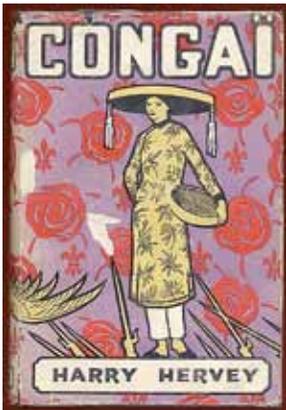


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## Gender as Colonial Exploitation in French Indochina: Concubines in Selected Pre-1965 Novels Published in or Translated to English



[Note: the illustration is from the dust cover of Harry Hervey's novel *Congai* that Cosmopolitan Book Corporation published in New York in 1927]

There exists in the sexual relationships of Western white men and Asian brown women in French Indochina an exploitive nature that assists in identifying one cause of the bitter Franco-Viet Minh War that erupted in the mid-1940s. Aspects of this exploitation are realistically illustrated in several of the nearly sixty English-language fictive works or English translations of French works of the 1920s to the mid-1950s (for a list of these works, see this paper's appendix). The relationships in question involve Indochinese women who are known as congaies. Nicola Cooper, in her book *French in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* connects the term con gai to a term she uses called "encongayement" (154). This

text shall use *congayement* to denote the sexually-oriented partnership between Western men and Asian women.

In its most simple and beautiful form, the word *con gai* means “young woman”. A novelist of importance to this paper, Clotilde Chivas-Baron, compiled a set of Vietnamese legends into a book titled *Stories and Legends of Annam* which was published in 1920. One of these stories, “Water Genie” illustrates the positive nature of the term *con gai*. To quote Chivas-Baron from “Water Genie”:

Every morning, before the sun reddened the horizon, and often again at eve, when the sky was streaked with long bands of purple and gold, Kam-Kong would go down the principle village street, the muddy street defiled with betel, encumbered with children, pigs and poultry. She went with elastic, somewhat cat-like steps, along the path bordered with cactus which winds down to the river. A bamboo on her shoulder sustained two brown earthen pots wherein the young *congai* was want to draw water (1, 2).

Once French men began to colonize Indochina, the word *con gai* took on darker meanings. Frank Proschan in “Syphilis, Opiumania, and Pederasty” interprets the word as changing from “‘woman’ to ‘wife’ to ‘mistress’ to ‘whore’” (614). In “Eunuch Mandarins, Soldats Mamzelles, Effeminate Boys, and Graceless Women,” he alters the definition slightly to substitute “concubine” for “mistress” (456). The idea, however, that brown women became sexually attached to white men is represented in both terms.

American novelist and adventurer, Harry Hervey, in a 1927 travelogue called *King cobra: An Autobiography of Travel in French Indo-China* explains his idea of how the *con gai* system began in Indochina and how it worked as a means for French men to acquire women with whom to cohabit:

A young Breton trooper follows [an Annamite] girl with an appraising look, taking in the back bandeau of her hair, her black lace tunic and the tiny black sandals that drop from her heels as she walks. He wonders if her teeth also are black. But that possibility is dispelled as she turns and smiles....The night is very soft....He will go to her father and make a bargain; then there will someone to keep his clothes in order, brush away the mildew....Very simple....And the map is changed (21).

Encongyement as a concept is laden with the suggestion of the exploitation of women in an Asian setting where white men became conquerors, colonizers and masters of the native women they encountered. Nicola Cooper states that for white men, Asian women became an easy conquest, with the con gai representing “an Indochinese version of the traditional and mythologized indigenous woman: the compliant sexual conquest of the dominant white male coloniser” (154). To Cooper, the conqueror dehumanized the con gai to the point that she became a “possession”, a reward “due to the colonizing male” in a conquered country (155-57).

Frank Proshan, in “Eunuch Mandarins,” elaborates on a possessive, slave-like, nature of the con gai and suggests that the system is very much subject to the abuse of the women involved:

...the concubine, despite her sexual nature, is seen primarily as a domestic, offering her services to the colonial just as any domestic provides services. “What good is it to speak of them?” asks [Oliver] Diraison-Seylor [in *Amours d’Extreme Orient* 1905]. “Flesh domesticated by the conquerors.... [And the name congai] becomes truly a mark of possession, of a ‘thing’ that belongs without restriction. It takes on in passion’s legend, a meaning of passivity given to all sorts of sadism” (455-56).

Abuse inherent in the ownership aspect of the con gai system is equally evident in a statement of Milton Osborne’s found in *Fear and Fascination in the Tropics: A Reader’s Guide to French Fiction on Indochina* in which he explains regarding native congaies:

...these were women, in a setting that for the most part offered no other female companionship, and so they were used for physical relief, as French writers frankly acknowledged. As early as 1896, in an autobiography published that year *Tonkinoiseries: Sourvenirs d’un officier (Things Tonkinese: An Officer’s Memories)*, Jean Lera established the conflict of emotions that would be repeated so often in later, fictional works: simultaneous lust for and a repulsion from the dehumanized image of a Vietnamese woman. Lera recalls how he purchased a con gai; how he found himself drawn to her body but revolted by her red betel-stained teeth; and how finally he “succumbed to the brutish feeling of violent desire” (12).

Further, Matt Matsuda in *Empire of Love* contends that the idea of the “possession of a native” became supported both in colonial laws approving mixed marriages and in colonial fiction wherein writers such as Clotilde Chivas-Baron explored the mechanics and meanings of white-male and brown-female relationships (139).

In addition to the potential for abusive behavior, two other negative elements of encongayement are the abandonment of the native woman and the creation of a half-caste race that is subject to rejection and discrimination. Cooper clearly explains the abandonment situation in terms of the colonizer’s pattern of “landing, loving and leaving” (156). She explains that congaies, being “simple and inexpensive to keep...are abandoned as easily and rapidly as they were acquired” (155). Thus, for the native woman, the arrangement was a temporary one that would leave her without a husband or a lover once her white companion either went back to his homeland or found another mistress. To Kathryn Robson and Jennifer Yee, in *France and “Indochina”*, the woman who married a French man was known only as a “petite epouse” (5). This term carries the connotation of a relationship of diminished and short-term value to the male colon.

Regarding the creation of an unwanted race, Milton Osborne in *Fear and Fascination in the Tropics* observes,

Up to the Second World War, the pseudoscientific view of the inferiority of Asians to Europeans then prevailing among the French in Indochina sustained the idea that Eurasian ‘half-castes’ [metis of colonial society] were necessarily less capable than those whose European blood had not been degraded by mixture with a local source (14-15).

Robson and Yee, in *France and “Indochina”* point to early twentieth century novels that deal with the mixed-blood situation: “From the 1920s onward, a series of novels analyze the shame and difficulties of the metis, the mixed-race child born to a white man and a native woman,” and the two authors cite two imaginative works that reflect this unfavorable condition of the metis as being Herbert Wilde’s *L’Autre race*, 1920 and Chivas-Baron’s *Confidences de metisse*, 1927 (6).

Given the factual background on the existence and social conditions relating to encongayement, this narrative will now examine passages from five pre-1965 novels to illustrate the con gai concept. These fictive works include Clotilde Chivas-Baron’s novella *Madame Hoa’s Husbands*, one of three moderate-length works in *Three Women of Annam* (English translation, 1925), Harry Hervey’s *Congai* (1927),

Cosmo Forbes' *Where the Cobra Sings* (1932), Jean Hougron's *Reap the Whirlwind* (1953), and Graham Greene's *Quiet American* (1955).

Clotilde Chivas-Baron was an early twentieth century French feminist and activist (Lorcin). She is an author of considerable accomplishments. Her 1920 *Stories and Legends of Annam* has been recently reprinted as one of Kessinger Publishing's legacy series. According to Matsuda in *Empire of Love* Chivas-Baron received an award called "Grand prix de literature colonial" in 1927, and is known for her writing fictive works that feature strong and willful women (149).

*Madame Hoa's Husband* features two congaies, Hoa and Ginette. They are cousins who share the same sexual relationships with French men, but who are very different in their personalities. Whereas Hoa is temperate and accepting of her position in Vietnamese society, Ginette is hot-tempered, bitter and outspoken. Part of Ginette's discontent with life comes from the stigma attached to her for being Eurasian—the metis Osborne describes in *Fear and Fascination in the Tropics*. In one place in *Madame Hoa's Husband*, Ginette vehemently speaks to Hoa of her anger, "I am a...half-breed! That means a creature held in contempt by both races to which I belong" (198). Further, in giving vent to her bitterness and to her view that as congaies, she and her cousin are held in bondage, Ginette becomes a symbol of rebellion against the injustices of the cohabitation system that has captured them. Once, accusing Hoa of being too complacent with her status as a con gai, Ginette screams at Hoa, "You accept all the servitude, you accept all the humiliation.... As for me, I cannot!" (199). In this statement, Ginette reflects a feminism that is actually growing among Vietnamese women in the 1920s, a time in which the revolutionary woman poet, Bao Luong declared, "If men had prevented the French from coming in and brutalizing women, we'd have stayed home happily" (Tai 135).

Later in Chivas-Baron's work, at a moment when Hoa discovers that her French master has a fiancée in France, Ginette points out menacingly, "These are things that happen: they happen to us slaves...How many Occidentals, leaving behind them wife and children, choose young congaies for wives...while they are here" (206). In having Ginette give such a strong voice against the colonial system of exploitation that has victimized her and her cousin, Chivas-Baron uses the fiery metis to reflect an actual sense of rebellion that was increasing among the native populations of Indochina in the 1920s (Robson and Yee 6).

As *Madame Hoa's Husbands* nears its conclusion, Ginette finally marries a wealthy French companion and declares her intent to use the Frenchman's financial resources to free her Vietnamese sisters from their bondage by establishing an

education system that will give Indochinese women the ability to set themselves free. To Hoa, she exclaims:

...I can contribute to the founding of schools; if half-breeds have, one day, a chance of living otherwise than by prostitution; if, one day, peasant women, feel in breathing the air of Annam...that they are breathing an air of freedom, I shall not have lived in vain (262-63)!

A second English-language novel to explore the social dimensions of the con gai system is Harry Hervey's 1927 work titled *Congai*: a piece of fiction Hervey turned into a play that toured New York City theaters soon after the novel came out ("This Week's" xi). Hervey, an American writer and explorer—born in Texas in 1920—is reputed to have "led an expedition into the interior of Indo-China" where he gained knowledge enabling him to write his novel about congaies (Marquis 395). *Congai* focuses on the life of a Eurasian concubine named Thi-Linh whose mother was an Annamite and whose father, whom she had never met, was a French medical doctor and scholar (17). Through Thi-Linh, Hervey gives a portrait of a distinctive and intriguingly seductive nature of congaies in Indochina by illuminating his protagonist's first encounter with a con gai:

Once when she was a little girl [Thi-Linh] had been sitting on the bank as a river boat passed on its long journey to Vien-tiane; and she saw on the deck a slender young woman in a tunic of flowered black tissue over yellow, with diamond earrings in her ears. Thi-Linh admired her air of aloofness toward the other natives on deck, implied in her very posture. Her face, pale with rice-powder against which her lips were scarlet as a grenadine flower, haunted Thi-Linh....Later she told her mother about the bewildering creature on the river boat....Her mother nodded. 'She is the congai of Monsieur the Prefect of Police of Vien-tiane'" (18).

Later in the novel, to underscore the temporary nature of a brown woman's cohabiting with a white man, Hervey creates a scene in which Thi-Linh, after becoming a con gai, asks her mother about her French lover, "Will he leave me after a while?" To which her mother responds, "Probably" (38).

Continuing to build on the temporary aspect of the con gai's relationship to a Western male, Hervey uses a friend of Thi-Linh, a second con gai named Nanette to illustrate an exploitive element inherent in the con gai system. "Nanette," Hervey

informs the reader, “in spite of her name, was a pure Annamite from Quang Tri,” who had matured into “a restless little creature with incendiary thoughts” (67). Indeed, Nanette, hardened, realistic, outspoken like Chivas-Baron’s Ginette in *Madame Hoa’s Husbands*, becomes the con gai’s voice of liberation and independence when she declares to Thi-Linh: “...I have no intention of being good—it is stupid. No Annamite would take me for a wife now, and French husbands do not last, so why not have many and get everything I can out of each?” (68).

Nanette, then, acknowledging a social stigma attached to the con gai in Vietnamese society, and echoing the realization that marriage to a white man is only short-lived, becomes the rebel. Thus by refusing to be submissive and by declaring her own self interest, she symbolizes in fiction a growing movement in reality toward revolution and the violent expulsion of the French male masters from Indochina in the mid 1950s.

The third novel in this discussion is Cosmo Forbes’ *Where the Cobra Sings* which came out in 1932. Cosmo Forbes is a pseudonym for Val Lewton, a Hollywood producer who came to the United States with his mother in 1909 when he was five years old (Biography). He was working for MGM at the time he wrote *Where the Cobra Sings*, and his novel displays more of a Hollywood extravaganza than a realistic depiction of colonial life in Indochina. The book’s characters are colorful and urbane: An American broker who flees San Francisco and buys a tea plantation in Cambodia; a Dutch tea-plantation owner; an unscrupulous Saigon businessman of murky European origin; a former British army officer who once served in a “smart” unit in India; and a beautiful con gai from the island of Bali (67, 82, 84, 96). *Where the Cobra Sings*, however, clearly focuses on the idea of the con gai and a plot that rejects the concept of arranged, temporary, exploitive marriage between Western males and Asian females. As such, the novel deserves serious consideration.

Forbes gives an excellent and basically accurate description of the rationale for and exploitive nature of the con gai system:

Men came to the East to earn a living in the hard, killing climate. It was not to be expected that they bring white women with them into the tropics. The system which permitted congais was the result of their loneliness—easy marriages, binding only upon the girl and leaving the man free to go whenever fortune smiled or his work in the East was ended (83-84).

Amarah is the novel’s con gai and she belongs to Jack Murgatroyd, the former British officer who has “few morals, no honor, drank recklessly and was willing

to turn an easy dollar whenever the opportunity presented itself” (82). Here again, Forbes accurately reflects reality when he describes a master-slave relationship that exists between Amarah and Murgatroyd:

Amarah never criticized what [Murgatroyd] did. She was his *congai*. It was the duty of a *congai* to obey. The white man could do as he wished, could even leave her when he pleased; but so long as he had paid the marriage fee to the broker and did not treat her too badly [but Murgatroyd often abused Amarah], she must stay with him....For the native, marriage was binding upon her, but not upon her lord and master (83).

In the end Forbes’ novel rejects the idea of the arranged, temporary marriage of the native woman to a white foreigner because the author has the American from San Francisco falling in love with and legally marrying Amarah (216). While superficially this may be a happy, Hollywood ending to an adventure story, it is precisely the focus on and rejection of the con gai system that makes the book extremely valuable to consider. In addition to the moral objection to engagement represented in *Where the Cobra Sings*, Forbes adds a note of warning regarding the ultimate fate of many congaies by stating that in the end they will slide downhill to become nothing more than inmates in Saigon’s brothels (264).

The fourth novel under consideration is Jean Hougron’s *Reap The Whirlwind* which first came out in English in 1953, a time when French control of Indochina was approaching its bitter and violent end. Although Hougron never uses the term con gai in this novel, his work thoroughly reflects the brutality of the Franco-Vietminh War and casts yet another chilling light on the relationship between French men and their congaies.

Hougron had extensive experience in Indochina. Born in Normandy in 1923, he migrated to Southeast Asia in 1947 to work as “a truck driver, tobacco planter, beer salesman, and teacher,” and finally for Radio France-Asie before leaving Vietnam in 1951 (Yeager 208). His other novels about Indochina include *Blaze of the Sun* (1954), *Fugitive* (1955), *Ambush* (1956), and *Barbarian’s Country* (1961)

The main character in *Reap The Whirlwind* is Georges Lastin, a violent man who slit his wife’s throat in France in 1942 and then fled to Indochina. Hougron describes his protagonist by stating “there was a certain ruthlessness in Lastin’s nature” (140). Developing Lastin’s violent tendencies toward women in general, Hougron gives his novel a tone of misogyny as demonstrated by Lastin’s reflecting

upon his French wife's death. Feeling no remorse about killing her, he blurts out that the world now has "one bitch less" (269).

In Indochina Lastin takes on a con gai, an Indochinese woman named Lee who has set up "housekeeping" with her French lover (107, 224). Reflecting the temporary situation of cohabiting with a white man, Lee constantly worries about Lastin's leaving her, a concern that causes her to secretly lace his food with opium in order to dull his desire for other women. Discovering Lee's action, Lastin reacts with a terrible but predictable brutality, and after becoming filled with "cold rage":

...he went home and beat her and beat her, careless of the neighbors who had come out on their doorsteps. He had beaten [Lee] until she lay limp and motionless at his feet. The next day without a word of explanation he beat her again (140).

While on a personal level this act of physical violence is clearly one of spouse abuse, it is symbolically and historically reflective of a form of coercion that colonial French masters resorted to in order to extract submissive obedience from their congais. *Reap The Whirlwind* fully exposes the coercive use of brute force that forms a foundation of interpersonal relationships within a colonial framework that in Indochina accepted the subjugation of one race and gender to the will of another.

The final novel examined in this narrative is Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* which was first published in England in 1955. It is probably the most skillfully written and widely published pre-1965 Vietnam novel in the English language. Greene, as Norman Sherry notes in volume two of *The Life of Graham Greene*, spent a considerable amount of time in Indochina before 1955 and incorporated his experiences, particularly at a city called Phat Diem, into *The Quiet American* (373, 386, 390, 391).

Like Hougron, Greene does not use the term con gai, yet central to the novel's plot and thematic framework is Phuong, the mistress of a British journalist named Thomas Fowler and later the fiancée of an American covert agent named Alden Pyle. One of *The Quiet American* tenets is expressed in Fowler's belief that everything in life is temporary. In reverse of the con gai's fear that her Westerner lover would leave her, Fowler is very much afraid that Phuong will inevitably leave him. As he contemplates a trip to Phat Diem where a vicious battle rages between French paratroopers and the Vietnam Minh, Fowler asks himself why he wants to go to such a risky place. Perhaps it is:

A chance of death? Why should I want to die when Phuong slept beside me every night? But I knew the answer to that question. From childhood I have never believed in permanence, and yet I had longed for it. Always I was afraid of losing happiness. This month, next year, Phuong would leave me. If not next year, in three years. Death was the only absolute value in my world (42-43).

Here, with Greene's superb literary ability, is a reflection on the temporary nature of the relationship between a white man and a brown woman: cohabitation without the prospect of permanence. Fowler, an aging, married journalist who is about to be called home by his employer, fears losing Phuong (37, 59, 69), a fear that becomes more prominent at Phat Diem where Pyle declares to Fowler his love for Phuong. As the two men discuss Fowler's mistress at Phat Diem, Pyle claims to want to do what is in Phuong's best interests. This causes the journalist to explode, "You can have her interests. I only want her body. I want her in bed with me. I'd rather ruin her and sleep with her than, than...look after her damned interests" (60).

Corollary to the idea of Phuong's being Fowler's temporary sexual possession, Greene explores in *The Quiet American* the long-term result of trysts between Western men and Asian women: the metis. Fowler, meeting a metis in an opium-house in the north remarks, "Across the way a metis with long and lovely legs lay coiled after her smoke reading a glossy woman's paper..." (167). Soon a French military pilot observes of this woman, "There is a girl who was involved [in the war] by her parents—what is her future when this port falls? France is only half her home..." (169). Here Greene makes it very clear that mixed-race people are condemned by the actions of their French fathers and con gai mothers to a life of hardship and rejection.

At the novel's end, Greene neatly ties up the plot by making it possible for Fowler to gain a divorce from his English wife, to stay in Vietnam and to marry Phuong (209-10). While the wedding does not take place in the novel, the implied action suggests that Greene ultimately rejects the idea of temporary cohabitation with a native woman. In this respect *The Quiet American* resembles Forbes' *Where the Cobra Sings*. Both fictive works present non-French white men in an Indochinese setting where they fall in love with native women whom they either marry or promise to marry.

Applying imaginative literature to real situations in French Indochina is productive because it allows people to delve into what Sandra Taylor, professor emerita at the University of Utah and Vietnam War scholar, calls "meta-

history” or “secret history” which she contends is the combination of the reading of history texts and fiction to assist in garnering a more complete and accurate understanding—“complementary perspectives”—of the American conflict in Vietnam (68, 70). The thrust of this study of engorgement is that Dr. Taylor’s appraisal of the intertwining of fact and fiction is valid and that a serious reader can extend fiction about Western men in French Indochina to the events culminating in the Franco-Viet Minh War. As Anton Chekov once stated, “Fiction is called artistic because it draws on life as it actually is” (Greene, ed. Pratt 402). Most of the approximately sixty novels published in English about French Indochina before 1965, have something to offer regarding the understanding of the war that the United States met there once it began to commit American resources. The five novels presented in this narrative amply reflect one negative aspect of French control which led to a long and bloody war.

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