

The Smoke Surrounding the Dragon Lady

By Chloe Hall

Between the use of napalm and grenades, no one expected the most controversial weapon of the Vietnam War to be the Dragon Lady's words, ready to crumble a regime in one fiery breath. Madame Nhu, born Tran Le Xuan into a wealthy family, wed herself into one of Vietnam's most prominent families. Her brother-in-law, Ngo Dinh Diem, began to lead an emerging nationalist movement. From 1946 to 1954, Nhu and her husband lived in the mountain resort city Dalat and began quietly amassing support for Diem. When the French were defeated in the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, Diem was named Prime Minister of South Vietnam, and Madame Nhu gained access to a whole new world of influence. During the Vietnam War, the criticism Madame Nhu received for her outspoken and attention-seeking behavior reveals the greater cultural context of the time regarding topics such as feminism, sexual politics, and religion, as Madame Nhu became representative of the potential violence of her country and the objectification of East Asia.

Madame Nhu was in a particularly interesting position to influence policy and spread her beliefs as she became the

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“unofficial first lady of the regime.”¹ Since Diem was unmarried with no children, Nhu talked to him daily about his work in the country and to argue for what she wished to change, even being cited by a family friend as being Diem’s “platonic wife.”² Nhu firmly believed that the Diem family was the only solution to Vietnam’s problems and considered herself to be the main part of that solution. Part of that plan involved her running for a National Assembly Seat in 1956 and successfully being elected into her own form of influence.³ She leveraged this position to pass legislation to set up nurseries, maternity clinics, social welfare centers, kindergartens and night schools.⁴ And in the early 1960s, she began attracting media attention because of a TIMES interview that highlighted her teaching young women martial arts skills for self-defense.⁵ Nhu consistently used her position of power to shape Vietnam as she saw fit, and her legislation was a big part of that.

Madame Nhu’s early legislative actions were largely labeled as feminist by the Western media and still the biographical accounts of her life include phrases such as “puritanical feminist” which aims to neatly characterize her actions and square away her intentions.⁶ Yet, the household structure in her and Diem’s relationship, however

¹ "Nhu, Madame." In *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed., edited by James Craddock, 222-224. Vol. 33. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2013. *Gale Academic Onefile* (accessed December 6, 2019).

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX3705000108/AONE?u=tel_a_vanderbilt&sid=AONE&xid=882186be.

² Stur, Heather Marie. *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era*. United States: Cambridge University Press, 2011, 30

³ "Nhu, Madame."

⁴ "Joan or Lucrezia." 1962. *TIME Magazine* 79 (12): 30.

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tma&AN=54207650&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Goldstein, Laurence. "Madame Nhu, Woman and Warrior: A Reading of 'Le Xuan, Beautiful Spring'." *Callaloo* 28, no. 3 (2005): 767.

www.jstor.org/stable/3805780.

⁶ "Joan or Lucrezia," 30.

unconventional the circumstances, was quite typical of Vietnam at the time. A handbook for U.S. army personnel deployed to Vietnam noted that “many Vietnamese women are in fact extremely powerful and exercise a strong formative influence on their husband’s opinions and actions.” This was countercultural to some of the American’s experience in the 1960s and seeing Nhu’s influence over such a powerful man was threatening to many U.S. leaders. Many tried to have her removed from Saigon, including Secretary of State Dean Rusk, U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and other Kennedy administration officials, but they were warned by those close to the family it would be “practically impossible” to remove her.⁷

A large part of this media coverage included her infamous nickname, the “Dragon Lady of Saigon,” which both represented her immense power in the regime and the perceived threat to the West. The origin of the nickname ‘Dragon Lady’ comes from the name of a beautiful lady pirate in Milton Caniff’s comic strip “Terry and the Pirates.” The Dragon Lady’s real name was Lai Choi San, and Caniff wrote her to be an embodiment of the mysteries of the Orient. She was “the strongest of all because she had the double weapon of beauty and absolute ruthlessness.”⁸ The earliest representation of the media’s treatment of the Dragon Lady is Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, the wife of an American supported Chinese leader from the 1930s to WWII who was portrayed as damsel in distress that could be saved by the American knight in shining armor. Americans focused on her Christianity, physical beauty, and well-spoken English used to lobby for support of her husband’s government, even though many Chinese dismissed

⁷ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 30.

⁸ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 23-25.

her as a corrupt, power-hungry symbol of the past.⁹ She is an exemplar of the American media portraying Asian women in a warped way to best fit American needs, which often goes against the interests of the women of their culture or their country as a whole.

Madame Chiang's story is a part of a larger epidemic of Western representations of East Asia through the sexualization and fetishization of its women. The tropes of Orientalism served to justify colonialism in Vietnam in its early stages. Later on, as reports of American involvement relied on describing Saigon as a feminized place of "sensual pleasure," Vietnam began to develop a "sensual geography" in which these sexualized ideas informed the way people conceptualized the country.¹⁰ With an understanding of American views of gender roles and sexuality at the time, it can be seen why this "sensual geography" would seem to be justification for the masculine power of U.S. occupation troops' political mission.¹¹ By feminizing Saigon as a sensual maiden, the West was able to court, exploit, and abandon her, all within their own sensibilities and moral systems. One of the recognized influences on the media depictions of Vietnam comes from Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, which emphasized Saigon's attraction as a "gendered, quasi-magical, and sensualized enchantment."¹² The larger identity of Saigon was proving detrimental to its people, who were no longer able to effectively influence its image.

⁹ Faison, Seth. "Madame Chiang Kai-Shek, a Power in Husbands China and Abroad, Dies at 105." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, October 25, 2003. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/25/world/madame-chiang-kai-shek-a-power-in-husband-s-china-and-abroad-dies-at-105.html>.

¹⁰ Keith, Jeffrey A. "Producing 'Miss Saigon': Imaginings, Realities, and the Sensual Geography of Saigon." *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22, no. 3 (2015): 243-72. www.jstor.org/stable/43898425.

¹¹ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 30.

¹² Keith, "Producing 'Miss Saigon,'" 257.

Madame Nhu attempted to occupy a space in this “sensual geography” that was entirely her own. She exemplified the origins of the ‘Dragon Lady’ by being renown for both her beauty and her ruthlessness. Nhu was known for her extravagant glamour and fiery tempers, which made her a favorite in media coverage of Vietnam.¹³ She was featured on both Time and Life magazines on their covers and developed a reputation for being the talking head of the regime.¹⁴ Her style was controversial for her tight fitting bao dais, which were a traditional Vietnamese gown, and her sexually suggestive decollate gowns were shocking to the more old fashioned Vietnamese women.¹⁵ One French journalist described her as “molded into her dress like a dagger in its sheath,” which is representative of the physical manifestation of violence her sexuality had taken on. Even her brother Diem criticized her outfits for being too form fitting, but she told him, “It’s not your neck that sticks out, it’s mine. So shut up.”¹⁶ She was taking control of her own image and in doing so, propelled herself to the center of both criticism and power. Madame Nhu began to symbolize “the potential violence in her already bloody land.”¹⁷

There was a widespread effort to diminish her authority and trivialize her opinions, often using her sexuality as a means of humiliation. During her 1963 speaking tour, Nhu complained the Kennedy White House was too soft on communism and claimed there were “not red yet, but they are

¹³ "Nhu, Madame."

¹⁴ Itkowitz, Colby. "'The Dragon Lady': How Madame Nhu helped escalate the Vietnam War." *Washington Post*, September 26, 2017. *Gale Academic Onefile* (accessed December 4, 2019).

¹⁵ Goldstein, "Madame Nhu, Woman and Warrior" 767.

¹⁶ Baker, Katie. "Finding The Dragon Lady: In Search of Vietnam's Infamous Madame Nhu." *The Daily Beast*. The Daily Beast Company, September 24, 2013. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/finding-the-dragon-lady-in-search-of-vietnams-infamous-madame-nhu>.

¹⁷ Goldstein, "Madame Nhu, Woman and Warrior," 766.

pink." The Washington Post reported on her visit and remarked that her "long, sharpened red fingernails detracting somewhat from her posture of defenselessness."¹⁸ Her appearance and femininity supposedly were the downfall of her critiques, rather than their content. The Kennedy White House despised Madame Nhu and everything that she stood for. Nhu was the antithesis of the Kennedy's air of refinement and of Jacqueline Kennedy's feelings that women had no place in politics and were better suited to the role of wife and quiet supporter. Mrs. Kennedy admitted that Madame Nhu represented "everything that Jack [Kennedy] found unattractive in a woman."¹⁹ Since her decisions were not ladylike by the Kennedy's standards, and therefore not attractive, the perceived lack of sexual appeal was therefore reflective of Nhu's inherent value.

Jackie Kennedy also criticized Madame Nhu's reputation for clamoring for power. Madame Nhu's own parents openly criticized her as a "power-hungry propagandist" of a daughter.²⁰ Mrs. Kennedy once asked her husband "Why are these women like her and Clare Luce, who are both obviously attracted to men... why do they have this queer thing for power?" Both President Kennedy and his wife interpreted Madame Nhu and Clare Luce, a staunch supporter of Madame Nhu, as women who hate men, and Jackie Kennedy whispered to a historian, "I wouldn't be surprised if they were lesbians."²¹ This was perhaps echoing a sentiment that President Kennedy had expressed in the White House to emphasize his distaste for Nhu. The Kennedys were again using Madame Nhu's sexuality

¹⁸ Itkowitz, "The Dragon Lady"

¹⁹ Osborn, Julie Annette Riggs and W. J. Rorabaugh. "War, Women, Vietnam: The Mobilization of Female Images, 1954-1978," 91, *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, 2013.

²⁰ Baker, "Finding The Dragon Lady"

²¹ Osborn and Rorabaugh. "War, Women, Vietnam," 91.

as a weapon against her, attempting to write away her feminist reputation with a more sinister explanation at the time. The Kennedy's criticism tied into the greater unrest of the time surrounding sexual identity, and they attempted to insult Nhu's efforts to own and control her sexuality in a culture that was consistently trying to define it for her.

The final point of identity subversion came from Madame Nhu's commitments to her Catholic faith. The practice of being a "puritanical feminist" involved proclaiming modesty despite her sexualized image and seeking to regulate the morality of the "sin city" of Saigon.²² These Morality Laws banned dancing, beauty contests, contraception, and underwire bras.²⁴ As well as proposing a family bill, which banned polygamy and concubinage, the laws set up stiff penalties for adultery, and outlawed divorce except by permission of the President.²⁵ This was another element to Madame Nhu's larger plan for Saigon, which seemingly undercuts the expectations of her feminist and sexual politics that were so often the subject of Western media. This was her betrayal to the expectations of her as the Dragon Lady as she redefined her role, from ruthless beauty to one of protector.²⁶ Her strict Catholicism increased tension with the majority Buddhist population of Vietnam, since her minority government was becoming increasingly regulatory and oppressive. Through these Morality Laws, Madame Nhu herself became contradictory as she simultaneously championed Western influence and criticized the U.S. role in Vietnam, sought to modernize Vietnam and return to conservative, traditional values, and used her

²² Baker, "Finding The Dragon Lady"

²³ Keith, "Producing "Miss Saigon," 257.

²⁴ Baker, "Finding The Dragon Lady"

²⁵ "Joan or Lucrezia," 30

²⁶ Stur, *Beyond Combat*, 30.

sexuality to harness attention while restricting and outright banning many expressions of sexuality at the same time.

Madame Nhu's most infamous moment of controversy involved her religious identity when she made her statements surrounding the Monk protests. Madame Nhu was originally born into a Buddhist family, but converted to Roman Catholicism in order to marry into Ngo Dinh Nhu's family at the age of eighteen.²⁷ After Diem was elected president with 98% approval in a suspectedly rigged referendum, he became Catholic minority leader in a country that was majority Buddhist, which came with much resentment. The most notable crisis was in Hue on May 8, 1963, as protestors celebrating Buddha's birthday in defiance of Diem's restrictions clashed with government troops. This began a series of crackdowns and violent interventions by the Diem regime to suppress Buddhist protests. In response, monks began staging self-immolation protests to show the West their distaste and anger with the Diem regime.²⁸ Madame Nhu, who was the spokesperson for the regime, and somewhat responsible for handling this controversy, went on air saying, "I would clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show."²⁹ This harsh language upset people in the West and began to sway American's perceptions about the Diem regime.³⁰ Her parents were appalled and withdrew from their positions in the Diem regime, and her mother even told the CIA she had urged Vietnamese expats to run her "monster" of a child "over with a car" while traveling to America.³¹ This comment was her biggest downfall and cost her and the Diem family their power, and for some of them, their life.

²⁷ "Nhu, Madame."

²⁸ Hunt, Michael, "Lyndon Johnson's War," 63.

²⁹ "Nhu, Madame."

³⁰ Itkowitz, "'The Dragon Lady'"

³¹ Baker, "Finding The Dragon Lady"

The Dragon Lady of Saigon became just as feared and desired as her name might suggest, but even that name manages to undersell her power and influence. Throughout her life, Madame Nhu began to exemplify Vietnam and the Diem regime. She represented the hope of change as she sought to legislate her country into the place she wished to see while being discredited and minimized for her gender and sexuality. Her lifelong need for attention and influence was indicative of the Diem regime as a whole, that was a much better fit for U.S. military support by image, than in reality. Her ability to remain controversial for so long, until she ultimately sealed the Diem's regime's fate, paralleled the ongoing violence of her land that had great potential to escalate with a single miscalculated move. Madame Nhu is both a product and author of her own history and neither the world nor the war would have been the same without her.

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