out. In the end, the seemingly far away social issues appeared more tolerable than more bad press about the war.

Rising Anti-American sentiments directly linked to involvement with civilian populations, however, created tensions over how to balance the U.S.-RVN alliance with the practical need to raise GI morale. In order to maintain a positive image of U.S. servicemen’s behavior in Vietnam, officials balanced keeping troops safe in the face of loose health regulations and fears of anti-American hostility. Sources of anti-Americanism were closely monitored from protests against American presence in cities to the rising popularity of hippy culture and the “minijupe.” These thigh-flashing skirts represented a loosening of modest styles in Vietnam that many associated with the more conservative áo dài tunic and slacks. A 1967 report on the health knowledge of prostitutes reported that this trend had not enveloped all young Vietnamese women, but particularly targeted the generation of city girls coming of age during the war.

On the ground in Vietnam, South Vietnamese and American Military Police worked to limit interactions between civilians and troops. Especially in cities away from Saigon, GIs presented acute risks to the U.S. Cold War strategy of using psychological


warfare to promote western democracy among local populations. Prostitution with its associated culture of drinking, corruption, and occasional violence only added to what was already a tense political relationship.\footnote{Evidence of these links can be seen in the Military Police desk blotter records; USARV/1st Infantry Division, Provost Marshal - Military Police Desk Blotters; 01/13/1967-02/17/1970, Boxes 5-8, Records of the US Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975, Record Group 0472, NARAII.} Several contested gun-shot deaths of civilians around the coastal city of Qui Nhơn in central Vietnam, for instance, motivated the South Vietnamese Minister of National Defense, Nguyễn Văn Vy to send hostile letters to Commanding General Creighton Abrams requesting that Americans needed to curb the numbers of men allowed into cities.\footnote{Nguyen Van Vy, Minister of National Defense, Republic of Vietnam to Creighton Abrams, Commanding General, US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (Feb 18, 1971), Hồ sơ Phủ Thủ Tướng [Prime Minister], Ký hiệu 1060, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.} The more U.S. servicemen entering cities and villages to visit bars, the greater the risk they would engage negatively with civilians. In addition, he recommended marking certain areas completely off limits, something that cities across South Vietnam had experienced in different capacities since 1967.\footnote{Placing cities off limits to soldiers occurred for a variety of reasons including the 1967 Operation MOOSE in Saigon. That same year, soldiers were likewise prohibited from freely entering the town near Bien Hoa. Following the 1968 Tet Offensive, the U.S. military tightened restrictions to help eliminate security threats; Gerry Ellenson, interview with the author, August 30, 2014, email.} He feared “this bubbled situation may boil into a fiery explosion beyond our control” if civilian protests led to infighting between the allies. GIs feared attacks on brothels and rumors flourished about undercover National Liberation Front guerrillas working as prostitutes to launch attacks or obtain information, but the primary means of safety regulations related to venereal disease.\footnote{Stur, Beyond Combat, 40.}

The efforts to trivialize the impact of the prostitution industry in South Vietnam by figures like Secretary of Defense McNamara were damaged by subsequent reports
illustrating the repercussions of ignoring social problems. In early 1967, General Earle Wheeler warned congress that the venereal disease rates among military men in Vietnam were already ten times higher than their stateside rates. The General expressed surprise at these numbers, but admitted that the military’s efforts to minimize the risks were “not eminently successful.” The rate of 280.7 infections per thousand men in Vietnam represented high rates even for the American military. In the Korean War, the rates had grown as high as 193 per thousand in 1952, but remained far lower than those during Vietnam. Wheeler placed the blame from these high numbers on the soldiers themselves, suggesting that the high percentage of young troops accounted for much of the behavior. He also pointed to their morality, suggesting that brief military training could not be expected to alter their desires.

Both medical and social concerns over the repercussions of the booming prostitution industry were more visible in Vietnam than in the United States. The heightened levels of venereal disease brought vice culture and the impact of American servicemen on Vietnamese women to the attention of a wider audience who sought a clearer understanding of who these women were. A 1967 study on the health knowledge of prostitutes reported that fifty percent of the roughly 5,000 women treated at the Venereal Disease Control Center tested positive. Although the clinic claimed to provide them education as part of their treatment, most were repeat offenders which likely indicated the


46 It is significant to note, however, that in 1967 post-war rates in Korea were higher than Vietnam’s at 321.7 cases per thousand.

47 He was specifically referring to troops under the age of twenty-five.

48 The women seen at the clinic were those arrested by Vietnamese police on suspicion of solicitation. They were then held and treated for illness if necessary.
information was incomplete or the women were unable to fully understand or enact the methods provided.\textsuperscript{49} Probably due to the government prohibition of contraceptive sales, sixty-two percent of women surveyed reported that they did not use any form of prophylactic while working. Few recognized the symptoms of venereal disease or understood how they were contracted, but mainly feared the financial consequences of getting sick or pregnant.\textsuperscript{50}

The study relied on testimony from sixty women interviewed by a female Vietnamese social worker. Despite the limitations of a survey style questionnaire, it presents useful information about the socio-economic status and basic understanding of healthcare for prostitutes. Only twenty-eight percent of the women were over the age of twenty-five, and many were as young as fifteen years old, pointing toward the desperation of many involved from a very young age to support themselves or their families. Education and literacy rates among the women were low, with only two percent having had more than five years of schooling. Home lives were equally desperate as ninety-one percent did not have running water in the home and lived in over-crowed conditions with fewer than ten percent having their own room. Seventy percent reported being married, and sixty-two percent had at least one child.\textsuperscript{51} The report did not indicate if these children were with spouses or customers, but concerns over the long term prospects of being able to marry and have children worried many. Despite their ignorance concerning the risks of their

\textsuperscript{49} Seventy-two percent reported they had been to the clinic more than once and twenty-five percent had been in more than five times; Marcondes and Edmonds, “Heath Knowledge of Prostitutes,” 18-19.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 19, 21.; Many feared getting sick due to the financial burden and “later consequences” related to problems with marriage or pregnancies.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 18-21.
profession, almost all of those surveyed feared contracting a venereal disease. As a tangible negative physical and financial repercussion of engaging in sex work, these fears provided U.S. military and civilian aid workers with a more receptive audience for their envisioned treatment and education programs.

The 1967 study offers a view into the mindset of Vietnamese street prostitutes arrested in Saigon. As the previous chapter highlights, throughout Vietnam the sex trade varied dramatically with uneven access to care or knowledge about its repercussions. From bar girls who worked in some of the rare air-conditioned locations in Saigon to alley sex workers or those sold by their families, diversity complicated potential policies and treatment programs. While those working in elite clubs profited richly during the war, those working from the streets often survived day-to-day. The statistics on health knowledge provided an alarming data set for the American government to digest concerning the percentage of prostitutes who did not comprehend how venereal disease spread or what the symptoms looked like. The lack of control over the industry in Vietnam presented a risk to the health of the numerous soldiers who visited these women for their services. Prostitution, social corruption, and increasing levels of violence spread rapidly throughout South Vietnam, and the hotly debated discourse over the treatment of venereal disease illustrates that both governments took notice.

To maintain a positive image of GI behavior in Vietnam, military leadership considers how to keep the troops safe and happy during their inevitable contact with

---

52 In stark contrast to this and other medical reports on prostitutes and prostitution during the war, Mai Lan Gustafsson’s “‘Freedom. Money. Fun. Love.’: The Warlore of Vietnamese Bargirls” The Oral History Review 38, no. 2 (2001): 308-330, paints a picture of bargirls working happily for their American clients. She points to this discrepancy in her article between these women and what she calls “more traditional Vietnamese women, who spoke soley of their suffering and the horror of war.”

53 Sheehan, Bright and Shining Lie, 264-265.
civilians. Safety risks came in many forms from the diseases caused by unsafe sexual practices, to the security weaknesses caused by distracted and often intoxicated soldiers. Brothels provided Nation Liberation Front infiltrators with targets that represented both the indulgences of the West and capitalism, but also the intimate violations of Vietnamese women by Americans. In addition to this, the concern over America’s image abroad played a role in maintaining a safe environment for soldiers. Primarily, the South Vietnamese complained about the effects of the Americans on the economy and daily life, and officials worried this resentment could develop into open hostility.54

The potential of prostitution to attract negative attention from allies, anti-war protesters or communist publications slandering the west’s behavior in Southeast Asia compounded the negative repercussions of U.S.-Vietnamese intimacy.55 The Nation Liberation Front’s Liberation Radio broadcasted reports labeling the industry as a “humiliating scourge” as early as 1965.56 In 1966, Nguyễn Hữu Dương published a book titled To Prostitute Oneself: A Social Evil? A Career? A Form of Slavery? debating the varying perspectives arising as a new mass of foreigners moved into a space long associated with French rule in Vietnam, and thus linking the Americans to imagery of colonialism.57 The following year, in 1967, the Vietnamese Women’s Union published a report on the problem. United Press International, a news agency focused on global civil rights, ran a story on the sharp rise in venereal disease in areas with high concentrations of

55 Bernstein, The East, the West, and Sex, 226.
56 Quoted in, Ibid., 226.
American GIs. The Vietnamese Women’s Union reported this story in an issue of their anti-American publication *Women of Vietnam* warning against encounters with foreign servicemen. In particular, these reports highlighted the spread of venereal disease and physical abuse of Vietnamese women. The spread of venereal disease and its links to prostitution provided useful propaganda against the American presence in South Vietnam. The links, they reported, threatened the dignity of Vietnamese women and the future of the Vietnamese race. In response to these growing concerns, sympathetic South Vietnamese held forums to discuss how to handle the future of their problems, and eventually set up the “Committee in Defense of the Rights and Dignity of Vietnamese Women,” a domestically developed program to better educate Vietnamese women of their options.58

In the wake of increasingly negative attention, the U.S. military made efforts to establish “friendship councils” to open a dialog between the Vietnamese public, American military command, and GIs. Lines of communications were accompanied by limitations of the number of GIs stationed in the cities and allowed out of the barracks at once and the establishment of recreation facilities for soldiers away from the city centers.59 At the same time, contemporary western media often portrayed the industry as harmless, reporting that the prostitutes simply added “brilliant splashes of color to the drab, war-tinted thoroughfares,” while others feared possible repercussions regarding the livelihood of women who pursued relationships with servicemen or worked in the sex trade after the United States withdrew.60


To reach an agreement over prostitution in South Vietnam, the allied governments needed to strike a balance between one nation’s need for morale and the other’s concerns over morality. Early efforts at collaboration failed to stabilize vice problems. The demonstrated lack of engaged American interest and the industry’s overall profitability prevented its complete elimination. Monitoring local police, American Embassy reports reveal that American’s viewed South Vietnamese anti-vice efforts as a mockery, noting that “the force also ‘protects’ most of [the city’s] bars and brothels.” With the Vietnamese government unable to control its police force’s behavior, the Americans recognized they could likewise press the issue.

Within South Vietnam, the rise of a “protection” culture surrounding those engaged in the prostitution industry allowed it to continue to flourish in many ways. Over a two year study, 604 policemen were arrests for alleged misconduct and most were punished for their actions. Statistics show of these 604 cases, 286 involved corruption allegations. While not limited to prostitution, police corruption illustrated U.S. concerns over RVN legitimacy and stability. From early in the war, determining how to maneuver between

---


61 David Brown, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN - Corruption, 69-73CD, October 17, 1967, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

62 The National Police anti-corruption activities failed to make an impact. The punishment for convictions ranged from disciplinary transfers (25%), demotion (20%), and reprimands (25%). Cases with lesser punishment or a combination of punishments constitutes the remaining 30% of cases.; To Department of State from Am Embassy Saigon, Airgram, “RVN Anti-Corruption Campaign,” February 3, 1969, Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 1967-73 (4) NSC VN Info Grp: Intell; other Reps NSA, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Am Embassy Saigon, Airgram, “Corruption In Vung Tau,” November 10, 1967, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Intel; Other Reps/Box 2/Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, 69-73 CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI; To Department of State from Am embassy Saigon, Airgram, “Recent Events in the Fight Against Corruption,” November 24, 1969, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp/ Box 2/ Gov’t of SCVN, Corruption, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.
internal corruption and external American pressures signified the continued struggle of South Vietnam’s policies regarding sexual behavior during the war.

In their efforts to enforce the ban on vice industries, however, Vietnamese mayors and police forces were occasionally met with support from some civilians concerned about the impact of the U.S. Editors from the Saigon Post who reported their concerns as early as 1965 in an opinion piece about what Americans involvement with Vietnamese women might cause, especially after the American inevitably left.63 Other civilians reported resentment toward officials connected to corruption scandals which they believed stemmed from cooperation with the Americans. For one, the atmosphere of political instability bred corruption and led to numerous leadership changes in South Vietnamese local politics. In one fall 1967 case reported by the Vietnam Information Group, Vũng Tàu ousted their Mayor, Lt. Col. Ho Nhat Quan, after twenty-six months in office on charges of corruption. The citizens reported a deep distrust for local government during the war, but expressed this as the fault of city authorities under U.S. influence, and not the Americans themselves.64 Public concerns over corruption extended beyond the high-level dealings in power, money and real-estate, to the more mundane problems involving licensing, gambling, draft evasion, and prostitution.

The American Embassy in Saigon’s report on the case sheds light of the depth of police corruption through records on the various Vũng Tàu corruption rackets. These 1967 reports reveal the extent to which prostitution had infiltrated Vietnamese society in the two

---


64 Tones and diacritics not included for name; David Brown, October 17, 1967, Box 2, NSA/NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intel; Other reps/ Government of South Vietnam - Corruption, 69-73CD, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.
years since the war’s escalation despite the illegal nature of the practice. Protection occurred on many levels from dealing directly with the police to purchasing military security to intervene in the instance of a police raid, or simply buying protection to oversee the safety of the women and to work as a look-out for police. Brothel workers in Vũng Tàu paid monthly fees for protection from military officers or the local police as a means to avoid time in jail or rehabilitation centers. One woman reported indignantly about potential raids, “in this place we are all sponsored by the paratroopers. Every month, each of us pay them one thousand piasters, and our Madam pays them four thousand. So – how dare the police search here?!” Other women were instructed to take policemen as their lovers in order to avoid trouble. During round-ups, police would step in and claim a relationship, either familial or sexual, with protected women to prevent their arrest. The rise of a “protection” culture around the prostitution industry allowed it to continue flourishing regardless of the seemingly persistent eradication efforts proposed by the president. The constant undermining of official policy by Vietnamese civilians and police encourage U.S. patronage of seemed to be an only nominally illicit industry. Despite recurrent government attempts to shut down the bars and brothels, especially in central Saigon and Vũng Tàu, illegal establishments continued to resurface throughout the duration of the war.

Despite the publicized coverage of the growing corruption problem, officials made little progress in their attempts to clean up the South. During a National Assembly reception, Prime Minister, and later President, Trần Văn Hương commented on the problem stating, “[t]he task of eliminating corruption is being pushed forward, however if it were completely eliminated there certainly would not remain enough people to do the

65 Ibid.
necessary work (of government).” These concerns, formerly classified State Department cables reported, likely resulted from the truth the population saw in this statement. Involvement of officials in illegal sex-trade corruption held a particularly high concentration among the police force, according to the corruption records. In a report to the South Vietnamese government, Senator Bùi Văn Giái reported that the population continued to distrust the police for their involvement in the various corruption rings in the cities.\(^\text{66}\) Paid protection for bars and brothels generated a portion of illegal police activity in cities as far from Saigon as Đà Nẵng. The National Police claimed to actively engage in anti-corruption activities, but efforts failed to make an impact on the prostitution industry.\(^\text{67}\) Without active engagement to control American GIs and their behavior, the South Vietnamese efforts to control and eliminate prostitution failed.

By the early 1970s, Thiệu’s focus shifted to the 1971 Presidential election and steadily to maintaining a voice in the peace negotiations in Paris. Still during this period, Thiệu remained concerned over the social problems in South Vietnam and once again his office called for a closure to bars, but like prior years the efforts ultimately failed to make a serious impact.\(^\text{68}\) Prostitution only added to the already tense alliance. Several contested gun-shot deaths of civilians, for instance, motivated the South Vietnamese Minister of National Defense to send hostile letters to Commanding General Creighton Abrams requesting that Americans curb the number of men allowed to leave their compounds and


\(^{67}\) To Department of State from Amembassy Saigon, Airgram, “Recent Events in the Fight Against Corruption,” November 24, 1969, NSA/NSC VN Info Grp/ Box 2/ Gov’t of SCVN – Corruption, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

enter the cities yet again. Still, inflation provided the primary language for the Vietnamese to discuss the industry in a way the Americans would understand. Meeting with Kissinger in 1971, Thiệu listed three necessities to win the war: air support, army support, and long-range economic assistance.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the U.S. influence on economic inflation directly linked prostitution with black markets. The United States, for the most part, maintained their position regarding social issues with the continued promotion of discretion over all else, but found their passive stance increasingly problematic. Concerns related to social issues grew more pronounced as the war continued and they compounded with the more dire statistics related to death tolls and bombings. A shift in Nixon’s policies to behave more aggressively in relation to South Vietnamese society and the economy showed through in the exceedingly aggressive stance of the United States regarding social problems in relation to the pre-1969 policies’ of the Johnson administration.

The Americanization of Sexual Policy in Vietnam

In the face of rising health concerns and Vietnamese efforts for eradication in a culture plagued by corruption, the U.S. continued their focus on education and treatment. U.S. medics who monitored the results of prostitution on troops throughout Asia kept their expectations about what politicians and military executives could do to stop it low. At a medical leadership seminar for the various U.S. military service branches in 1966, each officer gave a brief synopsis of the problems observed in their units or regions. While

---


discussing whether venereal disease moved from prostitutes to GIs or the other way around, a U.S. Air Force Commander Eisman acknowledged with a sense of futility, “For the Air Force VD is a problem. But the Air Force can’t clean up Saigon – the French and Vietnamese together couldn’t do it. We have just accepted it as a fact of life.” In response, Lieutenant Commander Champlain settled the issue, “I think that is what we all should do.”

With up to of seventy-five percent of GIs engaging in sexual relations with Vietnamese civilians and disease rates increasing by the late 1960s, however, it became inevitable that the military needed to reassess their training methods on infectious diseases. An American study conducted at the US Air Force Hospital from 1970 to 1971 reported twenty-five hospitalizations over a six-month period with roughly four-hundred cases treated per year in that hospital alone. To do so, the U.S. military utilized soldiers’ noted concern over syphilis, despite infrequent contraction of the illness. Syphilis represented only two percent of venereal disease cases in Vietnam, but the long-lasting effects of the disease made it one of the most fears for GIs visiting a brothel, street prostitute, or bar girl. Playing on these fears, the American government developed the training film, “Where the Girls Are: VD in Southeast Asia,” in 1969 to educate soldiers on the potentially traumatic and lasting effects of having unprotected intercourse in Vietnam.

---


After a trip to the region in 1968, Air Force Secretary Harold Brown passed along the information about shockingly high venereal disease rates among soldiers to Secretary of Defense Clark Clifford which then passed to Air Force Chief of Staff General John P. McConnell. This information created a stir in the State Department to produce a better means to educate the troops about disease. The film they commissioned promoted abstinence as the safest option, but stressed the importance of protection for those who indulged in Vietnam’s nightlife. American officials felt they could not prevent intimate encounters between GIs and civilians, but instead chose to focus on the potentially distracting and dangerous medical effects for soldiers in the field.

The film they commissioned promoted abstinence as the safest option, but stressed the importance of protection for those who indulged in Vietnam’s nightlife. The short video follows a young GI, Pete, through his life in the city where the officers and doctors advise him to avoid the scene altogether, but another GI convinces him to visit a bar with him and then a sauna where he contracts gonorrhea. Following that encounter, the doctor advises him to change his ways before things become worse. Just as Pete prepares to move on with his life and makes plans marry his girlfriend, Julie, the doctor informs him by phone that he contracted syphilis as well. This film ends on a note of uncertainty about Pete’s future, but the viewer feels he might be spending it alone. Despite the sterile portrayal of bars and soldiers in the film, the military hoped this updated training video would present the GIs with realistic problems related to their sexual behavior in Vietnam.  


75 For a detailed analysis of the rise of venereal disease as a medical problem within the military and of the content of the film see, Sue Sun, “Where the Girls Are,” 66-87.
In addition to the pressure to create a system of venereal disease identification and treatment in South Vietnam, the United States had more control over the joint program to R&R sites from the country. Like their efforts against prostitution and venereal disease, the removal of R&R sites had as much to do with security as it did with sexual and social politics. Vũng Tàu was an early target for potential closure as an R&R location in 1970.\textsuperscript{76} Educational training continued to fail to eliminate either prostitution or venereal disease. In the early 1970s, American military officials began exploring alternative suppression options, the simplest method being separation.

To fulfil the sexual desires of the GIs and reduce tensions with the South Vietnamese government, the Americans began to encourage out-of-country R&R destinations over the iconic Vietnamese locations like China Beach.\textsuperscript{77} Not only were locations like China Beach a social risk due to the illegality of prostitution in Vietnam, but they created strategic targets for attacking Americans who might be otherwise distracted. In the aftermath of the Tet Offensive, in particular, GIs noticed a reduction in their ability to enter and have contact with civilians in urban spaces in Vietnam as a security measure.\textsuperscript{78} R&R locations like Thailand offered greater security and promoted a legal prostitution industry that attracted many servicemen on leave.\textsuperscript{79} Better still, married men were

\textsuperscript{76} Memo to The Minister of Health from Assistant Director for Public Health, “V.D. Clinic Le Loi Hospital, Vung Tau,” April 23, 1970; Box 32; Folder 1603-03 Venereal Disease – 1970: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472; NARA II.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{78} Gerry Ellenson, interview with the author, August 30, 2014, email.

\textsuperscript{79} John Ketwig, ... And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI's True Story of the War in Vietnam, 20th anniversary updated edition (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002), 138-139.
encouraged to spend their leave in Hawaii where they could visit their wives.\textsuperscript{80} Foreign
R&R locations worked as pressure release valves for tension between the U.S. and South Vietnam.

To better control venereal disease rates in Vietnam, Preventative Medicine Units (PMUs) were assigned to help limit communicable diseases and USARV officials responsible for Command Health experimented with strict “off limits” periods for urban spaces.\textsuperscript{81} PMUs in Vietnam could take jabs at their own service, with one veteran remembering, “Both units [the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 172\textsuperscript{nd} PMU] were somewhat irreverently M*A*S*H-like. It was standard for all military units to stencil their identity below the windshields on their jeeps. For a short time, the 172nd […] had ‘CLAP CONTROL’ on their jeeps until the combat command that was over the Pleiku base objected strenuously and forced the removal of that from the 172nd jeeps.”\textsuperscript{82} In Đà Nẵng, officials lifted restrictions for one month to track any changes. Previously steady rates of roughly 150 monthly cases of venereal disease infections among GIs spiked to 500. After replacing the restrictions the rate dropped back to 250 cases the following month. The correlation between GI-civilian contact and venereal disease demonstrated its popularity and morale benefits, but also the risks, of wartime intimacy. Rates remained low as long as the men


\textsuperscript{81} Report Assistant Adjutant General Captain W. H. Smith to Commanding General United States Army, Vietnam, “Command Health Report RCS MED (R5) for the month of May 1971,” June 12, 1971; Box 13; Folder 923-09 24\textsuperscript{th} Corps – 1970: USARV, Office of the Surgeon/Preventative Med Div, General Records; 1961-1972, Record Group 472; NARA II.

\textsuperscript{82} Gerry Ellenson, “Reply to comment by Amanda Boczar,” 20\textsuperscript{th} Preventive Medicine Unit Archives, Vietnam War, September 27, 2014, http://20thpmu.wordpress.com/comment-page-1/#comment-148.
avoided contact with urban women, linking disease to the local population in their minds. U.S. officials thus focused sexual policy in Vietnam on women and cleanliness.

Vũng Tàu developed a similar reputation to Đà Nẵng. In a 1968 survey trip to the area, Blair Sheire, Petty Officer First Class in charge of the epidemiology section of the 20th Preventative Medicine Unit reported on the steady stream of bar girls who solicited him in bars and along the streets. As he reused their offers, some simply moved on to another man in the bar while others taunted him. Cryptically, Sheire concluded that the survey proved “interesting” and recommended regular follow-ups.83 One year later, a similar trip report showed venereal disease rates had increased three-fold in three months. The letter from Captain William Fisherman of the Medical Corps recommended keeping records for each case reported. His suggestion was rejected, but the reports of rising disease levels encouraged medical officers to push for some change, and Fisherman reported in 1969, that a doctor in Saigon and the senior advisor for MACCORDS planned to meet with seek approval from local government to provide free medical treatment for Vietnamese nationals.84

Debates over social disruption weighed on the alliance between the U.S. and South Vietnam already strained from mutual distrust during the fledgling peace talks. During the Nixon era, American policy makers took a more direct stance to find solutions to social problems in the slowing war, but their methods met resistance from Vietnamese politicians.

On 21 August 1969, Nguyễn Văn Tính, the Mayor of Vũng Tàu boldly replied to American officials.


requests for easing prostitution regulations and insisting they add more venereal disease treatment programs with a curt memo standing his ground. In his statement he reiterated that the Vietnamese government forbade sex work, and thus the solutions proposed by the American Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) Advisors to monitor the practices “cannot be realized.”

He also firmly condemned the actions of U.S. Medical Team #20 who entered local establishments to pressure snack bar girls into seeking care. The team reportedly questioned working girls and even “examined their vaginas” for signs of disease. For the Americans, the checks represented safety and modernity, while the Vietnamese official clearly saw the exams as an intimate violation of the women and an off-handed disregard for their laws.

Local health procedures to license restaurant waitresses, bar girls, and hostesses provided a potential means of monitoring women likely to offer sex as a service. In the late 1960s, American development officers saw a way to use the cards to their advantage. As service industry workers, the girls were required to hold sanitation permits similar in principle to a food-handling. Many bars in South Vietnam, however, failed to even serve food but simply used the term “restaurant” to circumvent legal restrictions. American military and aid workers viewed the cards as a potential means to control the spread of

---


diseases among girls not working near bases with required medical examinations. Lawrence Swain of the American pacification CORDS program, proposed instituting sanitation cards to women working in these industries as many were known prostitutes.\footnote{Minutes of the Special Meeting Held on 21 March 1970-1030HRS to Discuss Problems of Public Heath Cards, VD Control Program in Vung Tau; Entry # A1 724, Box 32, Folder 1603-03 Venereal Disease [sic] - 1970: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472, NARAII.}

This version of the sanitation cards would require regular visits with a doctor to check for illness or venereal disease, who could then mark the card. Those who failed their exams would have their cards revoked for the duration of their treatment.

The Mayor of Vũng Tàu argued with Swain that he doubted the assertion of an American medical specialist who claimed that bar owners and girls appreciated the examinations and treatment performed by U.S. Medical Teams. Rather, he asserted, their interference in bar culture created a “bad rumor … that all manpower and facilities of the RVN Public Health Service have been utilized to protect health condition for US militarmen [sic] only and not to protect the local Vietnamese people as majority.”\footnote{City Mayor, Maj Nguyen Van Tinh, to Municipal Senior Advisor MACCORDS, Lawrence L. Swain, Vung Tau, August 21, 1969; Entry # A1 724, Box 32, Folder 1605-05 Venereal Diseases - 1969: Advisory Team 79 (Vung Tau City Municipal Advisory Team) Administrative and Operational Records, 1967-1970, MACV/Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS), Record Group 472, NARAII.} For the most part, this seemed true. The Department of State’s Agency for International Development (USAID) eventually worked out an agreement to send in a female envoy to provide information that might aid Vietnamese women to take a more active role in politics and the economy, but this occurred months after the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement and the start of troop withdrawal.\footnote{Department of State Agency for International Development, Project Implementation Order/Technical Services, Có quan PTQT Hoa Kỳ - Nhà Tài Vụ / 4776, Vietnamese National Archive Center II, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.} During active conflict, protecting the health of U.S.
servicemen took precedent in managing sexual behavior. Venereal disease seemed best contained by stopping its spread at the source, which the advisors perceived through their previous experiences and experiments like that conducted in Đà Nẵng and Vũng Tàu, through the women.

Despite their efforts to keep positive relations with South Vietnam, the United States’ focus on the health and security of its troops did not outwardly discourage GIs from having relations with civilians nor did it encourage locals to maintain cooperation.91 Vũng Tàu’s mayor continued his protests against the idea of sanitation cards for months, reiterating fears of violating the constitution.92 Talking past each other, the Americans moved boldly ahead with some of their initiatives like building a venereal disease clinic in the Lê Lợi Hospital in Vũng Tàu and hiring a joint American-Vietnamese team. They opened the clinic in the hospital located directly next door to the Military Police barracks who oversaw many of the prostitution cases from the American side.

By March of 1970, the mayor acquiesced to the growing pressures in the name of public health. American reports in April of their previous considerations for making the entire city “off limits” likely hastened his decision as the impact on the local economy would be severe.93 He began revoking the cards of sick stewardesses, and accepted this

---

91 As early as August 1965, National Security Council member Chester Cooper noted that the military-civilian relationships could potentially blow up in the faces of the American war effort; Memorandum for Mr. Bundy, “The Week in Asia,” August 9, 1967, 3, National Security File, Name File, Cooper Memos, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Archives, Austin, TX.


more organized system of monitoring prostitution in Vũng Tàu. Still, the mayor held reservations over the decision. He reported,

I agree that I can issue what paper I want, but any paper must indicate its well-known purpose. Please be careful to avoid some misunderstanding that local authorities are publicly authorizing prostitution among stewardesses, which is unconstitutional… Now, I think we can agree to make additional issuances of Public Health cards for stewardesses, because it is legal in principle and our goal is to control diseases; but it will make different sense for US/Allied troops who practically mistake public health cards for ‘prostitution cards.’ So, please think over the matter to avoid any misunderstanding that we are legalizing prostitution. Our purpose is good, but the public can understand it differently. 94

The decision to institute and enforce sanitation cards linked with venereal disease examinations marked an opportunity for Americans in Vũng Tàu to not only establish a dialog, but to link their efforts of negotiating sexual politics in a way that accomplished their goals of reducing disease while not overtly violating Vietnamese laws.

In the southern city of Cần Thơ, a similar debate between military, USAID, and Vietnamese city officials over the institution of sanitation cards boiled over in 1971. USAID officials worked through friendly Vietnamese channel for permission to open a venereal disease clinic to the dismay of Dr. Lê Văn Khoa, the Ministry of Public Health in region IV, who resented their correspondences with Dr. Luu Huu Loc the Chief of Anti-venereal disease efforts since the later did not hold the authority to sign agreements. 95 Like

94 Ibid.

95 Tones and diacritics not available for Luu.
the mayor of Vũng Tàu, Khoa stressed the prostitution remained illegal in Vietnam, and the links between disease and sex work placed clinic employees at legal risk. On top of its basic illegal nature, Khoa stressed that American closures of bars in Cần Thơ to “teach Vietnames [sic] people [sic] a lesson” about the role of Americans in sustaining the local economy was a “big dishonor of [the] Vietnamese people.”96 In his letter of June 26, 1970, Khoa suggested a solution to American officials to step-up control efforts amid Vietnamese pressures to close American-endorsed clinics. Switching the language from venereal disease to communicable diseases, clinics in Cần Thơ would examine snack-bar girls every sixth months as part of their regular health exams. American pressures for change appear to have been more effective, however, as two weeks later, Khoa sent in a telegram to the Minister of Health in Saigon to issue a decree for an allocated “[pilot] place of anti VD in Can Tho,” and copied the American CORDS official in the region.97 Similar to the Vũng Tàu leadership, only through a prolonged process of negotiations they could reach an agreement over every element of prostitution from what to label the issue to how to negotiate government restrictions.

The institution of sanitation cards or communicable disease clinics marked a few moments of compliance between the two governments, but one where the U.S. clearly took a more active role. Significantly, U.S. CORDS officials attempted to work with local governments like that in Vũng Tàu or Cần Thơ to handle the most detrimental

96 Letter to Dr. LTC. Burham DMAC Surgeon from Dr. Le Van Khoa Regional Health Officer, Region IV, June 26, 1970, Box 29, Folder 1606-03 VD + TB CONTROL - 1970: MACV, HQ CORDS, MR 4/Public Health Div, General Records, 1966-1972, Record Group 472, NARA II.

repercussions of prostitution, at least from the American perspective, disease. Venereal
disease rates still remained high throughout the end of the war, but their existence provided
government and military officials with a way to discuss the problem of prostitution without
the threat of directly challenging the Vietnamese constitution. To manage venereal disease
provided both sides with a loophole to better manage the impact of sexual encounters
between the two populations. The longer the war drew on, the less clear it became when it
might end. When the United States put forward a more rigorous effort to hinder prostitution
and its effects in any way, they found the Vietnamese willing to concede on certain issues,
but overall committed to their anti-prostitution stance.

Prostitution remained both a constant threat to health, security, and even morality,
as well as a source of recreation throughout the war. The images reported in the Saigon
papers in the days following the signing of the Paris Peace Agreement in January 1973
depict a sense of despair among those who had capitalized upon Saigon’s role as a GI
playground. 98 Journalist Charles Mohr reported, “vice is a depressed industry in Saigon….
[t]he charm is gone.” Bar girls reportedly gathered together on the roof of the once
illustrious Continental Palace Hotel where they had worked since the government shut
down many of the bars in downtown Saigon. The group watched as their primary source
of income and protection against strict morality laws began to flood out of the city to return
home. 99 As the decade long conflict that turned American politics and Vietnamese life

---

98 Concern over the plight of the peasant rose during the initial weeks after the signing of the ceasefire
agreement, formally known as the Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam, but
for most this concern did not last. Many women who acted as prostitutes, or were accused of doing so,
would be prosecuted in the years following the American exit from Vietnam. After Saigon fell in 1975,
many were sent to re-education camps and Amer-Asian children often became orphans and received poor
treatment.

upside-down began to draw to a close, popular press reports on the fate of prostitutes illustrates how severely initial efforts to limit the effects of Americans on South Vietnam had failed.\textsuperscript{100} Fulbright’s fear of “fatal impact” seemed not to far from the truth for those who had previously profited so richly from the war.

**Conclusion**

In the wake of Fulbright’s brothel claims in 1966, South Vietnam and the United States struggled for years to find a balance between fighting a war, stabilizing social problems, and maintaining the power dynamics of their alliance. Disagreements between the allies rooted in deep-seated cultural beliefs and pragmatic necessity led to an unexpected foreign policy dispute as state and non-state actors attempted to negotiate their stance on inter-cultural sexual intimacy in urban spaces. Through conflicting points of view of acceptable public behaviors to westernization and related inflationary problems, Vietnamese civilians who engaged in intimate relationships with U.S. servicemen, whether through acts of prostitution highlighted in this chapter or through long-term committed relationships resulting in marriage, their relations represented a potential threat to tradition, local authority, and the legitimacy of the state. As the war progressed, the impact of open wartime sexuality created undeniable threats to public health, urban security, as well as international politics.

South Vietnamese officials, however, held their ground in relation to how American GIs interacted with civilians. Where Americans sought morale building, the Vietnamese followed a morality-based constitution, and where Americans sought discretion, the Vietnamese sought eradication. Repetitive failures and limited solutions marked their

\textsuperscript{100} William Westmoreland, “General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, April 9, 1966,” #5 History File (13 Mar - 26 Apr 66), William Westmoreland Papers, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.
efforts to cooperate across such conflicting points of view. Banning soldiers from hiring
prostitutes represented not only an unrealistic goal, but also risked a serious blow to troop
morale and an exceedingly powerful vice culture. In their efforts to sweep aside the
initial claims of Saigon as a brothel, U.S. policymakers overlooked a significant element
of the war’s culture and their subsequent efforts to handle the problems illustrate the power
of inter-cultural relationships during wartime to create foreign relations obstacles.

The opposing approaches to venereal disease treatment and the Americanization of
policies for social behavior related to prostitution exemplify shifting policy views toward
the social and cultural elements of warfare that made significant and lasting day-to-day
impacts on the lives of the majority of GIs and civilians who participated in the Vietnam
War away from jungles and battles. By then end of the 1960s, Washington recognized that
it could no longer sweep the “American Brothel” aside. Reworked training materials,
stricter limitations on boundaries, limited R&R opportunities in Vietnam, and the
enactment of education and control programs by U.S. military and aid workers on
Vietnamese civilians marked their revitalized efforts to limit the negative effects of an
industry so effective for improving morale. With the RVN unable or unwilling to enact
significant change, the United States pressured for changes they approved of to control the
undeniable problems caused by the explosion of prostitution. As such, the prostitution
industry proved far more critical to the maintenance of day-to-day military operations than
Americans, from congressmen to journalists, initially believed.

101 The number of prostitutes is impossible to determine but estimates range upwards of 50,000. The
numbers shifted greatly over the course of the war, and some did not serve openly as prostitutes but
participated in sexual relationships with American soldiers under more ambiguous terms.
CHAPTER SIX

BEYOND THE BROTHEL: GIRLS, FRIENDS, WIVES

Introduction

In 1971, an honorably separated veteran wrote an emotional letter to President Nixon pleading for support to reunite with his fiancé, Kim, and their infant daughter. The soldier met a woman named Kim in Saigon while on leave during his Army tour in Vietnam. They pursued a loving relationship, sired a child, and intended to marry and bring Kim and their daughter back to the U.S. once his tour was complete. The complex paperwork and mounds of bureaucratic red tape, however, took longer to complete than his tour, leading him to return home alone. In the letter, he pleads with Nixon to help find Kim and reunite his family. With only a name and, a then year old, address, he hoped that someone might be able to expedite the Visa process and find out if both were healthy and safe.

The letter arrived on Nixon’s desk during an era of the Vietnam War when transnational anti-war movements demanded accountability for America’s social impact in Vietnam. The letter came along with a stream of others asking him to support Amer-Asian orphans and other broken relationships and marriages between GIs and Vietnamese women. Nixon’s staff forwarded the letter and marked it for a personal reply to show the President's interest and as part of what can be considered the effort to improve public

---

1 I have opted not to include the soldiers name, but the letter is publically available in the Nixon Presidential Library; Letter, To Richard Nixon, January 30, 1970; Box 85; Folder “[GEN] CO 165 12/1/69-3/31/70 [2 of 2].” White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Archives, Yorba Linda, CA [henceforth, Nixon].
diplomacy for the benefit of those watching around the world. The record on this case seems to stop here, however, as the document includes no follow-ups. Like many of the other personal stories about returning home from Vietnam that crossed Nixon’s desk, the disorder of South Vietnam in the early-1970s led to many unhappy endings to otherwise successful romantic, or otherwise non-sexually intimate, relationships between GIs and civilians.

This chapter examines how the United States and South Vietnamese governments and militaries responded to relationships between GIs and Vietnamese that occurred beyond the brothel, including dating, cohabitation, marriage, and paternity. Not deemed necessary to morale in the same way as prostitution, navigating these types of romantically committed relationships could prove particularly difficult for young couples. Those only hoping to date or live with GIs in exchange for companionship, protection or money could face harassment or stigmatization. As many women engaged in these relationships were still labeled as prostitutes, or opportunists at best, obtaining legalized marriages meant facing considerable challenges posed by both governments including fees, long lines, multiple ceremonies, and even after all this they met uncertain results. In other cases,

---


3 According to his obituary, the soldier appears to have never reunited with Kim or their daughter.

4 In their respective memoirs, Duong Van Mai Elliot and Kim Norrell have both indicated the difficulty of this process both in terms of physical bureaucracy and lack of understanding in social settings; Elliott, The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Norrell, Reflections of a Vietnamese War Bride (Denver: Outskirts Press, 2012).
couples navigated the bureaucracy successfully before their fiancés completed their tour, married in Vietnam, and happily returned to the United States.

Stories like the soldier who never reunited with his fiancé and daughter, however, occurred throughout the war with GIs struggling to bring home the women and children they fell in love with while serving abroad. Reflecting on the seventy-five percent and higher number of men who served on the rear echelon during the Vietnam War, the number of loving or committed relationships that occurred makes as much sense as the boom in sex workers. Unlike prostitution, however, marriage in order to remain together required a long, and sometimes purposely complex, legal process. Contrasting with the "war brides" of World War II, women in Vietnam were not allowed the same rights and ease of access to an American Visa and a path to citizenship. As with other social issues like prostitution, the United States hoped to work with the Vietnamese to abide by their laws before allowing engaged couples to apply for marriage in the United States. In addition to concerns over dating and marriage, the numbers of orphaned children fathered by American servicemen had a negative impact on U.S. public diplomacy by undermining their purported interest in supporting civilians.

This chapter will trace the structure and realities of intimate relationships beyond the commerce driven world of sex work to centralize American relations with South Vietnam regarding their policies on romantic relationships between GIs and civilians. To address these issues, this chapter will look at non-prostitution related intimate or sexual relationships.

---

5 Meredith Lair argues that depending on dates of service, seventy-five to ninety percent of U.S. soldiers "labored in supporting roles, out of danger, and in relative comfort;" *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 5.

encounters as they evolved from the most casual of daily interactions to the most intimate and legally, or biologically, binding. Threatened by already tense relations over the sex industry, U.S.-RVN policy regarding dating, cohabitation, marriage, and paternity were just as fraught with disagreements as policy on prostitution. This tension arose due to the previously discussed American presumptions of Asian women and the challenges that surfaced when faced with Vietnamese laws attempting to establish political legitimacy and traditional (non-western) values.

**Gendered Intimacy: Encountering Employees, Aid Workers, and Western Wives**

Laura Ann Stoler asserted in 2015 that scholars' definitions of "intimacy," including her own, were either misinterpreted, or worse, inherently flawed.\(^7\) To best understand the intimate, she argued, we must be aware of the deeply personal context of each relationship. She laid out additional criteria, including to keep our focus on the line she saw between the social and the political in order to conceptualize a hierarchy of the intimate as a power struggle. Finally, she suggested, we must particularly be aware that the intimate was not exclusively - if at all - the sexual.

The sexual, however, has, to many scholars, been the most important venue for understanding gendered power relations.\(^8\) One of the most compelling elements of studying intimate contact during the Vietnam War, and all wars involving allied occupation for that matter, is the competition between political powers for the hierarchical control over society. By taking control over elements of social politics in Vietnam, the United States

---


\(^8\) Goedde, Roberts, Moon, and Kovner all illustrate the significance of sexuality in their discussions of GI-civilian interactions and their role in the framing of foreign relations during war time or post-war occupations. Sexual relations with civilians created significant tensions regardless of whether the civilians belongs to an allied force, an enemy, or something in between.
therefore asserted itself as a dominant figure not only over the civilian population, but over the RVN as well. The elements they chose to involve themselves with in this instance were largely sexual, as the last two chapters illustrate. To understand the political significance of sexual encounters, however, addressing non-sexual intimate spheres of military-civilian relations allows us to obtain a broader lens through which to interpret the political setting of wartime sexual policies between the United States and the RVN. Still, placing romantic relationships into the context of GI-civilian interactions more broadly still misses the unclear lines in regards to domestic workers and the presence of American civilian women, an area in which this chapter will now turn.9

First, examining the structure of relations between servicemen and the women they hired for personal employment, including housework like laundry or cooking, shows part of the complexity of these relations. Domestic workers did not typically offer sex as part of their services. Military bases hired civilian women to do laundry, clean, and cook for them due to the absence of time and the affordability of the labor which gave the women access to U.S. bases during non-curfew hours. Cynthia Enloe argues in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, that any laundress who works on base might develop, “her own thoughts about what the military personnel on [a] base are doing with their deadly weaponry, but is careful not to express her political thoughts out loud.”10 More to her point that civilian women proved integral to U.S. operations with

---

9 American military women were numerous and strategically important military service members during the Vietnam War. Their interactions with Vietnamese women for the purposes of this dissertation, however, were not as problematic as the interactions with American men. I have yet to see any documents regarding American servicewomen who engaged in sexual relations with Vietnamese civilians, although a case of that nature would add a significant contribution to our understanding of the military-civilian sexual relationship.

unique access to American soldiers, as I quote in the introduction to this dissertation, Enloe writes:

Every military base depends for its operation on women occupying a range of social locations, performing quite different roles. To make visible that gendered base system, one must take seriously the lives and ideas of the military base laundress, the military wife, the woman in prostitution in a disco just outside the gates, a woman who is paid to sneak on base to have sex with a male soldier, the military enlisted woman and woman officer, and the women who have become a public critic of the base.\(^\text{11}\)

The circumstances in Enloe’s description apply well in the case of Vietnam. She describes these women as one of at least four types of women that servicemen would have contact with during base life, but clarifies that none of these women likely view each other as allies. Rather, they are all part of the structure of base life and vital in day-to-day operations during war.

Single men living off base hired housekeepers for the same purposes.\(^\text{12}\) Whether these arrangements included an expectation of sexual contact depended on each case. In some situations, intercourse was expected, in others it happened without a prior arrangement, but as a repercussion of close contact that is more closely related to the human condition than war.\(^\text{13}\) Rare cases of foreigners forcing themselves on their housekeepers

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 172-173.

\(^{12}\) Women would also come on base to clean the hooches for soldiers, providing them with closer access to American servicemen than other industries; Randy Mixter, *Letters from Long Binh: Memoirs of a Military Policeman in Vietnam* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 114.

\(^{13}\) In her memoir, Le Ly Hayslip describes her sister having multiple boyfriends who lived with her. They relationships were sexual in nature in addition to her maintaining the home; Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changes Places* (New York: Plume, 2003 [1989]), 169-170.
created a perception among Vietnamese of the types of young women who might accept jobs with Americans. These potential fears among civilians illustrate their concerns over close contact with Americans.¹⁴

The shared intimate space between housekeepers and Americans living in Vietnam illustrates a form of prolonged intimacy that was unfamiliar to GIs living on bases and only visiting bars and brothels, and especially foreign to those serving on the front. The relationships that developed out of these interactions were deeply personal and far less mechanical than depictions of encounters at bars and brothels.¹⁵ Beyond sex, the companionship element of the housekeeper-GI relationship also contributed to intercultural perceptions of the other. These interactions were typically less problematic that those in the bars since meeting a girl for a short-term sexual episode was not the end-goal. When arrangements between GIs and housekeepers led to accusations of rape, however, the situations became far more complicated.¹⁶ Rape and sexual violence form the core type of GI-civilian sexual encounter discussed in the next chapter. The remainder of this chapter will examine friendships, dating, marriage, and paternity as forms of inter-cultural intimacy challenging foreign relations and war-making.


¹⁵ For an example of prostitutes growing close to GIs in a way that borders on a domestic relationship, see Eric Karlson, *Fall to Grace: A True Story of Sex, Drugs, Vietnam and Enlightenment* (Boulder: Mariposa Press, 1999); Regarding the mechanical nature of sex with prostitutes, see John Ketwig, *And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI’s True Story of the War in Vietnam*, 20th anniversary updated edition (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2002), 77.

¹⁶ As housekeepers in Vietnam reported several incidents of attempted rape in 1965, this concern over intimate encounters and their potential for violence certainly influenced ideologies regarding appropriate sexual behavior; “Everything is News: Rape,” *Saigon Post*, October 23, 1965, 8, GLS, HCMC.
Interactions between Vietnamese women and western wives were less common than instances of GIs living with girlfriends or Vietnamese brides. These encounters offer a very particular perspective into how the two cultures viewed each other. Australians represented the most notable presence of foreign wives in Vietnam until the later 1960s when the Tet Offensive attacks in January 1968 brought the war to the streets of Saigon and led the Australians to ask non-combatants to leave the city. Proximity allowed for Australian women to travel with their Foreign Service husbands but fears of attacks ultimately forced them to leave as well. Fewer American women ever made it to Vietnam and those who did typically had a job of their own or were married to Foreign Service officers with permanent posts abroad. While somewhat outside the core of this project, the interactions among civilian Vietnamese, American, and Australian women offer a look into an alternative non-sexual form of intimacy during the Vietnam War. Like sexual encounters, the civilian-woman to civilian-woman relationships developed out of mutual necessity. They contributed to the wars legacy through the impact of social programs run or assisted by western civilian women.

When entire families traveled to Vietnam, they often hired a house worker to cook and clean for them at a nominal charge. Embassy workers all had housing staff to look after their needs, leaving western women without domestic duties. The relationships that developed between western women and their housekeepers illustrate a different kind of

---


intimacy than existed in the relationships with men, as the expectation for sex was replaced by something different. While variety existed among these relationships just as they did with the sexual encounters, civilian women who wrote about their experiences all express a mutual curiosity to understand how their fellow women lived in their very different respective cultures.\textsuperscript{19}

American Wendy Wilder Larsen exhibits in her poetry how the mutual curiosity between women was intertwined with the culture of very noticeable explicit encounters between GIs and Vietnamese happening around them. On the surface the men were what they had in common, but over time the relationships took on deeper meanings. After she completed her Master of Arts degree from Harvard University, Larsen moved to Vietnam in 1970 to be with her journalist husband. Trained as a teacher, she befriends a Vietnamese bookkeeper Tran Thi Nga to help her work with students.\textsuperscript{20} The two collaborated in the poetry collection \textit{Shallow Graves: Two Women and Vietnam} to tell the parallel stories of western and Vietnamese women negotiating the war from inside Vietnam. Larsen explores not only the lives, and often the suffering, of bar girls, but also the intimacy that occurred

\textsuperscript{19} I have made a decision in this project not to address combatant, military, or NGO affiliated women from either side. These are extremely important stories to tell, but ones that require entire monograph reflections of their own. The mutual curiosity still exists in these settings, but the alternative setting of being in Vietnam for employment or being a member for the Vietnamese military, rather than living a relatively “normal” civilian life during the war completely reframes their perspective of others. The most thorough examination of military, or military affiliated, American women is Heather Marie Stur, \textit{Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam Wa Era} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Numerous studies of American nurses are also useful on this topic including, Kara D. Vuic, \textit{Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); For studies of Vietnamese military women, the studies more commonly address the North Vietnamese or National Liberation Front women, see Karen Turner-Gotschang and Thanh H. Phan, \textit{Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam} (New York: Wiley, 1998), and Sandra C. Taylor, \textit{Vietnamese Women at War: Fighting for Ho Chi Minh and the Revolution} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999).

between woman, shedding light on their experiences with GIs and Vietnamese in country
to cover the war in the press, working as contractors, or married to someone in these
capacities.

In one account, Larsen describes how a Vietnamese woman stole her underwear
out of curiosity and need. The woman, her housekeeper, nearly dies from a pregnancy
complication as her “deserter husband” hides from Larsen. When she helps the woman to
the hospital, she sees that she is wearing her “missing silk underpants.” In other poems,
she encounters a young woman suffering from an unwanted pregnancy. Larsen explores
daily life in vivid glimpses of everything from the weather to the lack of proper
gynecological care for women. Her husband responds to this by joking that those coming
to Vietnam should “B.Y.O.B.G.Y.N.” In another poem, when comparing Saigon to
William Blake’s poem “London,” she writes a student’s response where the desire for
“traditional and peaceful Saigon” is squashed by “bar-girls in mini-skirts,” “jazz music,”
“far-away cannons,” “garbage,” and “corruption,” “refugees,” and poverty. In turn,
Larsen’s counterpart Nga writes in “The Americans,” that “Their soldiers slept with our
women. | Their generals patted our generals on the heads | as if they were children.” On
the issue of corruption, Nga writes, “Everyone was in on the deal.” Friendship, intimacy,
and attempts to reach out could not overcome the barriers of the war.

21 Larsen, “For Chi Phuc,” in Ibid., 35.
Like the bored housewives of Australian diplomats, Larsen reflected that her awareness of the desperation in the war-torn city sat apart from what she experienced as a western wife. In her poem, “Consciousness-Raising,” Larsen writes: “Saigon was a natural place | to start a consciousness-raising group. | We were eight women | all wives of journalists.” Together, the women sit together in a “hot small room” to discuss why girls wear pink and boys wear blue. Then, Larsen puts a spin to show how insignificant this is in the schema of the war: “Outside, a peasant woman | driven into the city by the bombing | slept in the street | on a newspaper | a child pulling at her breast.” Their proximity to war put the differences into sharp focus for women like Larsen who wanted to help their fellow women, but faced an entrenched culture of war-manufactured corruption by the early 1970s.

The discourse over the intimate in Larsen’s poetry illuminates that the gritty underworld of prostitution and corruption fails to capture the depth of GI-civilian experiences. Both cultures found themselves changed by their interactions together, and instances like Larsen’s account of the woman stealing her underwear show how something so taken for granted in the United States was an item of envy in Vietnam. Larsen’s ability to aid another woman in her pregnancy also shows the willingness to work together and the kindness often shared between the cultures. Not all women were prostitutes, but nearly all those living in urban spaces in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 experienced personal encounters with GIs, whether those relations were sexual or not. While this dissertation

26 McHugh, Minefields and Miniskirts, 41-42.

focuses on the sexual, these non-sexual relationships illuminate the mutual cultural interest and high stakes tied to the sexual ones.

The United States and RVN also negotiated civilian women’s mobility in society through programs targeted toward the support of women impacted by the war in other means. Social issues concerning women entered into the foreign relations discourse as early as 1966 and 1967 illustrating that women suffered in unique ways during the war and that their suffering generally involved infringements on their intimate lives.\textsuperscript{28} The Department of State Agency for International Development allotted 9,500,000 $VN for a “Refugee Relief – Women’s Training Program” in October 1966 to train and supervise one hundred thirty-five female camp workers in Vietnam to address this problem.\textsuperscript{29} The women would then work for the provincial staffs of the RVN’s Special Commissariat for Refugees. Their focuses included training for “areas of health education, home economics, personal and social problems, and maternal child care.”\textsuperscript{30} The objectives of the program included responding to the “special need” of women and children forced from their homes and living in temporary settlements. Developed in the months following Fulbright’s brothel debate, this program represented one effort to engage with Vietnamese civilian women beyond the brothel. Indeed, it offered an avenue to guide Vietnamese civilian women into lines of work not dependent on the American presence.


\textsuperscript{29} Assuming the August 1, 1966 U.S. set Scrip Rate of 118 Vietnamese to the dollar, this would equal $80,508.47 US. Adjusted for inflation, this would equal roughly $580,722; The conversion from piastre to dollar for 1954 is quoted from globalfinacialdata.com via an email from Dan Tsang to the Vietnamese Studies Group Listserv, October 7, 2006, https://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/elist_2006/Piastre-dollar%20Exchange%20rates.html.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 1 [page 2 of packet].
In another example of how non-sexually driven employment for Vietnamese women threatened their public image, a Congressional Inquiry shows how prostitution was used as an accusation to defame Vietnamese female employees of American organizations. In 1971, an investigation into the alleged improper behavior of an American supervisor at the National Training Center in Vũng Tàu, Mr. Joe Ahee, and the alleged illicit activities of his employee, Miss Pham Thi Xuan Hue, resulted in the inquiry that challenged their personal attitudes, business practices, and Hue’s sexual behavior. The investigation began as the result of an unsigned letter sent on behalf of the local Vietnamese Employees Committee that Ahee’s treatment of employees constituted an atmosphere of fear. To further defame Ahee’s character, the letter alleged that his business practices included the illegal buying and selling of goods facilitated by his female assistant, Hue.

Hue’s role in the case is of particular interest. Ahee hired Hue to work as the primary buyer for the National Training Center. In the letter, the Vietnamese Employees Committee showed particular concern over a woman being placed into this position of power. They also point out her socio-economic background as poor in an effort to destabilize her reliability in regards to money. Unhappy that she had chosen to make regular trips from Vũng Tàu to Saigon in order to broaden her available supplies and prices, they challenged her as manipulative and authoritative in what they labeled as her “dishonest

---


activities.”\footnote{Ibid.} In addition to these qualities, they ultimately pointed to her sexuality as her most damning attribute. Sending copies of the letter to both her mother and her husband in the Vietnamese Air Force, the committee accused her of acting as a prostitute to move ahead in her work.

They quickly accused her of relationships with as many foreign men as possible to tie her in with the worst attributes of the American escalation on the Vietnamese economy. “Thanks to crook activities,” they alleged:

Illegal transactions and relations with Americans, Koreans, Filipines and even ARVN high ranking officers, she and her family gets rich of millions of piasters. She is specialized in PX items which are carried back to her home by her foreign boy friends. Informants and neighbors comment very badly about her. Briefly, she is a kind of crook and international prostitute girl just good to dupe foreign victims.\footnote{Ibid., 4-5.}

The charges against Hoa and Ahee were dropped since the United States considered the authors of the letter to have a significant amount to gain from their replacement by others who would purchase goods for the National Training Council locally. Whether or not the accusations against Hoa were true, by placing her at the center of the case illustrates the vulnerability of Vietnamese women to accusations of sexual promiscuity. Her relationship to an American-led program and ability to profit made onlookers suspicious and resentful. Her decision to snub local businesses in her purchasing only intensified their scrutiny.
Simultaneous with the Americanization of policies on social and sexual behavior, the Nixon administration also heeded the calls of advisors to increase employment training for Vietnamese citizens in their efforts to Vietnamize the nation militarily and economically. In October 1970, war correspondence Richard Tregaskis wrote to set up a meeting with Nixon upon returning from a trip to Vietnam. He had observed the programs and felt that they were largely failing, with only 150 Vietnamese receiving employment training and licensing per week.\textsuperscript{35} Nixon’s advisor for communications, Herbert Klein, assured Tregaskis that the President would be informed and thanked him for his efforts. The requested meeting with Nixon was not approved. This disconnect between the potential of these programs to show positive American intentions in Vietnam suffered when their execution failed to produce results. By the later war years, scrutiny by Americans and Vietnamese fell on all forms of intercultural relations, whether sexual, social, or political. The anti-American sentiment kicked up by corruption, failures in nation building, economic inflation, and the prolonged war raised suspicions of on-lookers and made genuine long-term relationships between GIs and civilian women difficult.

Working for GIs, Foreign Service families, and Department of State employees represented a not inherently sexual realm of military-civilian relations that faced similar issues and magnified the reactions toward other encounters. Keeping in mind that intimate relations of all kinds faced constant scrutiny helps frame the public and government reactions to intercultural sexual encounters including dating, marriage, and paternity. Larsen and Nga's poetry, as well as accounts from the wives of Australian diplomats,

\textsuperscript{35} Richard Tregaskis to Herbert Klein, Presidential Advisor for Communications, 20 October 1970, Folder [GEN] CO 165 10/1/70-12/31/70, Box 86, White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Counties), Nixon, 1-2.
discussing their experiences with house workers, bar girls, and children provides one such means to show the closely related nature of these issues as a reflection of the war’s intrusion on Vietnamese life.

While sexuality may not be inherently intimate, its perceived nature in society as such led many to see relationships between GIs and women as a threat to Vietnamese culture, if not an attempt at a social form of neo-imperial domination. Often, they overlooked the anti-Americanism resulting from these fears which created risks and increased support for the North Vietnamese and their supporters in the south, the National Liberation Front (NLF). With dating, marriage, and paternity more so than prostitution, however, fears led to a struggle from both the United States and RVN to limit these relationships as much as possible. While neither government would prohibit the consensual relationships of adults outside the sex trade, their respective policies indicate a shared goal to limit and prevent what they thought was potentially problematic behavior.

“Riding With Americans in Taxis”: Dating and Cohabitation

Long-term affairs with civilian women in Vietnam occurred somewhat often for American military personnel stationed in cities. Many men took girlfriends for various reasons including companionship or a sense of normalcy to have a warm body to come home to. Each consensual relationship took on a different nature, some leading to love while some used each other for mutual gain: companionship exchanged for financial comfort. Over the course of the war, open relationships in cities like Saigon became more

---

36 This comment on taxis references a 1972 document concerning the debate among South Vietnamese police concerning the legality of Americans and South Vietnamese women dating, living together, or being seen together in public; MACV Office of Information, Command Information Division, “Fact Sheet: Police Harrassment [sic] of Vietnamese Girls Riding With Americans In Taxis,” May 12, 1972, Jim B. Green Collection, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archives (Henseforth TTU).
common and acceptable both socially and legally. Larsen described the whimsical side of these relationships in her poem “Pidgin.” She recalls a couple, an American and his Vietnamese bar-girl girlfriend known as Twiggy, who can communicate only through broken pidgin language. What she recalls in her poem is their shared giggles and their affinity for taking Polaroid pictures of each other.\(^3^7\) They visit her for dinner as a couple, not restricting their affair to the bar or the brothel. This couple, like many, could only communicate in limited ways, but desire or love brought countless others like them together in relationships throughout the war.

Offering a Vietnamese woman's perspective, Le Ly Hayslip presents her sister as a case of cohabitation where the exchange of sex was part of the deal. Hayslip's sister kept American boyfriends who provided her with money and gifts in exchange for maintaining an apartment for them while they were in country. Although most accounts seem to suggest that bars girls continued that line of work even while in relationships. For many women, living with an American, or several, offered a more desirable position over street or brothel prostitution. Hayslip remembers her sister, Bich, coming back to visit their home village from Saigon where she spied for the NLF by dressing in provocative clothes, wearing makeup, and getting close to GIs.\(^3^8\) Inquiring to Bich about beauty products and western clothes, Hayslip learned about her sister’s work for the NLF and “the difference between real prostitutes and women who simply looked like prostitutes to please their men.”\(^3^9\) She did not want to do either.

\(^3^7\) Larsen, “Pidgin,” in *Shallow Graves*, 42.

\(^3^8\) Hayslip with Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changes Places*, 113.

\(^3^9\) Ibid.
Hayslip’s other sister, Lan, worked as a tea girl in a Đà Nẵng bar where she had soldiers buy her iced tea priced like whiskey. Tea girls split their income with the bar owners for mutual profit or to repay debts. In addition to working in the bar, Lan also kept American boyfriends on the side. Hayslip recalls one instance where her sister had to choose between “honoring her father” who had traveled to the city to see her, or “‘pleasing’ her man,” an American soldier, who wanted her to have sex with him when she returned home.\textsuperscript{40} Lan chose her boyfriend and the associated financial comfort, leaving her father waiting behind a curtain. Many of the women supported by American GIs were given an income or had apartments paid for them that allowed them to move into more private apartments away from their family or the bars they may have previously lived in. Perceived dependence on their relationships for this way of life contributed to a westernization of clothing and behavior for women living with Americans, and to their families or communities appeared to disconnect them from their heritage.

American memoirs about living with or dating Vietnamese women also point to the pushing of cultural boundaries. In the case of GI Eric Karlson, his love affair with a prostitute who used the name Nina contributed to his decision to abandon his assignment and go AWOL, or absent without official leave.\textsuperscript{41} Karlson met Nina as a client on his quest for more sex across Vietnam. He started to make regular visits and purchase her services for long periods of time. Eventually the U.S. officer running the brothel stopped charging him to see her.\textsuperscript{42} Prior to his own love affair, Karlson reflected that he understood how “an

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 169-170.

\textsuperscript{41} Karlson, \textit{Fall to Grace}, 213.

\textsuperscript{42} Like Karlson’s account of falling for a Vietnamese prostitute, John Ketwig writes about falling in love with a prostitute while on an R&R trip to Thailand. After returning to try to marry the woman, Lin, he finds her uninterested and eventually is no longer able to reach her. From the memoir, it appears Lin created a
American falling for a gook could be a problem.” He thought most American men fell for the women only for the sex, however, recalling Vietnamese women “sure know how to take care of a man.” Karlson’s encounters with Vietnamese women included mostly, but not exclusively, prostitutes. The interest Karlson had in engaging in a long-term relationship with a prostitute threatened her procurer’s business. Pimps and madams found ways to trap women into service to avoid losing them to relationships.

One should not assume, however, that all love affairs began in brothels. Jim Stewart’s bittersweet story of falling in love with an eighteen year old Vietnamese woman named Mai offers a different type of love story. Stewart worked as a Military Police Officer in Saigon. This job put him in a position to see Mai pass by on a motorbike one day. He flagged her down and began their courtship. After their first date, Jim moved into Mai’s apartment in the city. Mai assumed that Stewart had another girlfriend in the U.S., she had seen GIs come and go before, but he chose to renew his position in Vietnam to stay with her. Despite their monogamous relationship, Mai and Stewart received harassment from Vietnamese police when out together in a taxi one day. She was accused of being a “V.C.,” or NLF, spy and taken to jail. It took over a day and significant bribes to free her. Intercultural dating threatened South Vietnamese police who regularly harassed couples like Mai and Stewart.

sense of a relationship with Karlson for his enjoyment and her profit during his stay. She did not have the intention to maintain the relationship in the long-run, or those who employed her would not allow her to do so; See Ketwig, ... And a Hard Rain Fell: A GI’s True Story of the War in Vietnam.

43 Ibid., 126.

44 Jim Stewart, The Angel from Vietnam: A Memoir of Growing Up, the Vietnam War, a Daughter, and Healing... (Baltimore: PublishAmerica, 2007), Kindle, Ch. 17.

45 Ibid., Kindle, Ch. 19.
Numerous GIs with urban postings like Stewart cohabitated with local Vietnamese women rather than living on base. Even soldiers fighting on the front often reported staying with girlfriends when they returned to the cities for short leaves rather than staying in the barracks. Cohabitation relationships differed significantly from couple to couple, ranging from basic exchanges of money for relative comfort and a steady sexual partner to fully committed monogamous families with children seeking marriage licenses. The inability to pinpoint these relationships and the elimination of Vietnamese arranged marriages by the 1959 Code of the Family made them legal. At the same time, the 1959 Code also made the practice of concubinage illegal. Living together while engaged in a sexually active relationship outside of marriage could go against the Ngô family’s morality laws. Even if money was exchanged in the form of housing, food or gifts, cohabitation was not prostitution and fully legal with the appropriate licensing by the early 1970s. Pre-war regulations regarding concubines appeared out of date and impossible to manage in the wake of escalation. In regards to foreign relations, the issue of cohabitation, like prostitution, tied together soft power relations and security.

Living with Vietnamese girlfriends appears commonplace in memoir accounts of the war. Military Policeman James Stewart reflected in his memoir that despite the prohibition of “living in other-than-government facilities” listed in the Army housing directive, many GIs ignored the laws. He moved in Mai shortly after they met since, he argues, the enforcement of the laws was “nonexistent.” Michael Herr refers to a similar situation where a pilot he encountered named Davies kept his belongings in his assigned


47 Stewart, The Angel from Vietnam, Kindle, Ch. 17.
Bachelor Enlisted Quarters at a Cholon hotel, but in reality lived with a woman he called his “‘wife’,” Hoa.\textsuperscript{48} Herr’s use of quotations around the title, wife, indicates that Davies may not have officially married the woman. Not only did Davies support Hoa, but her immediate family also shared the apartment. In another indication that they may not have been officially married, Hoa continued to work as a bar girl, “out hustling Saigon tea,” to bring in extra money. Herr implies that she may also work as a prostitute.\textsuperscript{49} The cultural differences and language barriers between GIs and their girlfriends created these types of misunderstandings. Monogamy seemed a fluid concept for many couples where the women continued to work in bars.

Public expressions of affection between GIs and Vietnamese women appeared to threaten some members of the Vietnamese city police who harassed women seen in public with American men. Relaxing enforcement of social laws since the coup against the Diệm administration left some confused over what was legal behavior.\textsuperscript{50} Corrupt police found an opportunity in this confusion to profit from the relationships. In some instances, police required “tips” or bribes to clear the women and allow them to continue on their way. Open dating, however, did not violate Vietnamese law in the way that prostitution did. With cases of police harassment growing so severe in the later years of the war, the Capital National Police Command (CNPC) in Saigon released a notice to Vietnamese police regarding the legal rights of women. The fact sheet on, “Police Harassment [sic] of Vietnamese Girls Riding With Americans In Taxis,” warned police that women were not required to show


\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{50} Scorn for the Diệm policy is noted in Leland Gardner, \textit{Vietnam Underside: “Don’t Worry Mom... We’ve got Penicillin”} (San Diego: Publishers Export Co., Inc, 1966), 120.
“Cohabitation Certificates” for dating or even living with Americans.\textsuperscript{51} Likewise, the police could not request a marriage certificate to prove the couple had a legal right to be out in taxis together.

The report, translated and distributed to American servicemen for reference by the MACV Office of Information in 1972, laid out the legal rights of couples and requested Americans not pay any brides to the police. They insisted that Americans do not need to file for cohabitation papers as they exist as “a particular status recognized by Vietnamese law” not required for any Vietnamese woman to date or live with an American. Not only does the fact sheet clarify that it is not illegal, but it also significantly includes the social interjection that it was not “improper for a Vietnamese girl to ride in a taxi, walk on the street, or accompany American men to public or private places.”\textsuperscript{52} In addition, the CNPC continued, “Any Vietnamese female including prostitutes has a right to accompany men – either Vietnamese or American – in taxis or elsewhere, without the threat of police harrassment[sic].”\textsuperscript{53} The indication that “any Vietnamese female” had the right to accompany Americans illustrates the shifting view against eradication late in the war. In addition, the comment about dating Americans not being “improper” points to a previous perception that the behavior would be seen as such. Likely, this responded to the negative response to interracial couples by local populations. Removing the stigma from the relationships proved far more difficult, but the fact sheet’s shift of focus to legal couples

\textsuperscript{51} MACV Office of Information, Command Information Division, “Fact Sheet: Police Harrassment [sic] of Vietnamese Girls Riding With Americans In Taxis,” May 12, 1972, Jim B. Green Collection, TTU.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
shows that prostitution only represented one type of socially concerning GI-civilian personal encounter.

Vietnamese police still retained the right to conduct searches on all persons, however, and the NCPC included instructions for how to respond to such searches. While police could not require civilians to show their marriage or cohabitation papers, since neither were required by law to be out in public with an American, they could ask for personal identification cards. Just like bar girls, the maintenance of a current ID was critical for all Vietnamese civilians attempting to remain in favor of local police. The instructions for GIs also warned that the women might be working with the police, and under all circumstances they should refuse to pay out of pocket. Rather, it suggested asking to be taken to the police station which would cause most corrupt officers to drop their harassment. Above all, the fact sheet suggests a desire to work within Vietnamese laws to maintain an amicable alliance. Corruption among local police, however, put MACV and GIs on edge about what exactly was and was not legal behavior for soldiers living among civilians.

The culture of having “girlfriends” in Vietnam meant something different to each person. For some, the relationships were serious and monogamous, for others simply a source of comfort for a few days. Whether a GI or contracted employee abroad, love and war became so commonplace in Vietnam that laws prohibiting public fraternization slowly dissolved or became unpoliceable. Racially targeted harassment against couples even resulted in MACV directives like the one regarding rules for dating couples. It became too

---

54 Ibid., 2.

55 The document also includes a page written up in Vietnamese that explains to the women riding with American how to respond to questioning by police when stopped for riding with U.S. servicemen in taxis.
difficult to monitor social relations when, as one USAID epidemiologist discussing how many Americans had Vietnamese girlfriends reflected, “we all did.”

**Marriage in the Post-War Bride Era**

Marriages to local Vietnamese women presented an entirely different set of issues for both the governments and those seeking the licences. During World War II, GIs brought home an estimated 125,000 brides from their tours in Europe and the Pacific. Congress voted on December 28, 1945 to facilitate entry into the United States for the newly married with the passage of the War Brides Act. The first of five laws passed in the immediate post-war era regarding war-time marriages, the act eased the process in which these brides and their children could enter the United States and lasted into the mid-1960s, gradually allowing in more brides, and eventually even fiancées. By the mid-1950s, however, controversies over misuse of the laws led to heightened scrutiny since they previously allowed in all partners to American servicemen and women. Following the Korean War, and into the occupation period, tens of thousands of Korean women lived in “camptown” settings that placed women in easy access to American soldiers. The number of Americans marrying Koreans and bringing them back to the states alarmed officials in the military and Red Cross who dissolved their programs designed to support brides with their entry into the country. As historian Susan Zeiger argues, American GIs in Vietnam still

---


58 Ibid., 131.

59 Ibid., 213.

managed to marry locals in significant numbers, on par with rates during the first World War.\textsuperscript{62}

The U.S. military attempted to work with the RVN to maintain more positive relations regarding marriages in the post-war bride era of the Vietnam War. Race played a factor yet again, as well as a Cold War culture of suspicion regarding communists. The military wanted to ensure that the marriages were genuine since GIs in bars were known targets for undercover North Vietnamese or communist spies.\textsuperscript{63} MACV directives insisted that marriages be completed under Vietnamese laws before American laws.\textsuperscript{64} The glamour of war brides coming to the United States from Europe in World War II, or even Asia, once the laws prohibiting interracial marriages were lifted, faded during Vietnam.\textsuperscript{65} During the Second World War, the Far East including Japan and China developed a reputation as deployment areas where GIs often married local women, but not until the passage of the 1946 Chinese War Brides Act and the 1950 Act on Alien Spouses and Children were Asian wives permitted to come to the United States with their husbands.\textsuperscript{66} However, unlike World War II and the post-war occupation era, war bride status was not extended to Vietnamese

\textsuperscript{61} Zeiger, \textit{Entangling Alliances}, 213.

\textsuperscript{62} Based on numbers from the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Zeiger estimates a minimum of 8,000 Vietnamese entered the U.S. as wives of service members; Ibid., 214.

\textsuperscript{63} Stur, \textit{Beyond Combat}, 57.

\textsuperscript{64} Revision of MACV Directive 608-1 to Chief of Staff, “Marriage in Command,” August 12, 1971, Box 32, Folder Marriage Application Records, 1971, MACV, Adjutant General, Military Personnel Division – Special Actions Branch, Record Group 472, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [Henceforth, NARAII].

\textsuperscript{65} Zeiger, \textit{Entangling Alliances}, 135-136.

\textsuperscript{66} Public Law 713: To place Chinese wives of American citizens on a nonquota basis, HR 4844, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., \textit{Congressional Record}, ch. 945: 975; Public Law 717: To permit the admission of alien spouses and minor children of citizen members of the United States armed forces, S 1858, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., \textit{Congressional Record}, ch. 759: 464-465.
women in the 1960s. The Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 updated U.S. immigration law to focus on family reunification rather than the “race-based policies” that shaped the first half of the twentieth century.67

Pre-war Vietnamese marriage traditions centered on a system of family arranged unions.68 Following independence and the passage of Diệm and Nhu’s 1959 Code of the Family discussed in chapter two, however, the RVN took a stance that marriages should take place out of love.69 This effort to give women more rights in society also opened up the possibility for more marriages to outsiders. Even within small villages, however, the rates of arranged marriages fell to only twenty percent during the 1960s and down under three percent in the 1970s.70 Prior to 1959 and lingering into the Vietnam War years, women interested in marrying men not selected by their family requested permission or out-rightly disobey them.71 Young women like Kim Norrell, the daughter of a laundry owner in Saigon, struggled over whether to try convincing her family to allow her to marry a GI since they believed, “good girls just don’t go out with GI[s].”72 For women like Norrell and thousands others like her, however, challenging tradition represented the only way to pursue love, or safety, beyond Vietnam.


68 Research in the region of Thinh Liet shows that “nearly 100 percent of the pre-1940 marriages were arranged;” Shaun Kingsley Malarney, Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), 149.


70 Malarney, Culture, Ritual and Revolution in Vietnam, 152.

71 Mai Phuong, Behind the Bamboo Hedges (Costa Mesa, CA: Nguoi Dan, 1996), 274-277.

72 Norrell, Reflections of a Vietnamese War Bride, 19.
Marriage provides perhaps the most important form of GI-civilian sexual relations after the issues related to prostitution. Large scale requests for marriages increased in line with the overall war, but even with only about 8,000 successfully completed applications the U.S. military kept strict policies to deter hasty marriages. Marriages for profit, manipulation, or access to the United States with no intent to pursue the relationship concerned the U.S. military and inspired the legal changes that took place.73

These fears translated to the American public as well. In 1967, media outlets cited a reportedly compiled by two U.S. Army medical staff. A brief in Jet magazine shared part of the research that GIs who engaged in marriages with Vietnamese women were primarily “sexually inhibited” and “bitter” about American life.74 Citing the same report, the exposé Saigon After Dark notes that of approximately six-hundred marriages between June 1964 and November 1966, twenty percent had ended in divorce once the Vietnamese wives had arrived in the U.S.75 This type of reporting bred fear among Americans concerning the intentions of GI brides and led to even higher levels of scrutiny on interracial couples.

Memoir accounts best illustrate the scrutiny placed on marriages. Duong Van Mai Elliott, an American-educated employee for the RAND corporation, returned to Vietnam with her American sergeant boyfriend, the now historian David Elliott. She worked on RAND’s interview project with civilians or captured communist fighters. Clearly not a bar girl seeking a quick escape from Vietnam, Elliott’s family was still suspicious of her marriage. Bluntly, her father told her that if she “married an American, everyone in

73 Security became part of the language of marriage applications in 1966; Zeiger, Entangling Alliances, 224-225.


Vietnam would take [her] for a whore.”  

In turn, her concerns over the impact of their marriage on her husband’s career were just as poignant as he hope to continue in government work. The two married in Saigon after much resistance from Elliott’s extended family. She recalls that David Elliott was able to persuade the family to accept him through his pedigree, manners, and mostly his Vietnamese language abilities.  

Le Ly Hayslip’s experiences as a Vietnamese single-mother who worked in clubs or selling black market items to support her family shows an alternate perspective of the same resistance to American-Vietnamese marriages. Unlike Elliott, her family was not nearby to impress. Hayslip dated several American men during the war and faced harassment with each of them. Eventually Le Ly met and entered into a committed monogamous relationship with an older officer named Ed. They shared a home, and he helped care for her son. Together, they had two more children. Like many GIs who found love in Vietnam, Ed signed up for additional time as he worked to obtain the appropriate paperwork to marry Le Ly and bring her back to the United States with him and their children. The difficulty of the marriage process often created considerable headaches for both governments and those seeking the marriage. 

In contrast to the social stigma and personal struggles faced by Le Ly Hayslip and Mai Elliott, other “war brides” recall the process more positively including Kim Norrell.  

---


77 Ibid., 307-308.  

78 While living with her first American boyfriend, Red, they face constant harassment on the street so they often leave their neighborhood to avoid local authorities and residents who disapprove of their courtship; Hayslip with Wurts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 282.  

79 Ibid., 345-347.
All three women write about their initial marriages to American men in Vietnam from the perspective of someone who was in love with their spouse and excited for a new life. Norrell’s story follows a trajectory that differed from the other two as her husband was not an older Military or Foreign Service officer, but rather a young man working in Army intelligence. Like most accounts on the subject of marrying American soldiers, time and paperwork proved to be the most significant challenges in legalizing the marriage requests. According to Norrell, it took nearly six months of running around five days a week to complete the necessary forms and tests.\(^{80}\) From urine samples to police reports, many Vietnamese women were unaware why they needed so many credentials to enter into the marriage. For some, they needed to purchase illegal forms to complete the process as Birth Certificates were required by American law but rare in Vietnam.\(^{81}\)

In spite of the challenges of satisfying three bureaucracies and their ever changing rules, those with enough money and desire could navigate the process successfully. MACV determined regulations regarding marriage laws for U.S. service members falling under MACV’s control during the war. In 1971, new laws went into effect to expedite the process of marriages between RVN or Australian citizens and Americans for the final years.\(^{82}\) MACV reduced previous regulations allowing GIs to apply for marriage with one-hundred and fifty days remaining in their tour to only ninety days. For the military, spouses

---


\(^{81}\) MACV Directive 608-1, August 12, 1971, Box 32, Folder Marriage Application Records, 1971, MACV, Adjutant General, Military Personnel Division – Special Actions Branch, Record Group 472, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [Henceforth, NARAII], Annex pg 2; Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, 345-347.

\(^{82}\) Revision of MACV Directive 608-1 to Chief of Staff, “Marriage in Command,” August 12, 1971, Box 32, Folder Marriage Application Records, 1971, MACV, Adjutant General, Military Personnel Division – Special Actions Branch, Record Group 472, NARAII.
represented a potential distraction and liability for service members. If the proposed marriages were between GIs and U.S. citizens or Australians, MACV offices could approve the marriages, but for citizens of the RVN or other nations, additional layers of protection were taken.

The layers of policy sought to prevent corruption by ensuring all applications were funneled through one office. Any completed application was required to be forwarded to headquarters for consideration, reducing the risk of bribes or other corrupt behavior on the ground. In addition to American laws, Vietnamese documents were also required to start the process, including statements showing the women were not already married and that the proposed wife had “good conduct” for “her entire period of residence in Vietnam.” Finally, the applicants must seek out legal marriage through the Vietnamese government first, and MACV then encouraged them to hold a religious service in the appropriate faith to finalize the union. Only after the exhaustive marriage process was completed could the couple visit the U.S. Embassy to discuss the potential for the spouse’s possibilities for immigration. After the 1965 change in immigration laws, a Visa for military spouses were no longer guaranteed.

MACV regulations could not guarantee that marriages were successful, but did ensure that couples faced considerable obstacles reaching the United States and beginning

---

83 Ibid.


85 Ibid., 6.

86 Ibid., Annex A pg 1-3.

87 Ibid., Appendix pg. 6-7.
their path to citizenship to test their dedication. Unlike earlier wars, the lines between ally and enemy in South Vietnam were always blurred and soldiers were trained to remain constantly vigilant of civilian populations. Issues like marriage created considerable concerns not only in terms of security for the war in Vietnam, but as part of the broader Cold War that framed it. For Americans, successful marriages had positive outcomes as well, showing the joy and collaboration possible between GIs and civilians. Within Vietnam the marriages had negative connotations for some who saw the Americans as coming in and taking away their women, or worse, turning them into prostitutes in order to marry them. Whether the marriages ended in divorce or remain happy until this day, for many Vietnamese women marriage to an American GI offered their best chance for starting a new life in the United States.

**The Orphaned Children of War**

When considering the limited number of marriages discussed above in juxtaposition with the much higher numbers of prostitutes discussed in chapters four and five and the limited use of contraception, these figures suggest why unplanned pregnancy and the responsibility of paternity developed into a serious social concern by the end of the war. What happens to these children when their mothers must return to work or the deployment of their father’s end made the issue a concern for foreign relations and U.S. public diplomacy. The children of war enter with no say over their role in the conflict.

---

88 In the post-war era, the marriages are not openly discussed. At the Vietnamese National Archives, all requested documents regarding the marriages of U.S. servicemen and Vietnamese women were not shown to me upon request. While it is unclear why the documents on prostitution were made available and marriage records not, it is possible that the prostitution records show the RVN regime in a more negative light than marriage records might. Whether or not this is the case is unclear, and a second attempt to retrieve those records from the Vietnamese National Archives could potentially tell us far more about the types of women who applied to follow soldiers to the U.S. and why their applications may not have been accepted.
Amer-Asian children, born in the thousands from 1965 to 1975, represent a concerning legacy of the Vietnam War. Vietnamese culture viewed the mixed-heritage products of GI-civilian sexual relationships as disgraceful reminders of intimate encounters with Americans.\(^8\) Whether their fathers knew about their existence or not, many of the children were turned over to the government or orphanages to care for them. Children of African American GIs were surrendered at even higher rates.\(^9\) Care facilities took in as many as possible, while others lived in abject poverty with families or on the street.

The Amer-Asian baby boom resulted in thousands of orphans left behind in Vietnam after the war. The estimates for remaining children in South Vietnam ranged from 25,000 to 40,000 children throughout the country with 8,000 to 10,000 in the Saigon area alone.\(^9\) Even with highly publicized efforts like 1975’s Operation Baby Lift that took out 2,000-3,000 children, scores remained in Vietnam where blending into society offered their best chance for success.

Governments around the world recognized the need to remove orphans of western service members and Vietnamese women from the war-torn county. Australians represented the first population to attempt to begin removing orphaned children from Vietnam. In 1967, Radio Australia News reported that the first two orphans from Vietnam


\(^9\) Letter from Michael B. Smith to Mr. and Mrs. Ronald E. Haglund, January 28, 1972, Folder [GEN] CO 165 Vietnam 1/1/71- [2 of 2], Box 86, White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Counties), Nixon, 1-2.

would be brought to the nation through the Department of Immigration at Canberra. As soon as the efforts began, they seemed to stall. The diplomatic correspondent for the station predicted that more cases were likely, but large numbers of adoptions would be limited by Australian adoption policies. These policies, meant to ensure stable life-time adoptions, promoted adoptions by families who could communicate in the child’s language, as well as breach the “psychological barriers” that might prevent bonding between the children and the adoptive parents. These “barriers” likely related to the issue of race and raising a mixed race orphan abroad. From case-by-case adoption efforts like this to the more large-scale attempts like Operation Baby Lift, the plight of war orphans concerned civilian observers throughout the Vietnam War.

As the war dwindled down, the concern over long-term social relationships like marriage took focus from the then standard cases of prostitution. Attention turned to ending the war as smoothly as possible, easing the process of de-escalation, and the legacy of the Vietnam War in American memory. The plight of Amer-Asian war orphans from GI-civilian sexual encounters threatened this process. American GIs assisted with aid to orphanages at times, but the numbers grew unmanageable for the United States to make an impact on supporting all the children.

Early in Nixon’s presidency he was faced with two major social issues regarding GI-civilian relations in Vietnam. The first issue related to sexual violence and the massacre at Mỹ Lai, a topic at the core of the following chapter, and the other about the rising number of children abandoned by American servicemen. Creating a policy regarding the

---

appropriate way to address the orphan problem spanned far past Nixon’s tenure. Congressional legislation regarding the legal rights of children of American servicemen abroad in the 1980s marked one of the most dramatic court cases regarding the responsibilities of the U.S. to care for those they leave behind after foreign conflict.93

Children were particularly vulnerable to the threats of the war. Mothers of Amer-Asian children feared for their own safety and that of their mixed-race children. As the North Vietnamese Army moved south after 1973 into cities that had formerly been strongholds of the Americans, mothers heard stories that their children would be targeted and killed prompting many to give their children to orphanages or try to get their children out of the country.94 Vietnamese orphanages were not safe from military threats either. A dispute in early 1971 between the Long Thành Orphanage Village in Biên Hòa and the U.S. Army accused American helicopters of harassing the orphanage, shining lights throughout the buildings at night, and even firing on the location.95 The Americans in contrast had reports that shots were being fired on their aircraft from within or near the orphanage walls.96 In under a month the United States ended their investigation and justified their actions as a reaction to hostility. Within the tense atmosphere of the war, even locations set up as safe havens for children presented potential risks.

93 Amer-Asian children, immigration and citizenship are the primary themes for an upcoming study by Sabrina Thomas (Arizona State University) who will be defending her Ph.D. dissertation, “The Value of Dust: Policy, Citizenship and Vietnam’s Amerasian Children” in Spring 2015.


95 Điện Tin [Telegram] from Làng Cô-Nhi Long-Thanh - Biên Hòa [Long-Thanh Orphanage - Biên Hòa] to Tổng Thống Việt-Nam Cộng Hòa [President of South Vietnam], February 1, 1971, Box 107, Folder MIV-29-71 Long Thanh Orphanage, Rec. US Forces INVESTIG DIV Reports, Record Group 472, NARAII.

96 Disposition Form, “Complaint from the Long Thanh Orphanage,” February 28, 1971, in Ibid.
Several groups reached out to Nixon to support the orphans, and particularly the Amer-Asian orphans. Within Vietnam those who could worked with orphanages to provide support to children, including the western wives of diplomats.\textsuperscript{97} Non-profits appealed to the President to provide support, citing mortality rates and the general dangers of war the children faced each day.\textsuperscript{98} Nixon’s staff offered a relatively standard form letter on the topic, thanking those writing to him for their interest in the orphans, but assuring them that the numbers of mixed-race children were not too high and that the South Vietnamese “already provided considerable assistance” for them.\textsuperscript{99} When offered assistance from eager writers, they simply suggested organizations they could seek out.\textsuperscript{100}

Nixon’s staff answered the letters on the orphans for him, keeping himself removed from this most recent of social relationships turned foreign policy concern in Vietnam. They kept the language vague, but universally positive. Nixon recognized that the administration could not ignore the burgeoning orphan population who would grow up into the next generation of Vietnamese, something they saw as “a most valuable resource.”\textsuperscript{101} Still, they remained unsure of what the United States could do to fix the problem. The administration remained steadfast that they would not change their laws to entitle any child of an American service member automatic citizenship like the French had enacted during


\textsuperscript{98} Letter from The Committee of 1000, Council on Adoptable Children International, to President Richard Nixon, January 16, 1972, Box 86, Folder [GEN] CO 165 Vietnam 1/1/71- [2 of 2], White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries), Nixon.

\textsuperscript{99} Letter from Michael B. Smith, Staff Assistant, to Mrs. David H. Campbell, February 22, 1972, in Ibid., 1-2.

\textsuperscript{100} Letter from Michael B. Smith, Staff Assistant, to Miss Mary Anne Fox, March 28, 1972, in Ibid.

\textsuperscript{101} Letter from Michael B. Smith, Staff Assistant, to Mrs. Samuel D. Berger, July 29, 1971, in Ibid.
the colonial period. As long as they could, they kept the issue on the back burner while they took part in tri-lateral peace negotiations in Paris. Only when Saigon began to fall did President Gerald Ford put the orphan issue up front with the organization of Operation Baby Lift in one final effort to gain sympathy and improve international opinion of American policies in Vietnam.

**Conclusion**

Dating, cohabitation, marriage, and paternity represent four of the most important issues in the study of GI-civilian relationships. While they have received considerably less attention in the post-war representations of the conflict then prostitution, these friendships, marriages, and paternal connections remain important links to the war today for many families. The roughly 8,000 brides who emmigrated from Vietnam have helped create communities and were influential in bringing South Vietnamese refugees to the United States after the war. Paternity cases are still newsworthy concerns as aging veterans seek out the children they left behind. In 2014, the BBC filmed the efforts of a former GI, Jerry Quinn, on his search through the streets of Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City, as he looked for his son. Quinn’s story ends back in the United States where his son was taken during Operation Baby Lift after years of childhood harassment for his mixed American heritage, and suffering while trying to live in the jungles of Vietnam.

---

102 During the colonial period, the French had this policy leading to a massive influx of mixed-race children into France; Letter from Michael B. Smith, Staff Assistant, to Miss Mary Anne Fox, March 28, 1972, in Ibid.

103 *Daughter from Danang*, Dir. Gail Dolgin and Vicente Franco, PBS.

104 See Norrell, *Reflections of a Vietnamese War Bride*.

In popular memory of the war prostitution represents the most vivid memory of GI-civilian sexual encounters, but the complexity of relationships beyond the brothel offers a glimpse into a much broader world of military-civilian interaction. From non-sexual relationships shaped by the presence of American or Australian women to concerns over cohabitation and political restrictions to limit marriages, the encounters forced the United States and their allies in South Vietnam to once again take a stand on policies regarding the social and sexual behavior of Americans and Vietnamese civilian women.

Illegal practices like prostitution presented officials with an easy target not afforded by dating or marriage. When successful, GIs who engaged in relationships beyond the brothel gained far more intimate perspectives of their allied culture, but this closeness also brought risks. The potential that brides might be looking to infiltrate the United States, or conversely flee a collapsing Vietnam, meant far greater risks for the public image of the allied governments. This concern also applied to the public relations disaster of thousands of abandoned children with both American and Vietnamese blood left behind. Reasons like these forced the Nixon and Thiệu administration’s to seriously consider the social and sexual lives of their people.
CHAPTER SEVEN
SEX, TRAUMA, VIOLENCE, WAR

Introduction
Evaluating the role of the character Patsy in the 2013 Hollywood remake of Simon Northrup’s memoir *12 Years a Slave* and the role of Julie from the 1938 film “Jezebel,” The New Yorker editor Amy Davidson ties the films together around the persistent global themes of sex and violence. She opines, “What does sex have to do with slavery? What does intimacy have to do with violence? In the absence of freedom, everything.”¹ These questions and their definitive answer apply to the relationship between sex, trauma, violence, and warfare in much the same way.

Looking past the reported glitz and social-climbing linked to the prostitution industry in Saigon we are faced with an industry staffed with ambiguously consenting women, rampant disease, and the recognition that not all Vietnamese civilians connected to prostitution profited richly from their encounters with GIs. Further removed still, many instead found themselves trapped in a world of kidnapping, sex slavery, rape, trauma, manipulation, blackmail, extortion, or other forms of corruption that tied them into the illicit sex trade in South Vietnam. Their suffering came at the hands of foreign and local perpetrators alike through channels of rage, inebriation, or profiteering. Even more than the popular brothel and bar girl industries, sexual violence and coercion marked a black eye on the war, provided ammunition for anti-American and RVN propaganda, and placed

the allied governments once again at odds with how to manage their contrasting political ideologies about sexual and social behavior. When looking to Vietnam, one might ask, what does sex have to do with war? What does intimacy have to do with violence? In the absence of peace, everything. Whether structural, physical, or simply to escape the dangers of the war, GI-civilian sexual relationships were shrouded in violence.

Rape accusations against Americans documented in the Vietnamese press in the earliest months of escalation appear to have received no domestic attention. Concerns over sexual violence against Vietnamese civilians only became a significant concern for the United States in the post-Tet era. The 1968 massacres in the Vietnamese village of Mỹ Lai and other isolated areas shocked the American public, placed the issue of rape during modern warfare into the lap of the American president, and critically weakened support for the war.

This chapter will examine the issue of sexual violence as it related to GI-civilian encounters in three ways. First, it will examine the culture in South Vietnam where rape was deemed commonplace. Women feared rape and took precautions to avoid it. The U.S. military strictly prohibited rape and reminded troops of the detriment the acts had on the American image abroad. While relatively few rapes took place in relation to consensual relationships, those that did remain vivid reminders of how the actions of individuals in

---

2 “Everything is News - Rape,” Saigon Post, October 27, 1965, 8, lưu trữ báo [Newspaper Archives], General Sciences Library, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (henseforth GLS, HCMC).

wars threaten the perception of the institutions they represent. Through a comparison on court-martial numbers and the restricted day-to-day police records that I had unprecedented access to at the National Archives in College Park, I argue that our perspective regarding the number and types of rapes that took place is skewed too low. Next, the chapter will examine how publicized massacres served as watershed moments for the U.S. government’s response to sexual violence in Vietnam. Nixon’s response to these events illustrates yet another attempt in his presidency to address the significance of society in relation to winning the war. Finally, the chapter will examine how sexual violence was treated in Vietnamese media through an examination of newspaper reporting and captured anti-American propaganda.

As a historic topic, sexual violence is difficult to address. Surviving victims and perpetrators rarely want to or have an outlet to speak about their experiences. To this day, few Vietnamese women are willing to discuss instances of rape.⁴ Scholars working on this topic have approached it from three primary angles to assess rape from a feminist perspective, within post-war representations, and as part of the Vietnam War culture of unchecked violence.⁵ In contrast to these works, I will examine how rape was perceived by individuals, both Vietnamese and Americans, to frame my analysis of the foreign policy response to sexual violence during the Vietnam War. Susan Brownmiller, in her groundbreaking book Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape, argues against claims that in the midst of so much death, “rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product

⁴ Nathalie H. C. Nguyen, Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2009), ix.

of the necessary game called war.” This belief provides an excuse for not discussing sexual violence and its impact on war, much like similar write-offs of prostitution during wartime. “Rape,” Brownmiller counters, “is more than a symptom of war or evidence of its violent excess. Rape in war is a familiar act with a familiar excuse.” In line with Brownmiller’s argument, however, it is critical to assess the cases of sexual violence to not only recognize these traumatic acts as part of the history of the Vietnam War, but to understand what they can tell us about American and Vietnamese fears, priorities, and policies toward women during the conflict.

Borrowing from Nicola Henry, I argue that political debates surrounding the Vietnam War frame how rape and sex crimes during the conflict are remembered. Accounts of rape supported the media’s portrayal of the war as immoral. Unlike later conflicts including the wars in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, however, rape in Vietnam did not exist as a weapon of war. As Henry points out in her work, law has the ability to shape public memory. It was not until the end of the Bosnian War and a 2001 judgment by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia that the first conviction for rape as a war crime was assessed. Despite the numerous cases and accusations that will

---

6 Brownmiller, Against Our Will, 32.

7 Ibid.


10 The 1990s marked a watershed decade for public discourses on sexual violence in war. The use of rape as weapons of war in the Bosnian War and the Rwandan genocide during that decade offered searing reminders that genocide existed in our world. Charges against Serbians for the rape and sexual enslavement of Bosnian women mark the first time they have been used as categories for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In addition, former Korean “comfort women” openly spoke about their trauma for the first time during this decade to seek reparations from the Japanese government; See “Crimes of Sexual Violence,”
be outlined below, rape remains little more than a mere footnote in most histories of the Vietnam War.\(^\text{11}\) Those willing to discuss rape tend to do so either in passing, lumped into the category of mass atrocities, as all out lies meant to defame U.S. troops, or as a calculated strategy of war directed against civilians.\(^\text{12}\)

In 2010, Gina Marie Weaver (Yount) published the first monograph-length study on war rape in Vietnam, *Ideologies of Forgetting*, in which she addresses the abuses through an examination of literary sources in the context of available evidence. She bluntly disregards claims that not enough evidence exists to indicate the presence of mass rape.\(^\text{13}\) Rather, she argues, its place within the collective memory of the war warrants further investigation. Accounts appear in first-hand post-war representations, but remain absent in the public discourse. Building on the dialog that Weaver has opened, this dissertation examines never before used Military Police records in addition to archives from the Nixon Library to reassess how rape occurred in Vietnam and factored into U.S. foreign relations during the war.

---

\(^\text{11}\) The topics covered in this dissertation have heretofore been a footnote of the war, but rape presents a particular challenge for two reasons: first, sexual violence during wartime rarely receives as much attention as the foregrounded military, political, and economic components, and second, most cases of rape in Vietnam were never reported or dropped before official paper trails could be created.


Why is rape still so divisive in Vietnam War Studies? Setting out to write this chapter, I questioned why if sexuality is so prevalent in our memory of the war, what makes accounts of rape so much more difficult to comprehend and study? Two major factors are at play here. First, evidence of rape during the Vietnam War is limited, censored, tangential or outright silenced due to ineffective or non-existent means to record occurrences. In this way, Vietnam is not too different from other conflicts. As Henry has argued, “Rape has the curious and somewhat paradoxical status of being considered both an ‘unspeakable’ and ‘inevitable’ crime.”

With a general disinterest in victims in the post-war era, or in the case of Vietnam, an inability to have contact with civilian victims who remained in country, few cases were ever presented formally.

The second major factor regarding the divisive nature of rape and its meaning during the war lies in the repercussions of labeling the actions of soldiers and military officers as war crimes. Instances of rape undermined the U.S. argument that they were in Vietnam to support civilians. The limited number of soldiers accused of violence against women and children justify the behavior out of their uncertainty over the enemy status of the person. In the cases that form the core of this chapter, however, rape is committed outside the field of combat in domestic or social surroundings. Rape in Vietnam took place in two very different settings, both of which created problems for the U.S. on the ground in Vietnam through negative propaganda. Only the cases linked to mass atrocity, however, received a response from U.S. policy makers.

14 Henry, War and Rape, 49.
15 Ibid., 29.
In this dissertation, I have chosen to draw a line between sexual violence linked to harassment, forced prostitution, or rape and the types of prostitution described in chapter two that some might classify as structural violence.¹⁷ Many of the women working as bar girls or prostitutes described in the previous chapters felt their work offered them considerable opportunities and participated willingly, removing the coercive and violent elements present in the encounters discussed in this chapter. This would certainly not be true for all prostitutes, but not enough evidence exists to include their stories at this point. The press sometimes reported about women and girls sold into prostitution against their will.¹⁸ Rape accusations and courts-martial against U.S. servicemen represent the larger portion of sexual violence cases during the Vietnam War marked by the treatment of both Military Police on the ground and the executive branch in Washington. Anti-war and anti-American propaganda references to rape are plentiful, but Vietnamese government sources on sexual violence during the war are largely absent.

By examining non-consensual or otherwise violent sexual relations during the Vietnam War, this chapter argues that looking beyond the well-publicized examples of massacres or prostitutes to the silences that seem to be more mundane occurrences of sexual violence sheds light on how each side viewed the other. I examine congressional testimony, military reports, diplomatic cables, memoirs and firsthand accounts to illustrate that the belief that rape is just a part of war leads to considerable under reporting in the

¹⁷ Structural violence refers to, as Kathleen Ho explains, “violence as the avoidable disparity between the potential ability to fulfill basic needs and their actual fulfillment. The theory further locates the unequal share of power to decide over the distribution of resources as the pivotal causal factor of these avoidable structural inequalities;” Kathleen Ho, “Structural Violence as a Human Rights Violation,” Essex Human Rights Review 4, no. 2 (September 2007), 1.

media. For the women living in Vietnam, rape was as ever present threat. In contrast, U.S.
foreign relations fears concerning sexual violence only arose after the publicized massacre
and mass rape at Mỹ Lai, but accountability for sexual violence has grown more scrupulous
for all military actions in the years since.

**A Weapon of War?**

Throughout the world, awareness of and punishment for rape increased during the
mid-twentieth century. For instance, in 1965, Vietnamese newspapers ran stories about
officials in the Philippines, a large American base and former colonial holding, increasing
punishment for rape during this time. By increasing jail time to the possibility of life in
prison, lawmakers hoped more victims would come forward to report attacks. Philippine
officials estimated five or more rapes per day, but only about twenty percent of those
attacked came forward. Limiting the potential for retaliation by lengthening the previously
standard prison times of between twelve and twenty years to life, the government hoped
that more women might step forward, decreasing the overall number of cases.19 Creating a
setting safe for civilians ranked high in priority for the Philippines, reflecting a global
interest in reducing sex crimes. Aside from anti-war groups, the debate of sexual violence
in Vietnam was reduced to silence until the massacre at Mỹ Lai brought American-led
atrocities in Vietnam to U.S. televisions.

According to Susan Brownmiller only fifty convictions were made on courts-
martial tied to rape during the Vietnam War.20 Charges for the actual act of rape only
account for thirty-eight trials, with only twenty-four convictions. The U.S. Marines

---

Sciences Library, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam (henseforth GLS, HCMC).

reported far lower numbers, with only three of their men convicted of rape through courts-martial. Sexual violence cases against American servicemen differed from those filed against South Vietnamese perpetrators, Brownmiller has argued. Rape accusations against Americans typically occurred with more than one U.S. serviceman present. The defenses prepared for these occurrences of the gang rapes that occurred during atrocities sometimes claimed that GIs felt insecure when the events took place, leading them to react irrationally. In addition to the atmosphere of tension discussed above, American perceptions of Vietnamese women also contributed to the “exaggerated masculine-feminine dynamic,” in times of war, “that lent itself readily to rape.” Most of the sexual violence cases that went to court-martial, however, stemmed from the massacre at Mỹ Lai and not the daily interactions that I will discuss below.

In the remainder of this chapter I will argue that while the massacre forced the Nixon administration to react, the coverage it has received overshadows the daily reality of sexual violence in Vietnamese cities. The accusations of and arrests for rape in the restricted Military Police Blotter daily records held in the National Archives at College Park indicates that the number of rapes that occurred in Vietnam not only far exceeded the number of convictions, but that the crimes were not always reflexes by frustrated soldiers reacting to perceived threats in the heat of battle. Rather, rape, like prostitution, became a part of the war in Vietnam. For President Nixon and MACV, keeping instances of rape quiet, or better yet eliminated, represented a vital priority to deflect the negative repercussions in the press.

22 Brownmiller, Against Our Will, 98.
Sexual Violence in Life and Memory

Like prostitution, rape accounts have been widely represented in Vietnam War films. In film representations, the exchange of, or refusal to exchange, money for sex often illustrates a particularly masculine, at times villainous, subject caught up in the heat of war. In this sense, they fulfill the role of “object” as defined by Russell Campbell in his assessment of prostitutes on film, but looking beyond their surface role in these films the larger impact of rape victims and sex-workers on soldiers as well as on the war in Vietnam, can be partially observed.23 Empathy for the plight of Vietnamese women by male characters on film is overtaken by the expectation that soldiers will naturally seek sexual relief from the tensions of war.

In Oliver Stone’s 1987 film Platoon, at the height of a tense village massacre scene, some soldiers are shown turning to rape for release of their anxiety.24 The films protagonist Taylor (Charlie Sheen) chooses to stop the rape in an autobiographical moment from Stone’s own war experience.25 As in other Vietnam War films of this era, the protagonists must choose to engage in or step in against the act of rape. Whether premeditated or in the heat of the moment, the use of rape as a plot device allows each of the largely anti-war American Vietnam War films of the 1980s to draw a line between the hero and the rest to illustrate the difficulty in maintaining ones humanity during war.

---


25 Susan Jeffords describes the stopping of the rape and Chris’ subsequent decision to kill Barnes as a choice between two fathers he feels he has in the film and recognizes there is part of both the masculine and feminine within him; Ibid., 69, 138-139; On use of personal experience, see Marc Cooper, “Playboy Interview: Oliver Stone” [1988] in Oliver Stone Interviews, edited by Charles L. P. Silet (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 74-76; Albert Auster and Leonard Quart, How the War was Remembered: Hollywood & Vietnam (New York: Praeger, 1988), 137.
In film representations of rape, Brian DePalma’s *Casualties of War* (1989) offers the most explicit account of the subject in the feature starring Michael J. Fox and Sean Penn. The portrayal of rape in the film presents wartime intimacy as a perceived right and necessity for some of the soldiers involved in the incident. In the adaptation of the work *Incident on Hill 192*, an account based on a true story, by Daniel Lang, the film centers on the kidnapping, rape, and eventual murder of a young Vietnamese woman (Thuy Thu Le).26 The men decide to commit the crimes after they are refused entry into a village to visit the local brothels as both are occupied by North Vietnamese Army troops for the night. Feeling like the locals are giving precedent to the enemy they are risking their lives to protect them from, the characters turn their rage on the village girl to show the brutality possible by Americans.27 Sexual expectations lead the men to decide who is and is not an enemy.

Through this account, only Fox’s “Eriksson” represents the voice of reason against the group mentality building in favor of attacking the girl. The inability to communicate sets the focus of the film on Eriksson who is forced to choose how he will respond to such a morally challenging situation.28 Even "Private Diaz" (John Leguizamo), who initially resists taking part in the gang rape, decides to join in when faced with pressure from and judgment by his peers. In the film, the guilt over the maltreatment of civilians is prominently displayed through the dramatic acting of the main cast who expose the masculine actions as pure evil in the face of Eriksson who is hopelessly directed by his

---

26 Daniel Lang, *Incident on Hill 192* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970); the copyright page notes, “This material originally appeared in the October 18, 1969 issue of *The New Yorker* under the title “Causalities of War,” the title that was adopted for the film version.


morality. Eriksson post-war physiological trauma stems from his own working through. Like in *Platoon*, his witnessing of the rape, as Sarah Projansky argues, acts as a “vehicle for understanding men” more than adding to our understanding of civilian struggles in Vietnam.\(^{29}\) In this way, the rape stands in for the entire war.\(^{30}\) He refused to participate in the act of rape but he could not stop it. He only felt capable of testifying against his fellow soldiers. Like other films from the era, he is the one character guided unwaveringly by morality and empathy for the Vietnamese woman.\(^{31}\) By viewing her as human, he is outside the norm and the other men distrust him for it. But, like all film representations of war, the complexity of the encounters as they occurred through the conflict, in this case instances of sexual violence, is lost.

As this dissertation has previously argued, the profitability of the sex industry in South Vietnam bred corruption activities. Beyond the illegal practice of sex work by consenting adults, rumors abound concerning kidnapped and coerced women and girls sold into sex slavery. Virgins or young girls sent to the cities to work for their families formed the primary targets for predators.\(^{32}\) According to various reports, audiences for the girls varied widely, with much of the clientele not tied to American soldiers, but to illicit networks throughout Southeast Asia and beyond.\(^{33}\) Sexual violence in Vietnam grew from

---


the expectations American’s held about Vietnamese women as eroticized, lingering in popular memory and from their memories of portrayals by French Indochina and their training, but most men did not engage in rape. Identifying the reason for rape both on the battlefield and behind the front lines remains an important question that varied from case to case.

For Vietnamese women, the possibility of rape was ever present from both sides. Even something as mundane as applying for jobs in Saigon could put women at risk. The need to seek work to support themselves placed them in positions where they needed to network or make connections with male business owners or office workers. These figures knew how desperate many of the women were to work for the higher paying Americans, and used this power to coerce sexual favors or bribes for the positions.34

The constant fear that some GIs harbored over threats from women motivated rape in a different way, as a tactic for interrogation or to assert dominance of potential female combatants through acts of sexual violence.35 Attacks on brothels and uncertainty surrounding the loyalties held by sexual partners contributed to the uncertainty.36 During the 1971 Winter Soldier Investigation testimony where Vietnam Veterans spoke out against the war and GI behavior, a panelist recalled, “it seemed to me that the philosophy over there is like somehow or another we’re more afraid of females than we are of males, because I don’t know why, but the female was always like you never knew where you


34 Hayslip with Wurts, When Heaven and Earth Changed Places, 310.


stood, so you went overboard with her in all your daily actions.”

While criticized as a bias source that has been manipulated by those who want to argue for the brutality of the war, the investigation illustrates several perspectives on the treatment of women that indicate a belief in rape as a part of the war and not rare outbursts of behavior.

The most critical responses to claims of atrocities and rape relate to sources. Gary Kulik and Peter Zinoman have taken issue with the arguments of Nick Turse’s *Kill Anything That Moves* which argues that systematic and policy-driven behaviors resulted in consistent and unanimous policies of brutality against Vietnamese civilians. Accusing Turse of cherry-picking his sources, they argue that his unanimous claims cannot be substantiated throughout the war. I seek a middle ground here where rapes certainly occurred during combat operations from time to time in Vietnam, but that the majority were not the result of direct orders in combat relationships but part of a broader ideology of male-female, West-East dominance within a culture of war. Fear, adrenaline, and rage played an important role in the occurrences. The relationship between urban and rural spaces, as well as personal familiarity with the women shaped the behavior in these encounters and could make GIs suspicious of all civilians they encountered.

Sexual violence occurred throughout the Vietnam War in all settings, however, not just the villages or hamlets tucked away from urban spaces that come to mind with the

---


38 For arguments against certain claims in the Winter Soldier Investigation testimony, see Kulik, "War Stories," 145.

massacres in Mỹ Lai or others like it. Working in support of the Vietnamese Women’s Union, Arlene Eisen Bergman argues that the perpetual cover-up of rape made it seem “socially acceptable,” since there was “no real need to fear punishment.”\(^{40}\) Le Ly Hayslip’s memoir has again influenced my interpretation of sexual violence in this respect. Hayslip recalls entering an American hiring office in Đà Nẵng for an interview. She arrived hopeful for employment within the American military which offered the highest wages for legitimate work. When she entered the office, the American male interviewer locked the door and proceeded to pressure her for sexual favors in exchange for the position. Creating a scene and throwing furniture, Hayslip freed herself from the room and instructed others in the office to call the police. In this case, she avoided harm and watched as the police carted the man away.\(^{41}\)

Hayslip’s account offers a glimpse into the entrenched expectation of dependence of Vietnamese women on Americans, in addition to the view of them as sexual beings. His attempt to pressure her into exchanging sex for a position with the American office reflects the uneven power dynamic. She refuses his advances to “play ball” in what he feels will allow them both to benefit, and instead choosing potential poverty over selling herself for a job. This example does not offer us definitive proof on the extent of these activities but provides a glimpse into the life of one woman whose life during the war was largely shaped by a series of sexually-driven experiences.\(^{42}\) Examined as a moment of sexual harassment and violence, Hayslip’s willingness to speak out against her perpetrator provides one of the


\(^{41}\) Hayslip with Wurts, \textit{When Heaven and Earth Changes Places}, 307-308.

\(^{42}\) Ibid, 307.
few detailed anecdotes regarding the presence of sexual violence in the cities from the perspective of a Vietnamese woman.

Halslip grew up in a village in central Vietnam near Đà Nẵng. As a young woman she was tried and sentenced to death by a National Liberation Front (NLF – colloquially V.C. or Viet Cong) tribunal living in her village over suspicions that she was spying for the South Vietnamese military. Her parents bribed her way out of a RVN prison where she underwent torture ranging from dropping a snake down her shirt to electric shock. The same men had committed several rapes as they passed through town. Once they found her guilty, the NLF men sent her out to an open grave to be killed. Rather than kill her, however, the man assigned to complete the task, a boy she knew from childhood, raped her instead. She kept this information away from her family, but rape and the knowledge it happened often was part of Hayslip’s life since childhood.

Even before the Vietnam War brought soldiers back to her village, Hayslip had been taught by her mother how to deter rape by soldiers passing through her village as a young woman by rubbing red vegetable dye onto the crotch of her pants to make it appear like she was menstruating. Hayslip’s memoirs illustrate that as women, the potential for rape existed no matter what side you supported. Like the accounts of soldiers who did not know who they could trust in sexual relationships, even those a woman worked for or supported represented potential perpetrators of sexual violence against her. For

---

43 Ibid., 81-84.
44 Ibid., 78.
45 Ibid., 93.
46 Ibid., 10.

243
Vietnamese women, rape was relevant long before the news coverage of Mỹ Lai broke in the United States.

Nixon, Rape, and Coming to Terms with Mỹ Lai

In September 1969 President Nixon received a notification warning him that the fallout of a massacre involving the rape and murder of civilians carried out by U.S. forces in Vietnam jeopardized American interests. For nearly a year, American and Vietnamese military familiar with the incident had participated in its cover-up.\(^\text{48}\) Two months later, and twenty months after the massacre in the Sơn Mỹ region of central Vietnam housing the hamlet of Mỹ Lai, the name colloquially used for the mass killings, the American public learned about the events for the first time.\(^\text{49}\) Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard informed Nixon in the memo that, “Publicity attendant upon such a trial could prove acutely embarrassing to the United States. It might well affect the Paris peace talks, and those nations opposed to our involvement in Vietnam will certainly capitalize upon the situation. Domestically, it will provide grist for the mills of antiwar activists.”\(^\text{50}\) Packard’s letter estimated that “possibly 100” unarmed civilians were killed, but as the reports

\(^{47}\) Also, see Martha Hess, *Then the Americans Came: Voices from Vietnam* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).


continued to come in the numbers grew.51 Vietnamese sources estimated as many as 500 people killed, most believed to be civilians.52

Weeks later, after seeing colored images from the massacre showing the bodies of women, children and infants, Senator William Fulbright lamented at a meeting of the Senate and House Armed Services Committee that, “This incident can cause grave concern all over the world as to what kind of country we are.”53 His comments were published in Time Magazine on December 5, the same day the colored images were published for the American public to see for the first time in Life magazine.54 Illustrating the American confusion over how to discuss the jarring news to the public, the piece in Time ran the headline, “MY LAI: An American Tragedy.” The human tragedy here, however, was most certainly a Vietnamese one. The political tragedy may well have been American.55 Speaking at a press conference four days after the publication of the color images and less than a month after the first reports were published, General William C. Westmoreland answered a question on whether he thought the news coverage of the massacre was excessive.56 He replied that it was, “rather complete,” but also that “much of this information is hearsay” and its constant attention in the media might threaten the investigations.57

51 Ibid.


54 See Life, December 5, 1969, 36-45.

55 For examples of how the American republic reacted to the publication of articles and images regarding the Mỹ Lai, see Olson and Roberts, My Lai, 174-177.

56 Westmoreland was promoted to Army Chief of Staff in 1968 after commanding MACV in Vietnam since 1964.

Prior to Mỹ Lai little exists in the Presidential records related to rape in Vietnam. For Nixon, this event which had taken place while Lyndon Johnson was still president came to overshadow much of his war policy. In regards to the examination of rape and sexual violence during the Vietnam War, Mỹ Lai marked a watershed moment that forced more diligent attention from the executive branch. Initially, Nixon’s advisors suggested keeping the president out of the proceedings as much as possible, presumably to distance him from the events.

The fallout of the massacre was impossible to ignore, however. Days before the colored images in Life became some of the most iconic images of the war, reports from GIs claiming to have witnessed similar events were already coloring the public’s perceptions of America’s behavior in Vietnam. On December 2, Henry Kissinger received a memorandum noting the President’s concerns over a report that highlighted the deaths of women and children. In the report, the “infantryman” claimed to have seen his unit commit war crimes that resulted in, “60 dead bodies – women, children and maybe a few old and decrepit men.” He continued that he had seen, “at least 100 Vietnamese lying in rice paddies shot – women taken for intercourse and then shot.”58 Nixon requested to Kissinger that the Department of Defense compile a list of any other cases like this he might expect to see in the coming days. In the reports that followed rape represented a central theme just as it appears in the case accounted above.

As an intimate violation of civilians, rape represented a particularly difficult crime to justify in the heat of battle. Beyond the threat or act of sexual violation as an interrogation

---

tactic against known combatants, like that mentioned above, the rape and subsequent execution of women and girls during massacres represented particularly heinous crimes.\textsuperscript{59} Even if every village women worked for the enemy, which is very unlikely, the intimate violation remains an unwarranted punishment that violated the Uniform Military Code of Justice and international war laws.\textsuperscript{60} William Calley, Lieutenant of the first platoon of Charlie Company who committed the majority of the crimes with Calley leading the way, claimed during testimony that he had not discriminated between men and women until stepping in to stop the “moleste”ng” of a female.\textsuperscript{61} His testimony conflicted with other accounts and many remembered rape as common during the massacre.

Responding to Nixon’s request for a list of any other war crime allegations that might arise as a result of the media attention on Mỹ Lai, the Department of Defense compiled a report noting charges against two-hundred thirteen men, sixty-six of whom where officers.\textsuperscript{62} According to the records, nine of twenty-nine convictions involved rape, sodomy, or attempted rape, including the rapes of children.\textsuperscript{63} Two cases were still pending

\textsuperscript{59} According to the Winter Soldier Investigation Testimony, an African American soldier in one unit was used to threaten rape on Vietnamese women. According to the speaker, he would scare them enough that they would general talk. The concept of threatening rape or sodomy seems almost exclusively limited on female prisoners in these records, although it is likely that it was used against some men as well; “Winter Soldier Investigation Testimony,” quoted in Mark O. Hatfield, “Veterans’ Testimony on Vietnam – Need for Investigation,” \textit{Congressional Record}, 92nd Congress, 1st sess., E 9997.


\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 514; For a profile on Calley and Charlie Company, see Ibid., 127-191; Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, \textit{Four Hours in Mỹ Lai} (New York: Penguin, 1993), 49-50; Olson and Roberts, \textit{My Lai}, 12-16.

\textsuperscript{62} For a published copy of the document, see Nelson, \textit{The War Behind Me}, Appendix B, 263; The list of incidents presented to Nixon is incomplete as two documents titled “Incidents,” are still classified, likely for the inclusion of FOIA protected names and private information, and withheld from Box 118; Folder “Vietnam – L.T. Calley Case (The Mỹ Lai Atrocity) [2 of 2],” National Security Council Files, Vietnam Subject Files, RG 472, Nixon.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 264-288.
involving rape. One of these encompassed at least five accounts of gang rape and murder in a massacre estimated to have taken seventy civilian lives.\textsuperscript{64} To that point one case accusing an officer of intent to commit rape and “Commission of a lewd act on the body of a Vietnamese girl, under 16 years of age,” was acquitted.\textsuperscript{65}

The new attention on violence against civilians resulted in more cases directly discussing sexual violence. In 1971, a Vietnamese newspaper published details about another U.S. unit referred to by Vietnamese civilians as the “Pig Division” of military forces in South Vietnam. This division was known for committing acts of rape against village women during their raids, and the investigation was turned over to MACV’s Inspector General to compile a report. Those making accusations of rape were not available to testify for themselves and the inspectors set up plans to talk to them at a later date. They concluded that three men would be punished directly, and the rest would receive more training on how to work with civilian populations, long seen as the key to winning the war.\textsuperscript{66}

The President received documents listing war crimes that recorded numerous accusations of rape. In one report delivered to Nixon including cases against Marines from January 1 to March 14, 1967, ten of the fourteen cases mentioned included rape or attempted rape as the charges. Two of the cases referred to the kidnapping, gang rape and premeditated murder of the young woman in the case that became known as “the incident on Hill 192,” the subject of the 1989 film \textit{Casualties of War} mentioned above. First broken

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 282.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 265.

\textsuperscript{66} Documents in Box 1, Folder 225-04 IG Investigative Files (71) (Phu Hiep), Rec. US Forces DEPUTY SR SDV WarCrimesVietofc, Headquarters, MACV, Investigation Files Re: War Crimes and Malfeasance, RG 472, Nixon.
in a timely 1969 report in the *New Yorker* and later recounted in the book by Daniel Lang.\(^6^7\) In all of the cases reported to Nixon of those found guilty, side margins on several note that the rape charges were later dropped, the sentencing of cases reduced in half, petitions placed, or cases simply “denied” by the United States Court of Military Appeals.\(^6^8\) These numbers indicate that the war total of eighty-six charges and fifty convictions for rape related crimes used as a general example from Army Court Martial records are likely far too low to provide an accurate representation of the role of sexual violence in the Vietnam War.\(^6^9\)

**Policing Rape in Vietnam**

The scope of the atrocity at Mỹ Lai and other massacres including accounts of Republic of Korea soldiers who systematically murdered and mutilated the bodies of Vietnamese civilian women, can dwarf other accounts of rape that happened at the back end of the war.\(^7^0\) The Department of Defense did not even bother including these cases when they compiled their list of other war crimes similar to “the Calley Case.”\(^7^1\) Yet, throughout the cities in South Vietnam, GIs committed rapes on civilian women “unrelated to war-time activity,” on a regular basis.\(^7^2\) This unquantifiable distinction between

---


\(^7^0\) See Kwon, *After the Massacre*.


\(^7^2\) Ibid.
government reasoning for not including these cases in their official records to the President, at the same time as the justification for some rapes being committed due to the fear that any and all women could potential be combatants, presents a striking contradiction for how rapes were managed during the war.

Daily police records pointing to instances of rape are relatively limited, typically noting that they are unable to verify the accounts of women making the accusations, but the regularity of the accusations point to something larger. Oral histories from former Military Police at the Long Binh Jail, north of Saigon, note that GIs were held for rape. Knowledge that most of the men held in the jail would later be released and sent back into the field created a stressful dynamic for guards. In addition, without formal prosecution or court martial records, and with the police blotters unavailable to researchers due to the sensitive information they contain, the records are difficult to substantiate. These cases occurred consistently throughout the available records which span nearly four years of police reports from 1967 to 1970 in the cities and villages of Dầu Tiếng, Dĩ An, and Lai Khê. I was able to examine many of these desk blotters at the National Archives before they were recalled due to FOIA restrictions for names and personal information. As such, I will not include any personal information for those accused or the date of the events, only the nature of the accused crimes. The cases in the files point more widespread rape within South Vietnam than the post-war records illuminate. Even if a portion of the cases were


74 For a profile of those arrested in Vietnam, see Ibid., 13-14.

75 The records I was able to view are located in the files of the USARV/1st Infantry Division, Provost Marshal - Military Police Desk Blotters; 01/13/1967-02/17/1970, Boxes 5-8, USARV/1st Infantry Division, Provost Marshal, Record Group 472, NARAII.
orchestrated, which we cannot know, the reporting of them indicates awareness that they were believable claims, as well as something of legitimate concern. As the next section will suggest, the accusations of sexual violence against Americans also bred distrust and hatred among the Vietnamese population.

Within the police records, some directly pin-point sex as the underpinning of the crimes, while others leave the nature of the cases more vague. In August 1969, a Private First Class (PFC) entered the Bamboo Inn club in Dĩ An. Following a woman to the back of the bar and into the bathroom, he assaulted her with blows to the face and striking her in the back of the head with a rock. The woman began to scream loudly, attracting a crowd and causing the PFC to flee across the street where he was caught by American MPs. The case was forwarded to CID, but I could find no further mention of it.

The Bamboo Inn case is surprisingly detailed when compared to other instances of violence against women. The blotters general keep very little information, leaving it up to the reader to consider the possibilities of the causes. In September 1969, another PFC was arrested for assault on a female employee of the 1/18 Infantry. No remarks are provided for the case, but a location of “Area adjacent to supply room” is noted. Whether or not the case involved attempted rape is unclear, but does mark another case of violence directed toward a civilian woman.

---


77 While this PFC did not seem to have received any serious punishment while serving in Vietnam, he has been serving a life sentence since 1974. After serving three years in prison for a 1971 breaking and entering case, he was arrested and sentenced to life only three months after his release for burglary and kidnapping.

Other cases include more overt accusations of rape. In October, a twenty-eight year old woman working in the Dầu Tiếng base camp was told to clean a room by a soldier. According to the police report, after she had finished cleaning the room, the man offered her money and threatened to hit her if she refused to take the cash. Once she took the money, he propositioned her for sex and she declined. The man later closed himself in a room with her. A second PFC helped him cover her mouth and hold out her legs in an attempt to rape her. Before they were able to conduct the rape, an unidentified soldier came into the room allowing the woman to escape and report to police. Within hours the stories related to this case were changing and the last words in the record state, “I’ll get the true picture for you.”

Violence or threats often accompany the cases included in the police records. In an instance of accused assault, a GI asked a woman for a “short time,” referring to intercourse. When she refused to participate, he threatened her by holding a knife to her throat before she was able to escape. Rarely did cases directly state that a rape had taken place. In more detailed cases, or ones that more openly claimed that rape occurred or was attempted, the women working for United States military on the bases. For instance, a woman was raped at seven in the morning by an Army Specialist in the Non-Commissioned Officers Club at Dĩ An. Hers is one of the few cases where the rape is definitively assessed, and not hinted at with euphemisms.


Similar to the courts-martial that followed Mỹ Lai, evidence proving these rapes is difficult to confirm and even more so without additional case material to illustrate the outcome. Likely, few of these cases were ever formally charged. Despite efforts by Nixon and his administration to remain in control of sexual violence and prevent it, the frustrations of the war and the perceived inability to distinguish good and evil in Vietnam, the cases continued to occur even after the 1968 massacres fell from the public eye. The rapes happening at the base and city levels indicate a different type of sexual violence, however. The women were often known to the men, either as employees working in their hooches every day or as the bar girls they frequented at local bars and clubs. Sexual violence in Vietnam cannot be understood simply as a tactic of war that occurred on the battlefield or in the interrogation room. Rape, like prostitution, became part of the American identity to Vietnamese women who faced the threat not only in the villages many had fled from, but in the cities where they came to seek protection as well.

The Vietnamese Response to Rape

Vietnamese press sources showed particular concern regarding sexual violence. This includes attacks against house workers by American GIs beginning as early as the start of U.S. escalation in Vietnam.82 The discomfort over wide-scale prostitution and the habits of some Vietnamese women to take American boyfriends created a certain amount of unrest, but the blatant harassment, violations, or in some rare instances murder of women at the hands of foreign men far outweighed the other two issues when it came to Vietnamese suspicions of American intent. While the numbers of these cases were in fact far lower than either of the other two types of relationships mentioned above, instances of sexual violence

---

seemed to carry more weight. It is important to note, however, that for Vietnamese women, rape fears were in no means limited to U.S. soldiers. Reports of rape conducted by North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front fighters added to a culture where young women, particularly those living in small villages, lived in fear of any incoming soldiers. Looking to the focus of this chapter, however, the majority of the accusations of sexual violence in South Vietnamese urban centers were tied to American servicemen.

In North Vietnamese or other anti-American media, sexual violence against civilian women represented one of the key components in undermining American interests in Vietnam. By painting all U.S. servicemen in a negative light that equated them to rapists, the propaganda performed two simultaneous actions. First, the image of the United States as a pillager of women linked them to imperial occupation and not aid forces. An anti-American organization in South Vietnamese published the pamphlet “Crimes perpetrated by the US Imperialists and Henchmen against South Viet Nam Women and Children” in 1968. This report cites hundreds of rapes by Americans beginning as early as 1965. The political goals of the United States overtake the moral responsibilities in the pamphlet as they argue, “It is due to such Machiavellian designs that South Viet Nam women and children have become the biggest victims of war in terms of the number of deaths as well as the physical and moral sufferings inflicted on them.”

83 Documents in Box 1, Folder 225-04 IG Investigative Files (71) (Phu Hiep), Rec. US Forces DEPUTY SR SDV WarCrimesVietofc, Headquarters, MACV, Investigation Files Re: War Crimes and Malfeasance, RG 472, Nixon.


85 Committee to denounce the war crimes of the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen in South Viet Nam, “Crimes perpetrated by the US Imperialists and Henchmen Against South Viet Nam Women and Children,” (South Viet Nam: Giai Phong Publishing House, 1968), 4.
Second, the propaganda forged fear in Vietnamese civilians who felt they might not be able to trust the Americans. Within a month of the massacre at Mỹ Lai, a village chief notified U.S. military officials in the region about the attack to try to get this information forwarded and receive answers for the “insane” attacks.\textsuperscript{86} NLF propaganda used the massacre to build hatred toward the Americans, who they called “pirates” and “Imperialists.”\textsuperscript{87} Calling the attack, “the most barbaric killing in human history,” the report highlighted attacks against women in its text. “Pregnant women were raped and killed,” it stated. In the short document, the rapes are described in more detail than the other deaths. For instance, “Nguyen, 12 years old, after being raped, was bayoneted in the vagina and rest of her body,” and “Phan Thi Mui, 15 years old, was raped and then burned to death in a rice bowl.”\textsuperscript{88} These accounts of brutality would only have compounded the fears that already existed in Vietnamese women concerning the possibility of rape by GIs.

For women in Vietnam, rape provided a powerful motivation for their involvement in the anti-war effort. Interviewed by the anti-American Liberation News Services Huyn[h] Thi Kien recalled a story where a woman more than eight months pregnant was strapped to a bed, raped to death, and then had her child cut out of her stomach. She concludes, “And they laughed...”\textsuperscript{89} While it is impossible to attest to the authenticity of the event she recalled, her story was published in Vietnam and used to raise female participation in the anti-war effort. The Women’s Committee to Defend the Right to Live claimed that a story

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 136-138.
\textsuperscript{89} Quoted in Eisen-Bergman, \textit{Women of Viet Nam}, 73.
\end{flushleft}
about the rape of a mother and daughter sparked mass women’s protests in 1970. As a political tool, rape worried and disgusted women, motivating them to speak out against the Americans, the war, or both.

Rape has played an important role in the memory of the war as well. Themes of prostitution, dating, or marriage to American GIs is largely absent from Vietnamese public memory of the war, just as the rape of civilians is only limitedly mentioned in American memorials. In the instance of a post-war TV show about North Vietnamese female fighters, the author strived to show how sexual violence framed warfare for women. She writes, “The events of legends didn’t happen in this place. They couldn’t counterattack the enemy because they had to reserve the last bullets for themselves, to avoid rape.” In memorials of suffering, the roles of women are central. Statues at the Mỹ Lai massacre site show two sides of this coin in Vietnamese remembrance: the mother who survives and stands tall even though she holds he dead infant in her arms, as shown in Figure 3, and the innocent civilian in her ao dai being shot down with her murdered child falling from her arms only in death [Figure 4]. While the act of rape is not memorialized here, the emphasis on women as targets illustrates their centrality to Vietnamese memory of the massacre.

---

90 Ibid., 73-74.


Conclusion

Amy Davidson’s attempts to understand the correlations between violence and sexuality in *12 Years a Slave* that opened this chapter may seem far afield from instances of rape during the Vietnam War, but the same principles apply. Vietnamese women feared rape from all sides during the war. Whether the men entering their villages were members of the North Vietnamese Army, NLF, ARVN, or U.S. military, the fear of rape existed. Not exclusive to village life, although reports from massacres seem to show that disconnect from cities encouraged more brutal behavior, urban women also faced heightened risks of sexual violence. It remains important, critical even, to note that most soldiers never took part in rapes. Men like Hugh Thompson Jr. even risked their lives to stop the crimes. Still, countless acts of sexual violence took place throughout the war against civilians, both women and men. The realities of war and the hostility of training on all sides put civilians

---

93 Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory*, 32.
at risk. For the U.S. military, the publicized coverage of sexual violence as an American tactic late in the war served to further undermine their war efforts to the public, particularly with those already associated with the anti-war community.

In addition to its effects on the war’s image abroad, this chapter argues that sexual violence, like other forms of sexual encounters between American GIs and Vietnamese civilians, grew more significant in relation to the war during the Nixon administration. Due to the timing of Mỹ Lai and other massacres in 1968, Nixon was forced to deal with sexual violence in ways that the Johnson Administration did not. In the months and years that followed, Congressional testimony was heard, and Nixon ordered confidential reports of every sexual violence case in Vietnam. Rape presented a particular challenge for troops on the front lines. Not only was their access to consensual sex cut off, but constant fears that women might be the enemy fostered the masculine culture of warfare in Vietnam to lash out through sexual violence. For all intents and purposes, Lt. William Calley became the face of the massacres to the American public as few other cases were ever tried, and none so publically. Most cases of rape against civilians were never reported. Many never could be. On the heels of the sentencing for life imprisonment against Calley and at the beginning of the public discourse on war rape, Nixon worked to reduce his sentence to ten years. In 1974 the Secretary of the Army pardoned Calley.\textsuperscript{94} It would be nearly thirty years until the first conviction of anyone for rape as a war crime.\textsuperscript{95}


\textsuperscript{95} Henry, War and Rape, 1-4.
CHAPTER EIGHT
EPILOGUE

“EASY MONEY GONE”: AMERICA PULLS OUT OF VIETNAM

Introduction

The signing of the Paris Peace Accords in January 1973, known formally as The Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam, began the wide-scale de-escalation of U.S. military efforts in South Vietnam. The Accords meant a cessation of American fighting and the limiting of support for the RVN government under Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. In response to growing anti-war sentiment at home, Nixon and his advisors determined that bringing home as many troops as possible represented their best option. The exodus of American servicemen did little to ease the nerves of South Vietnamese civilians who for more than eight years had lived in a society intertwined with the U.S. military and the money and goods associated with their occupation. Efforts to remove the impact of American soldiers on their society and economy had continuously failed, and their swift exit resulted in a shock to Vietnamese urban centers as if being weened from an addiction cold turkey.

Just as they had during the war, the press focused on bar girls and prostitutes as indicators of the changing society. Depending on who you asked, prostitution remained both a constant threat and a source of necessary recreation throughout the war. Images and descriptions of city life in the papers in the days following the signing of the Accords depicted a sense of despair among those who had capitalized on the GI presence in Saigon. Journalist Charles Mohr reported, “vice is a depressed industry in Saigon…. [t]he charm is
gone.”¹ Bar girls gathered together on the roof of the once illustrious Continental Palace Hotel where they worked since the government had shut down many of the bars and brothels in downtown Saigon in a recent raids. Mohr’s writing illustrates that the popular perceptions of exotic women in miniskirts did not adequately represent the diversity of the vice workers who came out watch the Americans begin to leave the city. These few “pretty prostitutes” he wrote, “are outnumbered by the hardened veterans. There are transvestites, young homosexual boy prostitutes, children selling cigarettes, men selling bad paintings and dirty pictures, and prostitutes who are mutes. There is even a mute midget.”² The “sordid” side of Saigon, in Mohr’s reflection, came through as desperation set in for many civilians in South Vietnam. The group watched as their primary source of income and protection against strict morality laws began to flood out of the city to return home.

As the decade long conflict that turned American politics and Vietnamese life upside-down began to draw to a close, the fate of the civilians who aided or relied on GI business for their livelihood remained uncertain. Reports coming out of Saigon in the month after the signing of the Accords illustrates how severe initial efforts to limit the effects of Americans on South Vietnam had failed.³ Fewer reports exist following the 1975 fall of Saigon, but those that did indicate South Vietnamese, and in particular women, struggled to escape persecution and rebuild their lives. So, as the United States de-escalated in Vietnam, Fulbright’s 1966 warning of “fatal impact” seemed not to far from the truth for those who had once profited so richly from the war.


² Ibid.

³ William Westmoreland, “General Westmoreland’s Historical Briefing, April 9, 1966,” #5 History File (13 Mar - 26 Apr 66), William Westmoreland Papers, Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, TX.
Strained Allies: From Paris to the Streets of Saigon

American troop de-escalation during the Nixon administration built up the tension between the United States and RVN leadership. Disagreements over political, military, and social goals drove the powers apart.\(^4\) Both nations sought out negotiations to end the war separately, as the United States failed to trust the leadership in the South and the RVN feared the United States withheld information and might be planning to abandon them as soon as an agreement was signed.\(^5\) When the negotiations in Paris officially started, representatives from the RVN were not invited to participate. As Henry Kissenger and North Vietnamese official Lê Đức Thọ proceeded their years of discourse in Paris surrounded by the top political minds from both nations, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu feared the Americans had begun to alienate the South.

As the final terms of the agreement took shape, Thiệu increased his communications with Kissinger to stress potential future steps they might take together.\(^6\) Much to his frustration, the responses Thiệu received indicated that any future actions would need to take place in the context of the latest iteration of the peace negotiations the Americans had forwarded to him in late January 1973.\(^7\) For more than a month, Thiệu had recognized that he would need to acquiesce to the decisions made in North Vietnamese


\(^{6}\) See Box 104, National Security Council Files, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Country Files – Far East, Nixon; and Folder Assurances to RVN (2 of 2), Box 105, in Ibid.

\(^{7}\) Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War*, 222-223; Nixon Letter to Thieu, January 17, 1973, Folder Assurances to RVN (2 of 2), Box 105, in Ibid.
(DRV) and U.S. negotiations.\textsuperscript{8} His efforts to maintain a voice in the settlement frustrated Nixon and Kissinger, but they eventually convinced him to sign the agreements with minimal changes to the text previously negotiated between themselves and the DRV.\textsuperscript{9}

Pierre Asselin argues that Thiệu resisted earlier versions of the accords that failed to remove North Vietnamese soldiers from South Vietnam entirely out of fear they could quickly take control of the south if the United States left completely. American occupied Saigon, he argues, “had developed a wartime dependence on the Americans that became so overwhelming that it reduced South Vietnam and its people to the role of collaborators.”\textsuperscript{10} When MACV and the last combat troops withdrew on March 29, 1973, these realities came into sharp focus.\textsuperscript{11}

As the primary beneficiaries of the American economic change in Vietnam from 1965 to 1973, bar girls and prostitutes suffered the most jarring changes when they left. The impact affected the women at different times or for different reasons. The most immediate shift occurred to the daily income for those who worked in the service industry. While several thousand Americans remained in Vietnam to oversee the transition of military control of U.S. goods, the masses of drafted and enlisted men with an unclear future no longer flourished after March.\textsuperscript{12} The troop reductions meant slower business and


\textsuperscript{9} On the process to convince Thiệu to sign the agreements, see Ibid., 166-174.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 168.


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
soon little or no business at all. Those who lived with American men found themselves suddenly responsible for maintaining apartments on their own.

Journalistic accounts of the years 1973 to 1975 refer to the declining demand for prostitution, abandoned lovers, and the feeling of despair that emanated from once crowded brothels and bars throughout Vietnam. *Time Magazine* reported, “there they were: the last U.S. servicemen, buzzing about Saigon on driver-pedaled cycles, flirting with bar girls, buying souvenirs and generally staging the biggest shopping, sex and sightseeing spree ever seen in the city.” Saigon becomes the focus of many accounts in these years, leaving silences from many of the abandoned outposts in other areas formerly bustling with American servicemen like Đà Nẵng, Pleiku, and Huế. After signing the Paris Peace Accords, Americans congregated closer to Saigon leaving smaller cities to face near complete elimination of their economic markets.

These silences indicate that bar culture, prostitution, and other services offered on American bases in these areas suffered a much quicker demise as their markets disappeared virtually overnight. Soldiers left behind girlfriends, and in some cases wives, as they quickly followed their units out of Vietnam. In the days left, some GIs scrambled to get Visas for their significant others while others simply left behind money to help support their financial needs until they met someone else. Army Specialist Nelson Coffey told *Time* that he paid the next month’s rent for his girlfriend and gave her pocket money, but “if she can’t hook up with a [U.S.] civilian soon, she’ll go back to the rice paddies.”

---


Vietnamese, particularly women, who had worked closely with the Americans, had the most to lose. They had profited even more richly than their employees, but now faced a hostile new government, negative connections in their past, and the loss of their business. One older female bar owner allegedly lamented, “I stay here and get drunk and maybe die.”

In the intervening years between the withdrawal of American combat forces and the fall of Saigon in April 1975, the United States and RVN tried to negotiate the future roles of women in Vietnamese society through the welcoming of USAID projects. These programs focused on women’s needs and hoped they might keep the women out of reeducation camps or worse in the years to follow. One such program in 1973 set out to “provide sociological analysis and research” focused on “the involvement of Vietnamese women within the political, social, economic sectors of the Government and population of Vietnam.”16 The approved official, U.S. Foreign Service officer Anita Lauve, had already created a name for herself among scholars of the war through her work with the RAND Corporation in the late 1960s.

Lauve’s deployment with USAID in 1973 marked an acknowledgement by both governments of the need to address women’s issues in the post-Paris Peace Accords era. Lauve’s outlined activities included placing special emphasis on “the role of women in the development of the Vietnamese economy.”17 She was chosen for the one-year position in part due to her previous experiences in Vietnam where she had witnessed the impact of the war on the economy.18 Working out of Saigon, Lauve set out to assess and recommend

---


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 2.
how to best restructure Vietnamese women’s roles in South Vietnam in a world after de-escalation. By the time Lauve dispatched to Saigon in December 1973, the loss of U.S. GIs had largely upended urban economies. The inflationary spending of the remaining American civilians and the supplies of goods for GIs that ended up on the black markets slowed.

President Thiệu’s efforts to maintain a grasp on South Vietnamese society in the social vacuum of American de-escalation meant simultaneously controlling overcrowding, unemployment, vice and crime. Part of these efforts included the forced relocation of peoples to areas outside of Saigon. The illegal process violated the Paris Peace Accords stipulation against hindering the free movement of civilians.19 Thiệu’s policies forced the poor and those labeled as criminals, including prostitutes, to areas beyond the city or into reeducation camps where they could learn new skills, or simply be separated from the rest of society into undesirable areas that had suffered from war or environmental damage during the war.

After the Fall of Saigon

When Saigon officially “fell” to the communists on April 30, 1975, thousands of civilians tried to flee Vietnam for the chance at escaping the incoming regime. The loss of American clients meant a loss of relative protection for the bar girls and prostitutes who had grown accustomed to the presence and money of Americans. This likewise went for women who still lived with or were married to Americans.20 In the days before the fall, rumors of the impending arrival of the NVA had preempted women in these positions to


fight for a Visa to escape with their partner, or find a GI willing to pose in that position.\textsuperscript{21} Under extreme pressure, the United States relaxed their immigration policies to let in numerous refugees who escaped on U.S. helicopters, or procured South Vietnamese planes or boats.

The prostitution industry remained resilient in the face of a changing market and increasing pressure to shut down. A U.S. government information sheet on life in Saigon after the fall cites refugee accounts that prostitution in the city remained a social problem. Similar to the 1967 efforts to alter the demographics of the city in order to remove unwanted individuals, Vietnamese leadership began a “phased program” to relocate citizens to what the refugees referred to as “new economic areas.”\textsuperscript{22} The program served multiple purposes for the new government. First, they forced former South Vietnamese ARVN soldiers and those who worked closely with the Americans to move in the first wave. In addition, the government allegedly used the program to remove the urban poor who failed to supply bribes in exchange for not being moved out of central Saigon or Cholon.

As it always had, however, vice remained profitable. “Despite a reduction in the number of Hondas on the Saigon Streets,” the report claimed, westernized Vietnamese “‘Cowboys’ flourish and prostitution is still in evidence.”\textsuperscript{23} In this additional parallel to the American escalation period, unemployment and inflation led many women to remain

\textsuperscript{21}This policy, known as the “no-marriage clause” helped expedite the process that under American Immigration Law would allow the fiancées of servicemen to return to the U.S. with them; “THE EXODUS: Turning Off the Last Lights,” May 5, 1975, \textit{Time Magazine}, Web.

\textsuperscript{22}Quoted in “Refugees Relocation in Vietnam,” July 1976, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06 – Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Texas Tech University Vietnam Center and Archives (Henceforth TTU), 1-5.

\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 2.
working in, or turn to, prostitution. The prostitutes mentioned in the report pointed to their place as part of the lingering remnants of American culture that remained in 1976. The women are noted as including the “wives of former RVN military officers,” who are able to “solicit quite openly” in the popular bar districts of Tự Do and Nguyễn Huệ Streets. The reference to the wives of former soldiers indicates that either their husbands were killed, arrested, sent to the “new economic areas,” or otherwise unable to provide for their wives.

Reeducation camps for women differed from location to location, and changed after the RVN dissolved. By 1975 pressure within Vietnam mounted to deal with vice problems including prostitution. External charities or religious groups sent aid workers to Saigon to assist with the training of young women to keep them from being banished to the “new economic areas.” The still functioning RVN Center for the Protection of Young Women and Girls took in youth in high risk groups. Former bar girls, prostitutes, heroin dealers, and street thieves made up the majority of the population. Volunteers at the center taught trades to help the women obtain careers within the law. For women who formerly worked for Americans, however, the meager salary for styling hair disappointed and shocked them.

24 Ibid., 2.
25 Ibid., 2.
28 Ibid.

267
For those left behind, the stigma of having lived with, worked for, or loved Americans created significant obstacles for women and those who had supported them. Like the embroidery sewers described in chapter four, numerous professions relied on an American client base during the war. In addition to luxury items and prostitutes, bar keepers and restaurant owners, laundry services, and other industries catering to Americans all suffered economically when the United States left. In addition to the loss of profit, those closely associated with Americans also risked imprisonment or death.

During its height, the prostitution industry required more than simply women to sustain its success during the Vietnam War. When the United States began pulling troops out of Vietnam in 1973, those tied to the industry in other ways faced a loss of income as well. In one example, noted in a 1974 report from the Indochina Resource Center titled, “Vietnam: The Human Costs of the American Aid Programs,” a man referred to simply as Linh is described. Linh had a family with RVN connections and worked around the Americans to profit. In one of his ventures, Linh taught “rudimentary English at fancy price.”\(^\text{29}\) His clientele included “swarms of prostitutes and bar girls” who could earn higher wages if they learned enough English to communicate with their customers. The report is very critical, however, noting that most Vietnamese would not have connections with either government. It refers to Linh as an economic entrepreneur, and an extreme one at that. While the author of this report, Guy Gran viewed prostitution as a form of structural

---

\(^{29}\) Guy Gran, “Vietnam: The Human Costs of the American Aid Programs – An Alternate FY 75 Foreign Aid Proposal,” Indochina Resource Center, May 1975, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – Antiwar Activities, TTU.
violence dictated by economic dependence, more than simply limited elites had profited from the Americans and struggled when the troops left.

Having a family member married to a U.S. serviceman made those who stayed potential targets of harassment or imprisonment after the fall of Saigon. Kim Norell’s family had multiple connections to the Americans that made them targets. In addition to Kim’s marriage, their family had made their living during the war by providing laundry services to American soldiers. After Saigon fell, her father was forced to give up almost all of his money to the new government. Her brother-in-law, a former Major in the South Vietnamese Army, was sent to a re-education camp after he was discovered hiding as a chauffeur. Upon his release, he was told to procure a job or he would be sent to work in land development in the jungle with his family.

These “new economic areas,” as some have called them, included areas that would have been poisoned by chemical spraying and the placement of landmines during the war. Those successful in their marriage attempts typically worked to assist other members of their families enter the United States. Kim Norrell worked with other Vietnamese-Americans to organize efforts for obtaining Visas and easing restrictions against immigration to the United States. Through the efforts of Kim, her husband Tom, and others like them, countless families were reunited after the signing of the Paris Peace

---

30 Norrell, Reflections of a Vietnamese War Bride, 51, 76-77.

31 An estimated 200,000 USD.

32 Norrell, Reflections of a Vietnamese War Bride, 76.


Agreement and the exit of American ground forces further separated families that had often already divided during the war.

**Conclusion**

Feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe argues that women suffered across party lines in Vietnam in the wake of the war.\(^{35}\) Prostitutes and those who worked for Americans during the war lost their source of employment, but they represented only one fraction of the population. Even those who had supported the DRV failed to garner positions in the government of unified Vietnam. Enloe asserts that women are beginning to regain their positions of power in twenty-first century Vietnam.\(^{36}\) While I am inclined to agree, the future of this slowly relaxing Communist leadership remains uncertain.\(^{37}\) Amid decades of war, all Vietnamese felt suffering in some sense. That suffering is shared by the Americans they fought or supported throughout the decade of war. It remains important to note that amid the mass suffering that occurred during the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, women suffered in unique ways that have failed to receive adequate attention.

---

\(^{35}\) She cites a lecture from Hue-Tam Ho-Tai at Clark University in 1987. More recently, Ho-Tai’s work on memory address the conspicuous absence of women in Vietnamese memorials or commemoration of the Vietnam War; Hue-Tam Ho-Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 14.


\(^{37}\) On Vietnam’s changing relationship with the west in the past twenty years since the Clinton Administration, see H. Bruce Franklin, “Missing in Action in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Four Decades On: Vietnam, the United States, and the Legacies of the Second Indochina War*, Edited by Scott Laderman and Edwin A. Martini (Durham; Duke University Press, 2013), 284-287.
Women’s History, War History

The history of sexual encounters during the Vietnam War is not a “women’s history,” but a history of the entire war. Coming to terms with the meaning of sex and the Vietnam War presents considerable challenges as most of the occurrences were never documented, whether whirlwind romances, fifteen minutes behind a plastic sheet with a prostitute, four decades of marriage, or a rape in the heat of the jungle. In some ways, the idea of sex in Vietnam made a greater impact than the acts themselves for the American public and government. The U.S. media followed social relations from their first interactions with Madame Nhu to Fulbright’s declaration of the “American Brothel” to the aftermath of Mỹ Lai and on to the hope and tragedy of Operation Baby Lift. For South Vietnamese civilians, the realities of social impacts from day-to-day economic struggles, the dissolution of kinship links, and fears of rape presented far more pressing concerns. For the communists, these relationships presented opportunities to build anti-Americans support in the press.

In many ways, this dissertation is also not able to adequately address many of the issues regarding the effects of the war on South Vietnamese women that an intensive oral history project could. Rather, I see this work as presenting the role of a certain part of the female population during the war, those who, for the most part, engaged in sexual relationships with American GIs. By examining what those relationships looked like and how the governments of the United States and the RVN responded to them, this work
proposes more questions than it can answer about the women who engaged in sexual encounters with American men during the Vietnam War.

Many who associated with Americans risked great hardship in the wake of the U.S. military’s exit from Vietnam, faced arrest, reeducation, and in some instances torture or death. Still, with the continued communist leadership today, we cannot be sure how much remains repressed about the war, the aftermath of the fall of Saigon, and the years of restructuring that followed. Slowly, archives are becoming more organized and open to outside researchers.

***

The human interactions at the core of this project serve to shed light on the foreign affairs between the United States and South Vietnam. Foreign relations between the two nations regarding sexual encounters revolved around their sometimes polarizing desires for morale and morality, respectfully. The practices of the policies on the ground, however, took on a far different reality. As the RVN worked to create anti-prostitution laws with their advisors from Michigan State University, American Foreign Service members openly made purchases from the sex markets. As they worked to shut down bars with American assistance, MACV helped build areas outside bases for prostitutes to live and be examined by doctors. South Vietnamese police openly accepted brides and ran protection networks for prostitutes instead of arresting them. Marriage laws were purposely difficult to satisfy. Orphans remained trapped between worlds until the 1980s, and some Americans committed rapes against the populations they were sent to Vietnam to protect.

In this culture of contradictions, both nations found their footing as the war went forward. The Johnson administration maintained colonial ideas regarding gender, race, and Asia in general. In addition to not being able to contain the war, sexuality represented yet
another hurdle that seemed unmanageable and only minimally important. As health, security, and public relations issues became so acute, however, the United States was forced to respond to these issues. By 1969, the Nixon administration was forced to act in several capacities tied to sexual encounters, including sanitation cards for prostitution, the terms for marriage policies, and the bubbling controversy over the massacre at Mỹ Lai. Bases were moved in programs like Operation MOOSE, marriages were incomplete due to tri-part bureaucratic regulations, thousands of mixed-race orphans were left in a hostile nation, and countless women were murdered as a result of the relationships described in this dissertation. It is in these ways and more that sexual relationships between GIs and civilians created such a serious impact on the war in Vietnam.

Examining military sexual behavior during the Vietnam War brings the added challenge of deciphering what elements of the behavior may have occurred as a result of military training. In addition, attitudes toward sexual openness changed during these coming of age moments associated with manhood and warfare with the global reframing of sexuality in the wake of the 1960’s counterculture and Sexual Revolution. The public’s ideas regarding sexuality from 1965 to 1973 set them apart from their parent’s World War II generation. Yet, as Goedde, Roberts, Kovner, Moon, Beth Bailey, and David Farber have shown, sex with civilians was not novel during the Vietnam War but rather considered part of a tradition. Yet, sex and the Vietnam War has become something tied to the Sexual Revolution in popular memory.

This dissertation sought to bring some balance to the history of sexual and social policies during the Vietnam War while treating the subject as a legitimate area of study deserving of a dedicated study. By adopting approaches used by scholars of World War II,
the post-war occupation era and the Korean War, I have incorporated the significant role of the social behavior of U.S. servicemen into the military and diplomatic history of the war. In the field of Vietnam War studies, Heather Stur’s work on gender and Meredith Lair’s scholarship on base-life for soldiers has provided me with significant insight into how the military in Vietnam viewed women and supplied their troops. This study has tried to blend together elements of each of these previous works while adding to the conversation. I emphasize the high-level documents of the United States and the RVN, as well as their allies in Australia and France, alongside elements of popular culture, memoirs, interviews, and contemporary news sources to bring together a transnational study of sexual encounters during the Vietnam War.

***

It has taken the United States a long time to come to terms with Vietnam. Relations are just starting in the past two decades to stabilize. As Jeffrey Olick has argued, the trauma of Vietnam is why it remains “an ongoing problem” in American public memory.¹ As more years pass, diplomatic and cultural ties strengthen over mutual interests in trade and tourism. In 2014, Vietnam reopened its adoption program to the United States. The memory of the war is still vivid for both nations despite the fact that the generation who fought the war are beginning to pass away more quickly.² In Vietnam, the war is not remembered in a sexualized way, as it is in the United States. Whether these two memories


of the war will even blend is unclear, but the memory within the United States has the potential to shape American behavior in other wars. It will be fascinating in the next several years to see if any similar relationships were able to take place during the twenty-first century wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much work remains to be done on these issues, as well as on how sexual encounters have evolved within the U.S. military abroad as more American women travel to combat regions and our physical contact with civilians have grown more limited.
Bibliography

Manuscript and Archival Sources

Vietnam: Political Affairs (Bilateral): Australia: Relations With: (And Attitude To)
Department of Far East and Pacific
FCO 24/132, HAA3/1 Part B

Gallica
D’Imprimer sur les Presse de L’Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient, 1926.
Fonssagrives, Jean-Baptiste and E. Laffont. Répertoire alphabétique de législation
et de réglementation de la Cochinchine : arrêté au 1er janvier, 1889.
T7. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Droit, économie,
politique.
Gouvernement Général, Bulletin administratif de l'Annam.

Gerald Ford Presidential Library and Archives. Ann Arbor, Michigan.
NSA/NSC Vietnam Information Group: Intel
NSA/NSC VN Info Grp: Gov’t of SCVN, Corruption

Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Archives. Austin, Texas.
National Security Files
Kommer-Leonhart File (1966-1968)
Name File, Cooper Memos
William Westmoreland Papers

Michigan State University Special Collections. Lansing, Michigan.
Police Administration Files
Ralph Turner Papers
Wesley R. Fishel Papers

National Archives and Records Administration. College Park, Maryland.
Record Group 472: Records of the US Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975
MACV, Adjutant General, Military Personnel Division – Special Actions
Branch
MACV, Investigation Files Re: War Crimes and Malfeasance.
MACV, Office of Civil Operations and Rural Dev. Support (CORDS)
National Security Council Files, Vietnam Subject Files.
Rec. US Forces INVESTIG DIV Reports
USARV/1st Infantry Division, Provost Marshal - Military Police Desk
Blotters; 01/13/1967-02/17/1970
USARV, 101st Airborne Division/Office of the Adjutant General Command
Reports, 1969-1969
USARV, Office of the Surgeon/Preventative Med Div, General Records; 1961-1972

Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Archives. Yorba Linda, California.
National Security Council Files, Vietnam Subject Files.
White House Central Files, Subject Files, CO (Countries).

Service historique de la Défense, Centre historique des archives. Vincennes, Paris, France.
Archives de l’armée de Terre et des organismes du ministère de la defense.

State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison

Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive Oral History Project.
Calvin Chapman Collection.
Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – Antiwar Activities.
Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05 – National Liberation Front.
Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03 – Statistical Data.
James Schill Collection
Jim B. Green Collection.
Michael R. Potaski Collection.
Robert Joy Collection.
Social Movements Collection.
Walter Wylie Collection.

Thư viện khoa Học Tổng hợp. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
liu trữ báo [Newspaper Archives].
ĐĐ: AV 1767.

Trung tâm Lưu trữ Quốc gia II. Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.
Cổ quan Phú Thủ tướng [Prime Minister], Hoa Kỳ - Nha Tài Vụ /2064.
Cổ quan PTQT Hoa Kỳ - Nhà Tài Vụ / 4776
Hồ sơ Phú Thủ tướng, Ký hiệu 31232.
Hồ sơ Phú Thủ tướng, Ký hiệu 1060
Tài liệu ghi âm 058-04

*Government Publications and Document*


Public Law 713: To place Chinese wives of American citizens on a nonquota basis, HR 4844, 79th Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record, ch. 945: 975.

Public Law 717: To permit the admission of alien spouses and minor children of citizen members of the United States armed forces, S 1858, 81st Cong., 2nd sess., Congressional Record, ch. 759: 464-465.


Newspapers, Journals, and Periodicals

Air Force Times
The Buffalo News
Detroit News
Le Figaro
L’Illustrations
Jet
Kentucky New Era
Ladies Home Journal
Life Magazine
New York Times
The New Yorker
Le Petit Parisien
Saigon Post
Saigon Roundup
Time Magazine
The Tuscaloosa News
Images


Published Sources


279


*Secondary Sources*


Furlough, Ellen. “Une leçon des choses: Tourism, Empire, and the Nation in Interwar France” *French Historical Studies* 25 no. 3 (Summer 2002).


287


289


Films

Casualties of War
Dr. No (1962).

Full Metal Jacket

Interviews

Gerry Ellenson, interview with the author. August 30, 2014. email.

Websites


Vita
Amanda C. Boczar

Education
Master of Arts, American History, July 2010, University of North Florida
Bachelor of Arts, History, May 2008, University of North Florida
Associate of Arts, General Education, December 2005, Florida Eastern State College

Professional Positions
Conference Co-Coordinator, Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR)
Annual Meeting, 2014-Present.
Teaching Assistant, Department of History, University of Kentucky, Spring 2014.
Graduate Instructor, Department of History, University of Kentucky, Fall 2013.
Instructor, Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies, University of Kentucky, Fall 2011-Spring 2013.
Teaching Assistant, Department of History, University of North Florida, Fall 2009-Spring 2010.

Scholastic and Professional Honors
Dissertation Year Fellowship, University of Kentucky, 2014-2015.
George C. Herring Paper Prize, Kentucky Association of Teachers of History, 2014.
Lance Banning Memorial Fellowship, University of Kentucky, Summer 2013.
Dissertation Enhancement Fellowship, University of Kentucky, Summer 2013.
Robert A. and Barbara Divine Graduate Student Travel Grant, SHAFR, Summer 2013.
Conference Travel Support Funding:
University of Bern, Switzerland, Fall 2011.
A&S Graduate School, University of Kentucky, Fall 2011.
Department of History, University of Kentucky, Fall 2011.
Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute Tuition Scholarship, University of Wisconsin, 2011.

Publications
Review of Marie Louise Roberts, What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France in The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society 112, no. 3 (Summer 2014).