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VIỆT-NAM CỘNG HÒA  
BỘ THÔNG TIN CHIÊU HỜI

TRUNG TÂM  
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THẺ NHÀ BÁO

Press Card

TÊN GERMAINE GREER

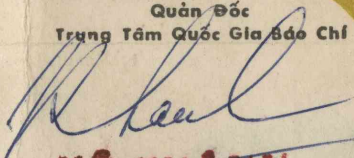
CƠ QUAN Sunday Times

Trân trọng yêu cầu các giới hữu quyền  
hành chánh, quân sự dành mọi dễ dàng cho  
đương sự thi hành phận sự.

Saigon, ngày 24-11-1971

Quản Đốc

Trung Tâm Quốc Gia Báo Chí



**VÕ-KHÁNH**

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## Germaine Greer in Saigon: of brooms and bar-girls

IN other times and under other foreign domination, the women of Vietnam were born to be either wives or concubines.

The cult of ancestor worship meant that a woman's function related always to the continuity of the family, and so she had in the course of her life three duties: as a daughter she had to live for her father; as a wife she had to live for her husband; and as a widow she had to live for her children.

Confucius said: "Among the three sins against filial piety, the gravest is to lack male issue." Any woman who so lacked had to countenance her husband's keeping of a concubine. Any concubine who brought forth sons had to hand them over to the legitimate wife.

The four virtues of the Vietnamese woman were modesty, *douceur* (sweetness and gentleness of behaviour), neatness in appearance and hard work. In the Chinese characters which were adopted by the colonised Vietnamese, the ideograph for woman also meant broom. The concubine also served as nurse and servant, unable to complain or protest, always silent, subservient and gentle. She had to make the head of the household happy, conciliate his wife and earn the children's trust.

Even the legitimate wife had to describe herself as "Miss So-and-so, accepted into the household of the Such-and-such family." Her devotion to her husband had to be absolute, even though the marriage was arranged by the parents of the couple. She was expected to give her life for her husband, if need be.

A Vietnamese woman's work extended to all "domestic" fields—agriculture, marketing and commerce. Her husband busied himself with "public" affairs—mainly, one supposes, by chatting about them over a pipe with his friends. The women tended the rice paddies in the heat and the rain, sheltering under their conical hats secured under the chin with a broad strip of cotton. The women trotted through the streets balancing laden baskets on their shoulders and cried their wares in the market place. Their labours were not made easier by the requirements of *Nu Tac*, which stated that they must be noiseless, that they must not let the panniers of the *adu dai* fly up as they walked, that they must not show their teeth when they smiled.

Nowadays you will still find the women of Vietnam in the fields, in the market places and hawking all sorts of wares in the streets. You will find them laying roads around the US Army HQ in Long Binh, behind a sign that says "Men and Equipment at Work." Long queues of women wait inside and outside the gates of the big bases: they are the hootch-maids who wait upon the GIs. They must check in and out each day so that the authorities can be sure that no female is left inside after dark, being, as authorities are prone to be, subject to a misconception that sexual activity is strictly nocturnal.

Given such constant civilian traffic on and off the bases, it is not surprising that security is bad. The hootch-maids are the principal source of heroin—"Ever noticed how they arrive with their hair all done up and leave with it down?" asked one soldier I met.

Occasionally a hootch-maid buries a grenade in the doorway of a hut. More often she tends her five GI charges with smiling humility. Supplying sexual services in addition to other menial duties, some of the women come to polish boots and scrub floors in mini-skirts and false eyelashes.

In the dozens of bars in downtown Saigon, in Tu-Do Street and Plantation Road or anywhere else the rich American military come to find a good time, there are the bar-girls. According to statistics supplied by the Students' Union of Saigon, there are 200,000 bar-girls, prostitutes and irregular wives of Americans. Hanoi claims that there are 400,000.

In the plushier zones they are

all well made-up, elaborately coiffed and prettily dressed. The by-laws of Saigon demand that they all wear white and register on the pay-roll of the bar (or restaurant as it must be called) as waitresses. Their real duty is to persuade the customers to buy them a "Saigon tea," a weak mixture of *creme de menthe*, water and ice.

If the client decides that he would like to spend the night with one of the girls he must pay the Mama-San who runs the bar 5,000 piastres, about £5, of which the girl of his choice may claim half.

Most of the girls are between 16 and 20. They are at pains to disguise the crass commercialism of the operation by their sweet modesty and charming manners. They play games, plying the soldiers with flattery learned from the book of "English For Bar-girls."

The men play along with their archness, and stories abound of the loving hearts and deathless loyalty of the bar-girls of Saigon.

If an American and a Vietnamese girl find that they get



along well together, he may take out a cohabitation permit, which will protect her from arrest if she is stopped by the police.

Many already-married soldiers have established Vietnamese women in apartments and had children by them. When the time comes for the men to go home, these women find themselves worse off than the concubines of old. In the Post Office in Saigon, you may see any day, queues of girls nervously waiting to put in collect calls to the United States.

Those soldiers who decide that they would like to marry their Vietnamese girl-friends are obstructed at every turn.

The Vietnamese soldiers are so poorly paid that they can hardly afford to compete with the Americans for the attentions of their own womenfolk. The bar-girls and their clients turn blind eyes when maimed Vietnamese soldiers come into the bars, begging with the aid of a typewritten official letter, which is their only recompense for a lost limb.

Not all the women in South Vietnam have had to capitulate to the American presence. Women were more than half the 83,899 Communists neutralised by the Phoenix Programme.

While some women were having their breasts enlarged with silicone implants to please the troops, others were fighting against the corruption of their country. Many girl students have disappeared into jail, like Vu Thi Dung and Nguyen Thi Thu Lieu, as a result of demonstrations against President Thieu's electoral tactics.

Tiny, ailing Madame Ngo Ba Thanh is condemned to indeterminate detention, although she has never been charged. She is guilty only of attempting to organise the beleaguered women of Saigon.

All of them, the go-go dancers, the prostitutes, the widows whose President misappropriated their meagre funds, the dead, the imprisoned, are casualties of American policy in Vietnam.

If the Americans were to vanish tomorrow, the scars of their presence would not heal for a generation.

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