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THE BUDDHA'S BLESSING:

GENDER AND BUDDHIST PRACTICE IN HANOI

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A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY OF
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This thesis is the original work of the author except where otherwise acknowledged

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To my wife Lan and my son Hugh
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Map 1: Inner-city Hanoi
Plate 1: Hoàn Kiếm Lake
The summer of 1994 was the first time that I travelled to Vietnam. I had only just finished my Masters thesis in the History and Philosophy of Religion on Vietnamese Buddhism in Montréal,¹ and had gone in search of the homeland of the people I had come to know through my research. I was excited by the things they told me, but even after writing my thesis about them I felt that I knew very little. While doing this previous research I found an incredible dearth of information about the Vietnamese, their customs and their religion. It was also during my Masters research that I noticed the gender discrepancies in attendance and participation at the Montréal pagoda where I had done my work. My visit in 1994 gave me the opportunity to see most of Vietnam and decide on a location for my research. I felt that Huế would be ideal: it was small and the monks welcomed me into their pagodas and were willing to sit with me for long periods, despite the problems with communication – I did not speak Vietnamese at the time. I thought that if I could actually communicate, I would have hours of undivided attention. As it happened, I did not end up in Huế. Life can be a strange thing. Instead, I remained in Hanoi for a number of reasons; some of which were directly related to fieldwork, and others were not. This change in plans is perhaps the most important factor in the thesis that I ended up writing.

My research took place over a period of eighteen months, from January 1997 to August 1998, and was split in half by a two month break (the end of June to the end of August 1997), when I returned home to Canada. The first six months was spent improving my Vietnamese language abilities, and familiarising myself with the people of Hanoi. During this period I was able to make a number of valuable contacts and get a basic understanding of Vietnamese family

¹ See Soucy (1994; 1993; 1996)
life, while making tentative forays into the pagodas and temples to observe how the practice of Buddhism was different in northern Vietnam from what I had seen in Canada.²

The second segment of my research led me to deeper insights into gender politics within the family, which is crucial for any understanding of how gender affects religious practice. It was also during this period that I began to participate more fully in the religious life of Hanoi people. I regularly visited a number of different locations of Buddhist practice, usually associated with discrete spatial locations within pagodas, and participated in the activities there. I went on pilgrimages in dilapidated buses jammed with old women who undertook the excursions not only out of piety, but also because they enjoyed the chance to get out. I went on pseudo-pilgrimages with groups of young people with intentions ranging from religion to entertainment. I sat and chanted sutras with the most devoted of the pagoda community. I joined the rehearsals of a ritual group, and learned to play the drum rhythms used during the rituals they performed. I sat and studied Chinese characters with the nun of one pagoda and had long discussions with old men about a variety of subjects pertaining to Buddhism and Vietnamese culture. I also attended other religious activities, including village festivals centred on the communal house (đình), séances (gọi hồn),³ fortune-tellers (thầy bói), and possession rituals called l-en dòng, in which a succession of spirits enter into a spirit medium (ông/bà dòng),⁴ who then distribute lộc—gifts from the gods.

² The Vietnamese that I had worked with in Montréal had come from South Vietnam, which may be one explanation for the substantial differences in religious practice which I observed in these two settings.

³ In séances, the mediums are possessed by the souls of their client’s relatives so that they could speak with them for a number of purposes, but usually to enlist their support. In the two that I witnessed I accompanied a woman whose brother’s grave had been disturbed during the war and the corpse removed. She was trying to find where it had been moved to so that she could care for him properly and help lay his soul to rest.

⁴ Although many scholars have translated ông/bà dòng as ‘shaman’, I find the word misleading because it indicates that the person’s spirit leaves their body on a voyage. I prefer the term ‘spirit medium’ because in the possession rituals (l-en dòng) the person is a vessel in which a spirit enters, and no voyage is taken. The drawback of my gloss is that it does not differentiate between the practitioners of spirit possession rituals and séances (gọi hồn). Nonetheless, the process is conceived of as being the same, the difference being that in the former, it is a spirit/deity while as in the second it is the soul of a dead relative or friend.
It was during this second segment of my research in Hanoi that I was married to a Hanoi woman named Lan. It is an event that has both enriched my life as well as my research; my wife and her family have been tremendously helpful. During the writing of this thesis we have been blessed with the birth of our son, Hugh (Hiệu) Colin Joseph. He has distracted and amazed me, bolstered my spirits and kept things in perspective. Far from being a lonely time of torture, this part of my life has been wonderful and exciting, to which I owe them a lifetime of thanks.

During the second period of my fieldwork I also narrowed down the field of research to two pagodas, where I spent the rest of my time in Hanoi. These two pagodas were chosen for specific reasons. Quan Sở Pagoda, as the pagoda housing the Vietnamese Buddhist Association, is politically the most important pagoda in Hanoi. More important for the research that I was doing, it was always busy, with plenty of people to watch and speak with. Its special status meant that there was always something happening; I could always be assured of having someone to answer my questions. By contrast, most other pagodas were usually empty, except for specific days and at special times.

The second, named Phúc Lộc Pagoda, was located beside a bustling market. It was a peaceful sanctuary from the tumultuous life surrounding it, offering a stark contrast from the world outside its gates – full of joys and disappointments, honesty as well as a good deal of cheating and lying. I chose this pagoda because, in contrast to Quan Sở Pagoda, it was much smaller and only attracted local residents. Unlike Quan Sở Pagoda which, because of its fame and prestige, attracted large numbers of lay Buddhists and occasional supplicants from all over the Hanoi area. Because of the smaller scale of Phúc Lộc Pagoda, I was able to surround myself with a closed group of people. As the pagoda was close to my own apartment, I would often see these same people around my house as well. By choosing Phúc Lộc Pagoda, I was able to create an environment not dissimilar to the village setting of traditional ethnographic fieldwork, in the middle of the second largest city in Vietnam. These people are so central to this thesis that I should offer special thanks, though they must remain unnamed.

5 Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam
Phúc Lộc Pagoda is situated in the Old Quarter, in a part of Hanoi where there is activity night and day. Here, the lanes are much smaller and less orderly; unlike the part of the city which the French built, with wide avenues lined with trees and comfortably spaced villas. The Old Quarter is a pile of houses, built one atop the other. People find their way home through mazes of back streets and small alleys. I lived in the busiest section of the Old Quarter, with the market at my doorstep.

This section of Hanoi conveys a feeling of Hanoi’s tremendous age. Prior to the Chinese invasion of Vietnam and a one-thousand year period of colonisation, the capital city of the autochthonous kingdom (named Cổ Loa) was situated not far from present-day Hanoi. Hanoi itself was founded as the capital city of the emerging Lý Dynasty by King Lý Thái Tổ in 1009 C.E. (Nguyen V.P. 1995:41). He named his new capital Thăng Long, meaning ‘soaring dragon’, and it remained the capital of Vietnam for almost every dynasty except the Hồ Dynasty (1400-1407 C.E.) whose capital was in Thanh Hóa, and the last, Nguyễn dynasty, which moved the capital to Huế in the centre of Vietnam. During the French colonial period the imperial capital remained in Huế, but the colonial government was in Hanoi. In 1954, after the Vietnamese defeated the French at Điện Biên Phủ and the country was divided along the 17th Parallel, Hanoi became the capital of North Vietnam. After the reunification of Vietnam in 1975 Hanoi once again became the capital city of all of Vietnam.

Hanoi is wet; so wet that mould grew on my leather shoes and computer disks. In summer, condensation would trickle down my white-washed walls and gather in pools on the tiled floor. The damp gives the vegetation a lushness, and the beautiful streets are mostly tree lined. Even in the crowded Old Quarter, banyan trees grew out of spaces in the crowded sidewalks, their knotted trunks often prickling with the red ends of incense sticks that had been placed there to supplicate the resident ghosts. Hanoi is situated on a bend of the Red River, the major river in northern Vietnam, and is surrounded on all sides by wet-rice paddies. The city is peppered with lakes, but the two most important are the West Lake (Hồ Tây), the largest, situated

6 C.E. is a non-denominational term to indicate A.D. See the notes on language below.
7 The name, Hanoi, is Sino-Vietnamese (Hán-Việt) and literally means ‘in the river’.
to the north of the city, and Lake of the Restored Sword (Hồ Hoàn Kiếm), a picturesque oval lake situated in the city centre. Virtually every lake and geographical landmark, as well as many of the pagodas, have legends which serve as reminders of Hanoi’s antiquity.

When I went to Saigon with my wife for our honeymoon, her friend, who had recently moved to Saigon from Hanoi, gave me a gift. It was a set of three statuettes of women. Each of them wears a slightly different costume which is representative of the north, centre and south of Vietnam. Hanoi is often characterised by Vietnamese in its relationship to the two other major cities: Saigon and Huế. Together, these cities are likened to three sisters. Saigon is young and carefree with a joie-de-vivre that surpasses the other two sisters. Saigon is more fashion-conscious, influenced by the West and more adventurous (and successful) in business. Hanoi is said to be the older sister: a little dowdy, standoffish, responsible and traditional. People in Hanoi complain about Saigoners as being too frivolous. Their conversations, I have been told by Hanoians, lack any substance or depth. Hanoians claim they have more of an appreciation for the past, they have a longer history and more of a sense of culture. More importantly, they claim that all of the key traditional symbols of Vietnamese culture are found in the North, and as most of the government is controlled by northerners, that claim is often portrayed in their choice of national symbols. Huế, in the centre of Vietnam, is the middle sister. Caught between, she is described as being not sure which sister to follow.

Hanoi, though not large by Southeast Asian standards, has a substantial population, with 2.16 million people within the Hanoi outer limits, and 1.2 million in the city proper. The population density is the highest in Vietnam, with 2,161 people per square kilometre and housing space of 1.2 square metres per person in 1992 (Li 1996:15). However, this is only the official figure. In fact, there are many more non-resident migrant workers who come into Hanoi from the surrounding countryside in order to find employment. These migrant workers are largely temporary, and still call their village home.8

The people with whom I worked were permanent residents of Hanoi. Some of them were from families who had lived in Hanoi for

8 Li Tana (1996) and Nguyen Van Chinh (1997) have both written a study of migrant labour in Hanoi, the later of which is more substantial.
several generations, while many were more recent migrants. Many of the young people with whom I spoke are university educated and currently hold positions in joint-venture companies while some hold positions in state-owned enterprises or private Vietnamese companies. Most of these people I met by teaching English, or through introductions by my wife. I also spoke at length with a number of young men who had come to Hanoi from villages to find work, and planned to eventually return home to get married and settle down after they had accumulated sufficient capital. My introduction to this group came largely from the men who worked at the hotel where I stayed for the first half of my fieldwork. They invited me to their home villages on a number of occasions, and I became acquainted with their families and friends. I returned to one particular village in numerous times, and came to know many of the inhabitants well.

I met many of my older informants at pagodas in Hanoi. In general, they were not university educated. Those who were not retired made their living through unskilled labour and petty trade. Many of their children have had significant advantages and have been able to receive university education. In terms of the overall population of Vietnam, many of the younger people that I met can be understood to be privileged. Some of the older people I had contact with have middle-management positions and a select few represent the upper-class, wealthy minority.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

A few notes need to be made about language in this thesis. I have kept all of the diacritics on the Vietnamese words. I have done this principally because, as Vietnamese uses a modified Roman alphabet, it is readable by everyone. However, because Vietnamese is a tonal language, dropping the diacritical accent marks may change the meaning of some words. I apologise to those who do not know Vietnamese and find the diacritical marks annoying.

I would like to note that I have not italicised words and place names that are common in English. Therefore, Buddhist terms which are more commonly seen such as ‘karma’ and ‘bodhisattva’ remain unitalicised. I also do not italicise proper names in Vietnamese such as the names of people or the Vietnamese New Year, ‘Tết’, though I
continue to use the diacritics for the sake of continuity. I do, however, omit the diacritics on 'Saigon' (formally called Hồ Chí Minh City), on 'Hanoi', and on 'Vietnam'. There is no logical reason for this other than they are common enough in English. All other place names do have the proper diacritical marks.

All people have been given pseudonyms. Further, the name of one of the pagodas where I did my work, Phúc Lộc Pagoda, is a pseudonym. I have continued to use the real name for Quán Sứ Pagoda, the other pagoda that this thesis refers to, because it is politically an important pagoda and therefore must be retained for coherence. Some names of informants have titles before them (e.g., Miss; Mrs; Ông) while others do not (e.g., Minh; Lan). This reflects the manner in which I would normally address these individuals.

In dating I use B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and C.E. (Common Era) rather than B.C. and A.D. as they are non-denominational. This seems particularly important to me as I am not writing about Christians.

All translations that I have made are indicated by inclusion of the transcripts in the original language. These are located either in the footnotes, for short passages, or in Appendix One, for those that are longer. The latter will be indicated by a reference to the appendix along with the reference number for those who are interested in seeing them in the original. If there is no transcript, it can be assumed that the original is in English. This is the case for quotes from books as well as personal communication; some of my informants spoke to me in English.

Referencing is a particularly sticky problem because Vietnamese names are generally the reverse of Western names, with the family name first. However, many overseas Vietnamese scholars change their name order to suit their Western environment. In this thesis I retain the order under which they published. For references, this means that there will be a comma after names that use the Western style (e.g., Nguyen, C.T. rather than Nguyen C.T.). I will also follow the authors in the use of diacritical markings. Therefore, some Vietnamese names will appear with them and some without.

Throughout the thesis 'pagoda' (chùa) refers to a Buddhist structure; 'temple' (đền, miếu) to a structure where the gods, spirits or deified heroes are worshipped; 'communal house' (dinh) to the politico-religious centre of the village where its tutelary deities, formerly appointed by the emperor, are worshipped and where the
village notables used to gather and make decisions for the village; ‘palace’ (phủ) for some religious sites which are often, in terms of size and importance, between temples and shrines; and ‘shrine’ (diên) for small structures where usually less prestigious spirits are worshipped. The reverse-glossary, in which my English glosses and their Vietnamese terms are listed, may be consulted. There is also a regular glossary of Vietnamese words used in the thesis.

I use the words ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ to refer to all supernatural beings except ancestors, ghosts and those deriving from the Buddhist pantheon (buddhas and bodhisattvas). Thus, tutelary genii (thần), deified national heroes (thánh), as well as mother goddesses (thánh mẫu), will all be called gods and goddesses throughout. ‘Spirit’ is also used interchangeably for all categories of gods and goddesses. Finally, the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived and died in India and is credited as the founder of Buddhism will be referred to as the Buddha or as Sakyamuni (the Sage of the Sakya Clan) interchangeably. All other buddhas and bodhisattvas will be referred to by name, and the generic words remain in lower case.

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Finally, the research could not have been done without the financial assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Australian National University. I hope that I have not let either down.

If I have forgotten anyone, please forgive me, and rest assured that I have not really forgotten you, just missed-placed you at the last moment.
On the fourteenth day of the lunar month, a few minutes before eight o’clock, Quán Sứ Pagoda – the most important pagoda in Hanoi – is crowded. Middle-aged and old women are everywhere, wearing the brown robes and the Buddhist rosaries that mark them as _đệ tử_ – lay-devotees of the Buddha. In the large, main hall there are nearly two hundred devotees, sitting on grass mats that flow out the doors and onto the balcony that surrounds the pagoda. They are waiting for the sutra recital to begin, and some of them have been waiting for as long as an hour in order to get a good place, close to the altar. Gently waving their purple fans, they chat to their neighbours, or quietly count on their prayer beads: _Nam-mô A-Di-Da Phật... Nam-mô A-Di-Da Phật... Nam-mô A-Di-Da Phật..._¹ Women make up the vast majority of people who consider themselves devout Buddhists in Hanoi.

But they are not all women. There are two rows of men sitting in the front, directly below the large multi-tiered altar that holds gilded statues of the most important figures of the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon. The men in the front, also wearing brown robes, are mostly over sixty years of age and some of them have long goatees like that worn by Hồ Chí Minh.² Unlike the women, the men do not chat. They may greet other men who arrive, but in a quick and quiet manner, after which they resume sitting silently and waiting for the service to begin. Unlike the women, they do not come to the pagoda early – their place in the front is assured. Some of them look at Chinese characters written on the paper before them. One of them, younger than the others (perhaps in his mid-fifties), sits with his legs crossed and eyes closed as if in meditation.

¹ This is the common chant used when counting the rosary. The meaning is something like ‘hail to Amida Buddha’ and comes from the Pure Land Buddhist (_Tịnh Độ_) belief that by reciting the name of this Buddha in faith one can be reborn in the Pure Land.

² The beards are regarded as a symbol of age and wisdom.
These people have assembled for the ritual called Sám Nguyên – the Buddhist version of a ‘Penitence’ ritual which takes place four times every lunar month. It consists of chanting particular sutras in unison, and is led by one of the old men in the front, who uses a microphone. Near the end of the ritual an official document, printed to look like an imperial petition (sờ), written in Chinese characters, is read by another lay man who has made himself a religious specialist by studying how to read Chinese characters for ritual purposes. The petition states the identity of the group that has been praying, the date and the location, so that the Buddhas can keep track of everyone.3

During the chanting, the chatting, the vying for seats and making room for friends, there is another activity that is taking place – not by a group but by individuals acting on their own behest. Mostly young and middle-aged women, they bring offerings of fruit, flowers, incense, spirit money (vàng mạ — to be burnt as offerings), and a few small bills of Vietnamese currency. After placing the offerings on the altar and praying for some special favour, they go to the back of the hall and chat with their friends or wait silently. After about five minutes they reclaim their now spiritually charged offerings, called lộc. They then return home, where they distribute the lộc to members of their family and sometimes their friends.

Outside the main hall, there are other activities in progress. In the library there are a few men reading books about Buddhism. In the offices upstairs a team of monks and lay Buddhists are working on the next issue of the magazine published there: The Research Journal of Buddhist Studies.4 In the store run by the pagoda there are women buying statues and tapes of Buddhist chanting, and in the alcoves and corners of the pagoda complex still others are engaged in other activities: reciting sutras, counting their rosary beads, talking with friends or with vendors selling religious books and items to visitors of the pagoda.

This thesis is about these people. It explores some of the reasons why they are here on this day doing a variety of different activities. Their religious practice plays an important part in their lives and has

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3 The sờ read at Quán Sứ Pagoda is hand written in Chinese characters, presumably by the man who reads it. At most other pagodas it is usually printed in Romanised Vietnamese script (quốc ngữ). They can be purchased by anyone at any religious supplies store, and the names added in the provided spaces.

4 Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Phật Học.
repercussions that extend well beyond the pagoda walls. In important ways, their religious practice is an attempt to control their lives. If I am successful, the reader should close this thesis with an understanding of the effect these practices have on the lives of the people I knew in Hanoi. Further, it uncovers some of the very different ways in which Buddhist practice is understood.

In Buddhism there is no systematised, formally imposed orthodox practice that is prescriptively required of all claiming to be devotees. Buddhists in Vietnam participate in religious activities that correspond to some extent with their social situations, and even within one form of practice there are a wide range of interpretations that are given to their meanings and objectives. Practice for many women consists of activities like those described above: going to the pagoda on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month to make offerings and taking the _loc_ back to distribute to family members. For older and more devout women and men (although the number of men is invariably much smaller) there are sutra chanting rituals a few times every month. Others prefer not to take part in rituals at all but instead study Buddhist philosophy. All of these practices, and more, are legitimate ways of interacting with Buddhism and no one is ever accused of not being Buddhist for lack of participation in a specific activity. These practices are not, however, randomly picked. Rather, they tend to be gender specific, and are a part of the construction of gender difference, just as gender difference intersects with other factors, such as age and education. Implicit to these variations are very complex gender dynamics related to the family, age and the historical circumstances of Hanoi at the end of the twentieth century. These factors shape what it means to be Buddhist for the people engaged in their individual activities on this day at Quán Sư Pagoda.

**KEY INFORMANTS AND SYMBOLIC SYSTEMS**

Before I went to Hanoi in 1997, I prepared by reading ethnographies dealing with religion and ritual. Much of what I read privileged the explanations of key informants (most often the religious specialists), and seemed not to take adequate account of the divergences in the ways that people practised and articulated their practice. To avoid over-reliance on such specialists, I thought it important to go beyond
a focus on ritual as the defining aspect of religion and look at religious practice – and more specifically, Buddhist practice.

Buddhist practice can be understood as a much broader and more inclusive category of religious action than ritual and more than a ‘cultural system’ (Geertz 1966). Buddhist practice means not only participation in ritual, although ritual in the strictest sense is indeed part of it. Nor is it meditation, which is not a widespread practice in Vietnam, despite the impression given by virtually all descriptions of Vietnamese Buddhism.\(^5\) Buddhist practice can be reading and studying. It can be making offerings and wishes for purely material gain. It can be the wearing of special clothes, prayer beads or uniforms to indicate one’s commitment to Buddhism. It can be building an altar in one’s house or hanging Buddhist calendars and neon clocks with haloed images of the bodhisattva, Guan-yin. It can be going on pilgrimages, which are themselves not always viewed as purely religious events. Or it can be engaging in informal discussions of religious issues. Buddhism can only be defined by the specific contexts of its practice and is not limited strictly to interpretations authorised by discourses of orthodoxy; it allows for both local influence and historical change.

Many studies of religion have tended to take religious practice as synonymous with ritual.\(^6\) My objective here is not to engage in a discussion of ritual as a subject of inquiry; a code to be broken or a tangle of symbols to be unravelled that will give insight into the society of a particular people. It is more to point out that there is still a tendency in anthropological inquiry to rely on ritual specialists for determining a unified ‘meaning’ to a ritual. Sociological factors such as power or accumulation of cultural capital are often ignored and individual experience of a ritual, or motivations for participation in it, are frequently not taken into account. This stress on the importance of establishing, as authoritatively as possible, the fundamental meanings and representations of ritual as an anthropological category is a project that has roots in the history of Christian exegesis (Asad 1993:60). Reconstructing the meaning of ritual is not necessarily a preoccupation of the participants themselves.

\(^5\) One notable exception is the recent work of Cuong Tu Nguyen (1995, 1997), who has shown that despite the way that history has presented Buddhism in Vietnam, Zen has never been a major Buddhist force. Buddhism, as most commonly practised was, and continues to be, much more textual and devotional, resembling Pure Land Buddhism.

\(^6\) For example, Kapferer (1997); Rousseau (1998); and Wilbert (1993).
Religionists and historians have tended to focus on the textual aspects of religion. So, for example, taking part in Buddhism usually means in most studies either (1) chanting sutras; (2) meditating; or (3) studying. No one has brought these together to recognise in an explicit manner that they are all different but valid ways of participating in Buddhism, and that there are other, equally valid ways in which one can 'be a Buddhist'. This thesis moves beyond a focus on the analysis of Buddhism through texts, to a broader examination of everyday religious observance. In doing this, I explore these variations in religious practice as they relate to the gender structure in order to understand how social position and social relationships affect religious practice.

My view of Buddhist practice accepts that what goes on inside the pagoda cannot be isolated from wider social practice. The motivation and the intent of religious practice are informed by the social position (themselves contextual and relational) of those who interact with Buddhist symbols. Participation in Buddhism, and religion in general, provides avenues through which people not only provide meaning, but also wrestle for control of their lives. Buddhist practice is concerned with ‘fundamental processes by which human beings construct and transform their life situations’ (Kapferer 1997:xii), rather than with abstract meanings and discrete cosmological systems.

This basic premise leads me to position myself against claims for universal explanations or definitions of religion, such as the universal core of religion propounded by Eliade (1959). He stresses the similarities of the ‘religious man’ as a universal category and places ‘the sacred’ in the centre of his analysis. Such a view of religion ignores how the process of religious practice is historically constituted and transformed. As Asad states, a universal definition of religion is not a viable project because it cannot take into account historical processes and particularities (1983:238). Even within specific traditions (i.e., understandings of religious practice at a particular temporal and spatial point), the tendency to construct ‘systems’ is a

7 Despite Kapferer's focus on sorcery and anti-sorcery practices as ways for individuals to regain agency and control in their lives, he continues to privilege the interpretation of the religious specialist. His phenomenological interpretation is then extrapolated from this understanding of the meaning of the ritual. In this he seems to be following Turner in assuming that the ethnographer holds a unique, authoritative and privileged interpretive perspective 'more deeply and comprehensively than the actors themselves' (Turner 1967:26).
project of the anthropologist who, while drawing on explanations
from indigenous exegetes, identifies and classifies the symbols to
make them coherent in a way that few, if any, of the practitioners
would do (Asad 1993:61). Indeed, such constructions often miss the
point of the motivation for religious practice in the first place.

This concentration on the symbolic meaning of ritual has led to
privileging the discourses of those who are more articulate in
describing (and ascribing) ritual meaning. The interpretation of these
rituals is typically obtained from a key informant who is a religious
expert, and it is taken for granted that others, if they know anything at
all, would verify the expert’s opinion. As an example of this, Keesing
wrote:

Religions, first of all explain. They answer existential questions: how the world
came to be, how humans are related to natural species and forces, why
humans die, and why their efforts succeed and fail. Undoubtedly, not all
individuals in a society worry about such questions. But every society has its
philosophers who seek answers to existential questions, while others carry on
assured that there are answers, and are more concerned with coping, solving,
and striving than with explaining (Keesing 1975:330; emphasis in original).

What gets lost in this approach, and what I am interested in, is
the multiple ways that people engage in religious practice and how it
relates to their lives. Most practitioners with whom I spoke did not
explicitly relate their practice to a cosmology, though they could if
pressed. This had less to do with an inability as it did with an
unwillingness. Religion for them had nothing to do with the act of
explaining. It had much more to do with framing themselves in the
world through relationships – relationships with the numinous or
transcendent as well as with those who most impacted on their lives.
I have chosen to focus on religious practice, not as an isolated
domain of social life, but as an aspect of everyday social practice.

There are always those who are pointed out or who make
themselves known when an explanation of ritual is requested. What
Keesing’s statement ignores is that the act of being regarded as a
‘philosopher’ is an issue of power and authority, and is not simply
about ‘knowledge’. For this reason, performances of expertise should
not be accepted at face value. It is surprising that the body of
literature addressing the connections between power and the use of
language (e.g., Bourdieu 1991) has not significantly affected the way
that religion and ritual is approached by anthropologists. Key
informants/ritual specialists have a vested interest in providing the anthropologist with ‘deep’ explanations of ritual symbolism. Clifford suggests that ‘indigenous control over knowledge gained in the field can be considerable, and even determining’ (1988:45) of what the anthropologist learns, to which I would add that it is not ‘indigenous’ people as a unitary group but individuals within the group who often have the control. Their authority to speak is a manifestation of their cultural capital, which stems partly through cultural signifiers – social position, gender, education level – but also through the presentation of the self (to use Goffman’s [1956] phrase). The practice of conveying that knowledge to anthropologists is partly a result of that position and partly the very construction of it. It is a performance. Thus, the question is: whose analysis is it and from which contexts is the person speaking? The valuing of a particular kind of authoritative knowledge by anthropologists ignores the social contexts and dynamics from which the explanations emerge; that there are other kinds of knowledge, other interpretations which are not voiced as loudly because of their lack of authority or the status of their bearers.

The approach that I take in this thesis is to try to bring together practice theory with the study of religion, which provides a vantage point from which to critique structural and structural-functionalist explanations (Ortner 1984).

There have been anthropological writings that do not privilege the perspectives of specialists, and accept a plurality of understandings. Geertz’ Religion of Java, for example, takes into account different voices. However, by employing the ideal types of abangan, santri, and prijaji (1976 [1960]:5), he is in danger of making three coherent systems instead of one. Spiro’s (1982) analysis of Burmese Buddhism, like Geertz’, identifies a number of different approaches and interpretations, but bases them specifically on Buddhist practice and the aims that they try to achieve. The value of his approach is that the categories are not discrete. Because they are based on practice, the outcome of his analysis is that categories do not represent distinct social groups within Burmese society. However, Spiro still deals with abstract categories, and this sort of categorisation inevitably fails when confronted with practice at the ground level. The interpretations I encountered tended to have a great deal more fluidity than Spiro accords. Tambiah’s work on Thai Buddhism (1970), which recognises four ritual complexes – rites performed by Buddhist monks; sukhwan ritual; the cult of the
guardian spirits of the village; and rites addressed to malevolent spirits. All of these, however, are nonetheless linked together in a *single total field* (1970:2). He recognises how distinctions for religion of village/civilisation (i.e., local/global) and historical/contemporary are characterised by continuities and transformations (1970:374). The task that he undertakes in looking at these continuities and transformations at the local level of ‘world religion’ is an important one, but my project is to focus on how different understandings (from wherever they are derived) are embodied experiences of religion to the practitioners, all of whom have specific standpoints that emerge from multiple differences.

It is not surprising that many anthropologists seek out and rely on ritual specialists. Often in my own research the problem of the existence of ‘experts’ was an obstacle, something also noted by other anthropologists (e.g., Ortner 1989:7-8). People who are not ‘experts’, particularly women, would redirect me when I questioned them about the religious practices in which they were engaged. It was not, however, that they did not have their own understanding of their religious practices, but that they were muted by their feelings of inadequacy and lack of authority. As Gal writes: ‘some linguistic strategies and genres are more highly valued and carry more authority than others. In a classic case of symbolic domination, even those who do not control these authoritative forms consider them more credible or persuasive’ (1991:177). Women that I spoke with in Hanoi did not consider themselves knowledgeable. Instead, they devalued their own knowledge to the extent that they themselves doubted it. Those who were considered to be experts (inevitably men) eclipsed others’ opinions. Thus, Keesing’s assumption that some are philosophers and some just follow is misleading. These women did, in fact, frame their practice within their understandings of cosmology, but were reluctant to speak of it because of a lack of cultural capital that allowed them to do so. Their silence was a statement about the feelings they had regarding their position rather than a statement of ignorance.

Feminist anthropology has been instrumental in pointing out that societies which have previously been taken as unitary and relatively homogeneous entities are not so. Initially, this critique focussed on the unreflected adoption of the normative masculine point of view by the anthropologist. The critique(s) have become more sophisticated and it is now recognised that ‘woman’ is also not a unitary category. Moore (1993; 1994:6-27) points out that there are multiple axes of
difference – for example class and race – that make the experiences of being a woman widely variant in any given society. Connell (1991, 1987; 1995) makes the same point in his work on masculinities.

In the study of religion, feminist critiques have indicated the extent to which certain religious knowledge, usually held and controlled by men, has been privileged. The focus on particular traditions and rituals within them has often led to the invisibility of women in ritual practice, for the ideal practitioner was assumed to be a man. This invisibility has been partly rectified by scholars turning their attention to specifically female ritual practices, which had previously been ignored because of the inferior status that they held within male-dominated societies. Examples of this sort of work include Kendall’s research on the kut rituals in Korea (1985) and Falk and Gross’s collected work, Unspoken Worlds (1989). In both cases, these show that women are active in religion, and in many cases take leading roles. However, these works mostly focus on rituals and practices which are almost exclusively tied to women’s experience and concerns. Studying women’s religious expressions as marginalised, is in itself an acknowledgement of an unwillingness to deal with women’s participation in mainstream religious traditions.

WOMEN IN BUDDHISM – A TEXTUAL BIAS

Studies of the connection between Buddhism and gender difference have been limited to discussions of women and Buddhism. This reaction to the assumed masculine practitioner of earlier studies is understandable, but a broader engagement of gender which includes men and takes as its basis the relationship between both sexes is fundamentally important if we are to understand how gender and religious practice coalesce. Moreover, studies of women in Buddhism have, by and large, been characterised by the critical interpretation and examination of text and doctrine, and have largely overlooked observed practice. Horner’s book, Women Under Primitive Buddhism (1989 [1930]), is foundational to this approach. Although first published in 1930, it is still referred to by scholars who debate whether or not the core of Buddhism is sexually egalitarian. For example, Horner looks at the controversial story of how the Buddha denied entrance to women into the Sangha three times, and when he was finally persuaded by his main disciple, he commented: ‘But
since, Ananda, women have now received that permission the pure religion, Ananda, will not last so long, the good law will now stand fast for only five hundred years’ (Horner 1989 [1930]:105). Horner argues that,

Although this statement is strongly worded, and is usually interpreted to mean that Gotama [the historical Buddha] grudged women their entry into the Order, it would be a mistake to let one utterance colour our entire opinion of his attitude towards the situation. It should be remembered too, that monks edited the sayings attributed to Gotama and they would naturally try to minimise the importance which he gave to women (1989 [1930]:105).

Horner instead stresses Buddhist philosophy, pointing out that it allows for no distinction between men’s and women’s capacity for achieving nirvana. She notes that the Samyutta-Nikaya says: ‘And be it woman, be it man for whom Such chariot doth wait, by that same car Into Nirvana’s presence shall they come’ (Horner 1989 [1930]:104).

This type of scholarship, which emphasises the egalitarian nature of the Buddhist textual tradition, continues today with such works as Murcott’s The First Buddhist Women (1991). In her book, she studies a group of poems usually considered to have been composed by wise women of early Buddhism, transmitted orally for six centuries, and finally written down in Sri Lanka in the first century B.C.E. (1991:3). The poems are called the Therigatha, meaning ‘Songs of the Women Elders’. She says that the Therigatha are ‘a record... of a major religious tradition in woman’s spirituality, based on the equality of women and men in the realm of the spirit and women’s ability to assume spiritual authority in the secular context’ (Murcott 1991:10). Like Horner, Murcott uses early Buddhist texts to show that in Buddhism women can be empowered, while paying no attention to the obvious disadvantages that, even at the textual level, have been used to subordinate women. For example, only at the end of the book does she tell us of the Eight Special Rules regulating relations between monks and nuns given by the Buddha, that say nuns must remain

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8 Before the Common Era (B.C.E.) is a non-sectarian designation for B.C.
9 The Eight Special Rules:

1. Any nun, no matter how long she had been in the order, must treat any monk, even the rudest novice, as if he were her senior.
subordinate to monks, regardless of ranking or achievement, and which place the order of nuns firmly under the control of the order of monks. She further mentions the rules governing the everyday practice of monastics. Nuns must observe 311 rules to the monks’ 227, and offences by women were punished more harshly by the Buddha.

Paul’s (1985) approach addresses contradictory images of women in Mahayana Buddhist texts. She writes:

Many sympathetic to the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism believe it to be an egalitarian religion, more supportive of women than either the earlier form of Buddhism or other religions. Indeed, there are positive images of the feminine in the Mahayana tradition, and laywomen and nuns play an active role in Buddhist religious practices. However, texts preserved in the Buddhist canon reveal a wide spectrum of views, most of which reflect male attitudes, the educated religious elite, whose views do not often reflect sexual egalitarianism (Paul 1985:xix).

Like Horner, the way she accounts for conflicting ideas and images is by separating ‘the propounded ideals of Mahayana Buddhist teaching’ from ‘the prejudices of a society that challenges those ideals’ (Paul 1985:xxviii).

Falk (1989) attempts to give some explanations as to why the order of Buddhist nuns died out in India. Unlike Paul, Horner, and Murcott, Falk tries to bring together Buddhist doctrine with Buddhist practice. She points out that the male and female monastic communities were ‘almost equal’ but not quite. Inequality, according to Falk remained primarily because of the Eight Special Rules for nuns given by the Buddha when he decided to admit them into the

2. Nuns should not take up residence during the annual rainy-season retreat in any place where monks were not available to supervise them.
3. Monks would set the dates for the biweekly assemblies.
4. During the ceremony at the end of the rainy-season retreat, when monks and nuns invited criticisms from their own communities, the nuns must also invite criticism from the monks.
5. Monks must share in setting and supervising penances for the nuns.
6. Monks must share in the ordination of nuns.
7. Nuns must never revile or abuse monks.
8. Nuns must not reprimand monks directly (although they could and did report one monk’s offensive behavior to another, who then might take appropriate actions to correct it) (Falk 1989:159-160).
Sangha (1989:158-59). The nuns in early Buddhism 'apparently did not find these rules oppressive... nor... did they consider themselves inferior' (1989:160), and these rules did not 'hinder women in what was considered to be their most important pursuit – practicing the discipline that led to liberation' (1989:160). Taking into account the social context, of patriarchal control of women in India at the time, the Rules imposed relatively modest restrictions on women (1989:160). However, the Rules prevented women from becoming leaders in the life of the whole community. This meant that men received better education, more attention, and consequently more donations. It is this lack of prestige and consequent lack of support, Falk suggests, that may have led to the extinction of the Buddhist order of nuns in India, and eventually in all of Theravada Buddhism. The way that Falk deals with these issues, though based on texts, is a significant attempt at trying to link doctrine and practice. However, her premise, that one can determine practice from doctrine, is one that needs to be critically examined, and it is through an anthropological approach that this can be done.

Keyes tries to draw together the gap between textual imagery and practice. In his paper: 'Mother, Mistress, But Never a Monk', Keyes asserts that Buddhism contributes to the relative situation of women in contemporary Thailand. In doing so, he relies largely on images of women in Buddhist text and doctrine that have been absorbed into popular culture, asserting that texts have a public character from which people appropriate meaning. Keyes further states that texts have more cultural coherence than 'action or the everyday discourse that accompanies action' (Keyes 1984: 232, n.2).

However, Kirsch (1985) questions the assumption that we can rely on textual material to understand Buddhist women's practice. We cannot assume that texts (not in the 'Post-modern' sense, but as documents) have cultural coherence and are therefore preferable to everyday discourses. Kirsch wrote in response to Keyes:

To be sure, texts do exhibit a kind of coherence, and that coherence is cultural in form. And, no doubt, texts do help people make sense of the world and act in it. But the cultural coherence conveyed in text is only partial. For one thing, insofar as texts provide a coherent view of some 'domain of experience,' presumably there are other texts relating to other domains of experience (Kirsch 1985: 916).
Horner (1989 [1930]) and Murcott (1991) have shown that there are textual references which are empowering, just as there are those which are disempowering for women. However, beyond the contradictions within the texts themselves, interpretations of these texts are never uniform. I encountered this dilemma at a Vietnamese pagoda in Montréal where I formerly did my research. Due to adaptations that were a result of the Vietnamese migration to Canada the pagoda leadership was very different from anything that I have ever heard of in Buddhist monastic practice: it was shared between a monk and a nun (Soucy 1994:5; 1996:37). The monk was the abbot, but he took very little part in the running of the pagoda. It was the nun, rather, who took charge of the lay community, as well as the monastic community, which had both novice monks and novice nuns. One can easily see the contradictions that would arise from such a situation. If one was to assume that Buddhist doctrine was followed to the letter, how could this head nun be the teacher of the monks? According to the Eight Special Rules, of which the nun was aware, ‘A nun, even of a hundred years’ standing, shall respectfully greet, rise up in the presence of, bow down before, and perform all proper duties towards a monk ordained even a day,’ and ‘Admonition by nuns of monks is forbidden; admonition of nuns by monks is not forbidden’ (Murcott 1991:197).

The head nun dismissed these rules. She said that they were not intended to be unidirectional: respect must be mutually given. More importantly, she pointed out that, as the novices’ teacher, she should be respected as such, whether she was a man or a woman. Thus she relied on models of the teacher/student relationship, and ignored contradictory gender models, both Buddhist and Vietnamese (Soucy 1994:109, 116). In the end, the fact remained that she was a leader in the community, and a well-respected one at that. At the same time, people who did not accept her leadership, and therefore her interpretation of Buddhist doctrine concerning the place of women within the Sangha, chose to attend one of the other pagodas in Montréal.10

10 Individualism is a major feature of Buddhism. As a Buddhist, one can practice at any pagoda one chooses, or at a number of pagodas, or at none. Furthermore, religious practice, especially for Mahayana Buddhism, may be performed exclusively at home. The level of engagement is also up to the individual. For instance, as a Buddhist lay person, it is considered to be meritorious to abstain from eating meat on at least the first and fifteenth day of every month. However, if one chooses, one may abstain on more than those two days – the more days the better. As a Buddhist lay person one is obliged to do
The study of women in Buddhism has relied largely on Buddhist doctrine and text. By stressing religious practice instead of just text or ritual, we can overcome the limitations of previous studies dealing with Buddhism and gender, because their overwhelming tendency to rely on texts. It is important, as Keyes states, to understand the imagery that is available for people to appropriate meaning, but not to the exclusion of practice, for there are a multiplicity of interpretations and a multiplicity of symbolisms that can be drawn upon. Kirsch writes:

...the search for cultural coherence should focus not on texts, not on actions as such, nor on everyday discourse, but on the lives of those we attempt to understand, be they rural mothers, village maidens, urban prostitutes, monks, or laymen. Those we seek to understand are ‘persons’ and it is in their lives that text-encoded images, everyday discourse, and action intersect in meaningful ways. Like texts, these persons and their lives are cultural constructions, having a public character and a coherence of their own. While they may be informed and guided by images contained in texts, by paradigms conveyed in rituals and myths, they are not reducible to them... it is only through these persons’ lives that texts assume any significance at all (1985:317; emphasis in original).

The shortcomings of the body of work on women in Buddhism are substantial. It focuses on symbolic representations, outlining how women, according to the Buddhist textual tradition, can be seen as either strong or subordinate. The symbols are ambiguous, and textual analysis cannot explain the relation they have to actual practice, and how it is put to use in the process of the constitution of gender differences. Because practice is largely ignored, one gets the sense from these works that symbols are static and taken at face value. In actuality, many of the textual symbols remain unavailable for all but a few individuals, and are not uniformly accepted by all Buddhists in all very little. This stems largely from Buddhist philosophy, which states that we are trapped in an endless cycle of suffering because of our ignorance of the true nature of the world (impermanence) which leads us to cling to things and resist change – an impossible task. Thus, by letting go of our attachment to things, and the belief that there is something essentially us (which there is not), we cease to produce the karmic energy which causes us to be reborn endlessly (for a comprehensive explanation, see Rahula (1974 [1959]). As a base philosophy, this led to the Theravada school of Buddhism concentrating on individual liberation, of which the Mahayana school was critical. The Mahayana school, instead, chooses to forego nirvana in order to stay in the world to assist others. However, practice still remains quite individualistic. Different beliefs and different levels of faith are accepted as being appropriate for people at disparate levels of consciousness. Robinson and Johnson (1982), offer a good overview of Buddhism.
countries. A substantial amount of work needs to be done in order to explain how these textual images of women, both positive and negative, are interpreted and applied, if at all, by Buddhist women and men. In order to understand how this happens, a more encompassing look at gender differences, rather than a focus on women, is required in relation to Buddhist practice.

Religious practice as a part of total social practice and religious symbolism tells us little on its own, without looking at how these images are negotiated. Therefore, if one is to write about gender and religion, it is essential to look at how the gender structure is formed through practice; how it is negotiated constantly:

(Gender structure) is a unity – always imperfect and under construction – of historical composition. I mean ‘composition’ as in music: a tangible, active and often difficult process of bringing elements into connection with each other and thrashing out their relationships. It is a matter of a real historical process of interaction and group formation. The difference from music is not that the process lacks a composer, but that it has a whole stack of them; and that all are inside the piece being composed, since what is being composed is their own lives (Connell 1991 [1987]:116).

A BRIEF NOTE ABOUT THE STATE

References to ‘the state’ appear throughout this thesis. Perhaps in other cultural settings it would not feature as prominently. The importance of the state as a social force is essential to my ethnography because of the omnipresence of the state in religion and gender discourse in Vietnam. Both religion and gender would be difficult to deal with in a meaningful way without taking the state into account. Therefore, it is important to explain what I mean when I refer to ‘the state’.

Vietnam is formally a Socialist country in that the government founded by Hồ Chí Minh, and based on Marxist-Leninist ideas, remains intact. However, the situation in Vietnam is much like Evans reports of Laos, in that despite the government structure being styled on a socialist model, ‘it is economically and socially capitalist by
almost any social scientific criteria’ (1998:1). The economy is, like China, moving to a free-market base. The policy under which this transformation has occurred is called the Renovation (Đổi Mới). Since its initiation in 1986, state-owned enterprises have increasingly been privatised, foreign investment has been encouraged, and people have, at least economically, been given a free reign. Concurrent with these economic changes, there has been a substantial decrease in social welfare and subsidies. While control over the economy has been loosened, and the socialist ethic of equality largely abandoned, the Communist Party still remains in power, and its members maintain the symbols of a socialist cosmology as a tool to legitimize their continued existence.

‘The state’, as I refer to it in this thesis, should not be understood as a unitary structure with a rigorous function, but as nonetheless a focus of power which is diffused throughout society (Foucault 1982:224; Smart 1985:130). Thus, the state is composed of disparate interests:

Recognizing that the state is not a unity implies a series of arenas which constitute the state both discursively and through shifting interlocking connections and practices. At one time there may be stronger links, and a clearer and more coherent set of intentionalities embodied within these apparatuses than at another. Similarly, more or less power can accrue to the state as a set of institutions and players across time and place (Watson, S. 1990:7).

It is not, in reality, a monolithic structure, although when dealing with the outcomes rather than the processes of the state’s use of power, it can often seem that way. In fact, there are struggles and conflicts within factions and echelons of the government. The effect of this is that occasionally conflicting results seem to emerge. For example, while one part of the state apparatus promotes gender equality, another implements policies which perpetuate images of submissive women and dominant men. Likewise, religion is often the site of conflicting messages. While one view, linked to Marxist discourses of religion, delegates it to feudal superstition, another state-originated view of religion draws links with Vietnamese tradition and is employed to stave off the flood of ‘social evils’ from the West.

However, scholars doing work on Vietnamese economy tend to call it ‘transitional’ (e.g., Fforde and de Vylder 1988, 1995), though perhaps a better term might be ‘mixed’.
that have become an increasing concern since Vietnam ‘opened the door’ (mở cửa) to the West, which happened at the same time as the economic Renovation (Đổi Mới).

Religious practice is enmeshed in the exercise of state power. For example, the Buddhist institution at Quan Su Pagoda is pressured to conform with the state, including those of the Fatherland Front (an umbrella for all mass organisations in Vietnam – see Chapter Three), and the police who survey the activities there. While in recent years people have become freer to practice as they wish, the state at any time may take a harder stance against what it labels alternatively ‘feudal’ (phong kiến) or ‘backwards’ (lạc hậu) practices, ‘superstition’ (mê tín), or ‘social evils’ (tể nạn xã hội). The technologies of control are firmly in place, and complaints of human rights abuses against Buddhist monks who have maintained a non-official Buddhist organisation (The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam), emerge almost daily on the Internet.

The state provides a discursive framing of religious practice and gender difference in the differentiation between religious beliefs and superstition. While freedom of belief (tin ngưỡng) is guaranteed under the Vietnamese constitution, superstition continues to be mentioned in speeches by leaders of the Communist Party as feudal, backwards, and as a social evil; in short, as something that needs to be wiped out. What constitutes religion as opposed to religious belief, however, remains unclear. This means that various organs of the state, or even different members of the police in different areas act on very ambiguous and conflicting criteria. The recent trend to give more freedom to religious practice has not been officially legislated, but has been signalled through the current leniency in regulating activity. Media reports on superstition, however, continue to target such activities as expensive weddings and funerals, burning spirit money (vàng mã) and other immolative objects (hàng mã), fortune-telling (xem bói), séances (gọi hồn) and spirit possession rituals (lên döst), and so on. The differentiation of religious practice from superstition is fundamental for the gender-religion nexus in Vietnam because it is primarily women who are viewed as

12 Mật Trần Tổ Quốc.
13 Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Thống Nhất.
14 While religious belief (tin ngưỡng) is mentioned in the constitution, words such as ‘religion’ (tôn giáo), ‘religious dogma’ (giáo chánh and ‘religious path’ (đạo) are absent.
superstitious. Consequently, women’s religious practice is devalued and made illegitimate while male rituals are valorised. This is especially the case in recent years where there has increasingly been a return to valuing Vietnamese culture and tradition, of which men’s religious practice is seen as emblematic. I make no claim that religion is purely a site of domination, legitimation, or resistance to a political or gender order (although all of these are indeed present). Religious practice is largely tied to a gendered habitus, which is enmeshed and reproduced through social practice. The conjuncture of state, gender and religion is directly relevant to an understanding of how religious practice ties in with the lived experiences of practitioners in Hanoi.

RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE

There has been a re-enchantment of religious practice in Vietnam since the late 1980s (Endres 1998; Malarney 1998; Marr 1994:15). Since the beginning of the century there have been critiques by the urban elite against the excesses of village ritual, where approximately ten to fifteen percent of a village household budget was given over for such purposes (Malarney 1993:281). At the time of the land reforms in the mid-1950s, communal houses (see Chapter Five), temples and shrines ‘were all converted from sacred village space into functional components of a desacralized village geography’ (Malarney 1993:289). This was achieved through a number of measures, including letting women enter communal houses, where they had formerly been prohibited; forbidding the practice of all forms of ritual, including the annual village rites, and by converting these spaces into functional structures such as store-rooms for agricultural cooperatives (Malarney 1998:4).

The reaction to government reform policies concerning ritual were not uniformly accepted. Many people, particularly women, continued clandestine Buddhist and spirit possession rituals (Malarney 1998:5-6). Luong (1993) comments that the unofficial Elderly Women’s Buddhist Association (Hội Chữ Bà) continued to exist throughout the revolutionary period, that is, old women did not give up their everyday religious practice. While men were far more restricted because of the closer ties that many had with the Communist Party, they usually turned a blind eye, at an individual level, to the religious practices of their mothers and wives.
Nonetheless, many Vietnamese supported the reforms, and though the wide-scale destruction that was wrought in China during the Cultural Revolution did not happen in Vietnam, many ritual objects were destroyed and the performance of rituals curtailed:

Statues, votive tablets and worshipping items were thrown into village ponds. So-called “superstitious” ritual practices like divination, the making of amulets, the burning of votive paper, rituals of spiritual possession and seances, were seen as blocking the path of progress and thus banned outright (Endres 1998:5).

The result was that there was a ‘severe constriction of acceptable practice’ (Malarney 1998:5). Even Buddhism, which technically fell outside of the ban on superstition, was extremely restricted in what it could do; not least of all because of over-zealous local cadres who conflated many Buddhist practices with superstitious ones (Malarney 1998:5).

However, since the late 1980s, many of these reforms have been reversed, and there is a more permissive attitude to ritual, as they have been coopted and re-defined by the state. Now, rather than regarding all rituals as superstitious, many are deemed worthy of preservation, especially those ‘which can be used to develop the spirit of patriotism’ (Endres 1998:6), such as the cults of Hai Bá Trương and Trần Hưng Đạo, national heroes who fought against the Chinese. The result of this resurrection of tradition to serve nationalistic ends has been that pagodas are receiving more devotees than they were ten years ago, and the donations from these devotees is resulting in the renovation of old pagodas and construction of new ones. Hordes of people head out at the beginning of the lunar year on pilgrimages to a variety of sites regarded as being supernaturally efficacious. Ancestral altars, which some of my informants said they had hidden during less permissive years, have resumed central places in many homes (and were present in more or less central places in all homes that I visited in Hanoi and the surrounding countryside). Other officially prohibited religious activities, such as spirit possession rituals (lên dạng) and séances (gọi hồn – used to communicate with dead members of the family) have also become popular, although they are less prominent than Buddhist or communal house rituals because of continued state disapproval.

It is obvious not only from the Vietnamese case, but also most other countries, that modernisation does not necessarily, as Weber
(1948 [1930]) predicted, bring with it an increase in secularisation.\textsuperscript{15} Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) have argued of Sri Lanka that the decrease in the chance to have desires and needs met through rational means have led to an increase of religious practice centred on spirit possession and sorcery to the detriment of orthodox Buddhist practice. Because of the particular political and economic situation which has emerged in the latter half of this century, ‘people want a lot of things and no longer see rational or practical ways of getting them’ (1988:100).\textsuperscript{16}

The explanations of most people I spoke with in Hanoi for why there has been a renewal of religious practice centred on two factors: the relaxing of the state’s anti-religion stance, and an increase in disposable wealth. In contrast to Gombrich’s and Obeyesekere’s explanation for Sri Lanka, most Vietnamese did not believe that a renewal of faith has, in fact, taken place. Instead, the factors that prevented them from practising in the past have ceased to exist, and consequently, practice has resumed.

In Vietnam, although reform has brought an improvement in the living standards of most people, it has also produced a sense of uncertainty. Certainly the so-called ‘Asian Economic Crisis’ in 1997 underscored the volatile natures of global economics and business in an open market. In southern Vietnam, Taylor has hypothesised that the economic situation has led to an increase in the worship of female spirits (1999). In the north, both Malarney (1993:3) and Pham Van Bich (1999:95) have hypothesised a connection between an increase in religious practice and the change from a planned economy to a market economy.

The tie between religion and economics was also made by many of my informants in Hanoi, pointing out to me that while men are not usually religious, those who are engaged in business can become so. People describe how careful businessmen are about such practices as geomancy or the burning of spirit money (vàng mạ) on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month. In one office the (female) secretary

\textsuperscript{15} This is amply pointed out by such scholars as Burke (1979), Comaroff (1994), Harding (1994), and Kendall (1996).

\textsuperscript{16} Weller has made similar arguments for religion in Taiwan, especially in the instance of the rise of ‘amoral cults’. He points out that the combination of the rise of Taiwan as an ‘Asian Tiger’, entailing a fair amount of economic risk, with the lack of moral direction given by the state has played a significant role in the rising prominence of cults centred on ‘matricidal magistrates and gambling gods’ (1996; see also 1994).
would make sure that these things were done, and while the (male) director of the company would scoff at these practices, he would also remind her to do it and would pay for the offerings. Another informant pointed out that many businessmen would consult fortunetellers to pick auspicious days on which to make important transactions, and would consult geomancers to find out the most positive furniture arrangement for the office.

Buddhism has regained prominence to some extent, but tensions about the appropriate role of Buddhism remain between factions in the state apparatus. While on the one hand some stress a strictly Marxist view that all religion is false, others look to religion as fundamentally tied to Vietnamese tradition, and as a force to be used against the increasing pressure of foreign influence that is perceived to have led to a decrease in morality and the incursion of ‘social evils’ (tể non xã hội). In neighbouring Cambodia, where the Khmer Rouge attempted to obliterate religious practice, the current regime re-established a close association of the political elite to the traditional Theravadin model of royal patronage (Keyes 1994). Keyes notes, the downfall of the Marxist regime in Cambodia was partly due to their ‘fail[ure] to account for the compelling attraction to religious visions of community repudiated by the Communist holder of state power’ (1994:65). In this respect, the situation in Vietnam bears a closer similarity to that of Laos, where the Communist regime has remained in power but, recognising the failure of its replacement symbols, has started to return to the ‘traditional’ symbols that hold deeper popular meaning (Evans 1998). In Vietnam, while Communist Party members were not required to profess atheism, the vagueness of the categories of ‘belief’ (tin nguông), which was permitted, and ‘superstition’ (mê tín), which was officially banned, made men especially reluctant to profess any religion or take part in any activities which might be construed as superstitious (Malarney 1998:5).

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

Part One describes how the gender structure and religious practice come together in Hanoi society. Part Two deals with particular religious practices, building on the gender-religion nexus developed in Part One.
Chapter One is intended to provide background to gender practice in Hanoi. In doing so, it looks at some of the conflicting imagery of gender difference. It takes the reader through particular sites of gender reproduction – The Museum of Vietnamese Women in Hanoi, women's magazines, the family – which open up some of the key aspects of gender difference in Vietnam. They are not presented as key sites, but as instances of contradictory cross-currents in the construction of gendered social identities.

The second chapter introduces the disparate sites of the Vietnamese religious landscape. It examines the formal model of Vietnamese religion that concentrates on the three traditions that came from China (Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism) as being somehow the core of Vietnamese religion. This model has a long pedigree of entanglement with the politics of religion in Vietnam. As a counterpoint to this model, I describe a division of the religious landscape that centres on the Buddhist pantheon and the spirits. This describes a holistic model and reflects the cosmological conceptions that I most frequently encountered in the speech and actions of everyday (non-specialist) Hanoian interlocutors with the supernatural. At stake in the discourse between the two frameworks are issues of heterodoxy and orthodoxy; authority and marginality; legitimacy and illegitimacy. Chapter Three introduces the pagodas where I principally conducted research, Phúc Lộc Pagoda and Quán Sứ Pagoda, and focuses on how they architecturally embody different religious discourses. It draws gender back into the picture, showing how the discourses of religion versus superstition (which form the core on state views of religion), are largely centred on the religious practices of women.

The three chapters that make up Part Two elaborate my central thesis: that gender difference plays a pivotal role in Buddhist practice. Chapter Four looks at the making of offerings and wishes and the distribution of the offerings after they have been infused with supernatural power of the Buddhas and spirits. I explore the relation between making offerings and the dynamics of women’s practice in their homes.

The fifth chapter looks at the core ritual practitioners of the Buddhist pagodas, and their main activity: reciting sutras. It is a practice undertaken by both men and women, but the interpretations that they have of the practice and the motivations for doing it are remarkably different for men and women. While for many women the
practice of reciting sutras is described in similar terms to making offerings and distributing 俸, men describe their motivations and interpretations in doctrinal terms. Further, the men who become involved in reciting sutras tend to position themselves within the pagoda community in a very different manner to women. This chapter also examines competition and status within the pagoda.

The final chapter looks at a practice specific to men: Buddhist study. As with the men in the previous chapter who become ritual specialists, men who study Buddhism but do not recite sutras are often concerned with doctrinal positions. At the root of their practice is a concern for knowledge-based self-cultivation (tu thân), a pursuit with thoroughly masculine connotations. While this sort of practice is one which reinforces hegemonic gender structures, involvement with religion does not fit squarely with communist, or indeed Confucian, visions of society that underlines atheism as being the ultimate reality. Thus, they distinguish their practice from that of women, choosing to engage in the intellectual aspects of Buddhism. They adhere firmly to a doctrinal stance and rhetorically separate themselves from superstition.

The conclusion brings together the central argument of the thesis, emphasising how looking at Buddhist practice rather than ritual or textual analysis can broaden our understanding of how taking part in Buddhist activities relates to the lives of the practitioners. It will also tie together how gender stands as an important determining factor in religious behaviour and discourse. These discourses on religion and gender inform the way that people think about and practice Buddhism.
There are multiple representations of gender roles and gender differences in Vietnam that serve different rhetorical purposes. In many works concerning gender in Vietnam, there has been a tendency to stereotype 'women's position' in Vietnamese society, usually drawing on mythical and historical images of women in powerful roles. For example, much is made of the Two Trưng sisters involvement in a rebellion against the Chinese in the first century C.E. However, while women are held forward as traditionally having had a much higher position in comparison with Chinese women, other studies have tried to show the extent to which women have been dominated by men, especially under feudal and colonial rule.

In this chapter I draw out some of the discourses that surround gender difference, especially those issued by the state, the academy and the media. I also show that it is considerably more complex being a woman or a man in Hanoi today than simple stereotypes allow. The observed social practices defy characterisations of women being either weak or powerful.

STATE DISCOURSES: THE MUSEUM OF VIETNAMESE WOMEN

On Lý Thường Kiệt Street, a major road in the French section of Hanoi just south of Hoàn Kiếm Lake, there is a museum dedicated to women, housed in a beautiful building styled after the surrounding
women, housed in a beautiful building styled after the surrounding French villas. The museum takes up the three floors above the main lobby, and is separated into ‘Vietnamese women in the defence and construction of the country’ on the second floor, ‘development of the Vietnam Women’s Union’ (hereafter, the VWU) on the third floor, and ‘women’s dress of different nationalities in Vietnam’ on the fourth. A wide set of stairs at the entrance leads visitors into a domed chamber where they are confronted with a statue in heroic Soviet style of a buxom woman wearing the traditional Vietnamese dress (áo dài). On her shoulder she supports a healthy-looking child. She symbolises the ideal of Vietnamese women: strong, with a hint of tradition and with her primary role in the family. The title of the statue ‘Vietnamese Mother’ along with the prominent place that it is given, underlines the importance of the symbolism of motherhood to state discourses on gender.

*Plate 2: Vietnamese Mother*

1 From the pamphlet handed out at the entrance.
Several agendas inform state-directed research and official representations of women in Vietnam, and these are transparently displayed at the Museum of Vietnamese Women. The museum displays reflect social scientific research on women, mostly conducted by women. The mandate of the museum is outlined in the pamphlet that is handed out at the entrance:

The museum is a research center about women, a place to preserve key documents, exhibits and displays on the role of women in Vietnamese history and culture. It is also the center of information and cultural activities helping large masses of women to understand the fine traditions of Vietnamese women, to grasp necessary knowledge of the society and family-life (museum pamphlet).

In fact, the ‘large masses of women’ guided through the museum are almost exclusively from the countryside, with an occasional foreign tourist. These women are part of organised trips put together by their local Women’s Union. I never met a woman from Hanoi who had visited the museum, or who even knew where it was.

The close connection between the museum, the Vietnamese academy, and the state is evident in the fact that the structure is used as a research centre as well as a ‘cultural building of the Vietnam Women’s Union’ (museum pamphlet). The museum glorifies the Vietnamese past as heroic and virtuous; a model for the present generation to follow. As such, the academy cannot be seen as independent of the state, for its members ‘self-consciously place their endeavours within the broader theoretical parameters of a variety of Marxism, and their theoretical and practical concerns are directly related to state policy’ (Evans 1985:117). They write what Evans calls ‘lobotomised histories’, referring to the state-sanctioned narrative which so often clash with people’s remembered pasts (1998:189; see also Taylor 1998). As with the Laotian case that Evans (1998) describes, in Vietnam the contradictions have contributed to an increasingly prevalent view that the state and its officials are illegitimate and corrupt. Nonetheless, the first and foremost agenda of the museum is to embed women in this state narrative.

2 I choose the word ‘academy’ to describe the total institution, comprised of Vietnamese scholars, universities and research centres. They are all largely under the control of the state. Their research and writing is carefully scrutinised by different controlling bodies, and there is a great deal of self-censorship as well as conscious effort to conform to the current state-held views. Because of this, the body of work that is produced is surprisingly uniform.
prevalent view that the state and its officials are illegitimate and corrupt. Nonetheless, the first and foremost agenda of the museum is to embed women in this state narrative.

Looking to the Past: China as Other

In the Museum of Vietnamese Women, nationalist discourses concerning women are evident on entry to the first of the three exhibition halls. The observer is presented at the outset with an artistic image of the mother of the Vietnamese race, Âu Cơ, followed by a display of the supposedly matriarchal Bronze Age Đông Sơn culture, which is claimed to be the original Vietnamese culture. There is then a bas-relief of the Two Trưng Sisters who led an insurrection against the Chinese rulers of Vietnam; an overused trope that is meant to give evidence that Vietnamese culture, stripped of its Sinitic influences, accords women with a great deal of power.³ Then there is a display that highlights female deities worshipped by the Vietnamese; further evidence of women’s high status.⁴

Plate 3: Four Mother Goddess

³ For examples of the use of the Two Trưng Sisters motif, see: VWU (1989:7); and Mai & Le (1978:6-20). Bergman (1976:30-31) is an example of a Marxist, feminist writer who incorporated these narratives into her account of women in Vietnam as part of the dissenting movement against American armed involvement in Indochina.

⁴ An article written by Ngo Duc Thinh (1996a) about ‘the cult of the female spirits’ is a good example of this kind of assertion.
All of these displays are aimed at showing how, before the millennium of Chinese rule, Vietnamese women held a high and respected position in society. These museum displays mirror academic writings that make much the same claims, and take specific evidence as icons to show that women had higher status in Vietnam than China: before the Chinese occupation (111 B.C.E–939 C.E.) Vietnamese society was matriarchal; women were often leaders in uprisings against the Chinese; the worship of mother goddesses in Vietnam shows respect for women; women in Vietnam never bound their feet, and were not confined to their homes. The point of this is to make feminism a part of state goals; to encompass it, thereby denying the possibility for it to become a competing factor with the dominant state discourse.

Plate 4: Two Trung Sisters

5 For example, VWU (1989:7); Mai & Le (1978:6-20).
The essentially nationalistic use of China as an imagined other is pervasive in many other contexts, as well as accounts of women in Vietnam. Where it is admitted that in the past women in Vietnam have had a low position, it is usually blamed on the impact of ideas and practices from China (ignoring the fact that Chinese influence became more pronounced in the fifteenth century, long after the Chinese rulers were gone) (Woodside 1971). Confucianism and feudalism are targeted as remnants of Chinese cultural imperialism, with French colonial rule seen as merely reinforcing, for the sake of expediency, the more conservative aspects of a system that they found on arrival. This negative period in the history of Vietnamese women is first compared with the pre-Chinese ‘matriarchal society’ (an imagined history), and then with the situation of women today, showing that the Socialist state has righted the wrongs perpetuated by the previous regimes. This is typical of progressivist socialist scholarship, as well as the rhetoric of post-socialism, that takes as given that Vietnam is constantly improving under socialism:

Against the dark background of culture and science unnaturally imposed by the French colonists, Vietnamese women were also fettered by feudalism... More than forty years have elapsed since the August 1945 Revolution. While carrying out national construction and a war of resistance first against the French colonialists and later against the American imperialists, the Vietnamese people have built up a national education system in which, for the first time in our history, women whom Confucian patriarchs considered unworthy of an education are free to attend school and university (Hoàng 1987:7).8

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6 There have been a number of scholars who have mentioned Vietnam's intricate relationship with China. It has been dealt with by K. Taylor (1983) in the period in which China occupied Vietnam, and by Woodside (1971, 1988) in the post-Chinese period and again (1976) in the modern period. It has also been mentioned by Evans (1985:127), and P. Taylor (1999:40) in relation to the Vietnamese academy and in the mind of an average southern Vietnamese respectively.

7 ‘Post-socialism’ is used by Evans (1998) to refer to the so-called socialist governments who have retained their power and continue to use the label and rhetoric of socialism for legitimacy, but no longer implement clearly socialist policies. The contrariness of ‘free-market socialism’ is readily seen by visitors to Vietnam as well as to the Vietnamese themselves.

8 The incidence of girls' education is declining, however, and many parents believe girls need not have a higher education (Nguyen V.C. 1997:5-6).
Women as Patriots: The Rhetoric of Mobilisation

Another agenda, which aims at encouraging Vietnamese women to be patriotic and obedient to the government, is also a strong theme at the museum. Women are presented as heroines both in the defence of the nation as well as in their productive efforts as sources of labour and in their reproductive roles as mothers – especially mothers of soldiers. The role of women in the wars of resistance is a constant theme. In the museum there are many displays that hold up individual examples of

*Plate 5: Vietnamese Martyr in the Revolution*
female patriotism. For example, there is a carrying pole that was used by a Vietnamese woman to bludgeon a French soldier to death; a sword carried by a female revolutionary; a statue of a female martyr in the struggle against France, a picture of a woman standing in front of an American tank with arms outstretched to deny it passage; an assortment of equipment used by women who helped cart supplies up the mountains in preparation for the great battle of Điện Biên Phủ; crafts done by women imprisoned by the Americans; and a display representing the women who lived and fought in the Củ Chi tunnels, a network near Saigon that stretched for hundreds of kilometres, used for combating and hiding from the Americans. These displays take up half of the first floor.

This nationalist discourse of women struggling against feudal, colonial and imperial oppression is duplicated in academic literature. *La Femme au Vietnam* (Mai & Le 1978) is an example of such nationalistic writings. The authors begin by describing the unbearable condition of women under feudalism, and then how the French supported these feudal ideas. They write: ‘French colonialism did nothing but prolong feudalism while adding new forms of exploitation and enslavement/servitude’ (Mai & Le 1978: 80). The rest of the book goes on to outline how things are much better now, under the current regime: ‘For the first time in Vietnamese history, young girls and young women no longer lacquered their teeth or wore the traditional turban. They spoke of individual freedom, the freedom of marriage, of the struggle against family oppression and for equality...’ (Mai & Le 1978: 93).

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9 ‘le colonialisme française ne fit que prolonger le féodalisme en y ajoutant cependant de nouvelles formes d’exploitation et d’asservissement’ (Mai & Le 1978: 80) [translation mine].

10 ‘Pour la première fois, dans l’histoire vietnamienne, des jeunes filles et jeunes femmes ne se laquaient plus les dents, ne portaient plus les turban traditionnels..., parlaient de liberté individuelle, de liberté de mariage, de lutte contre l’oppression familiale et pour l’égalité...’ (Mai & Le 1978: 93) [translation mine].
More recently, Tran Thi Van Anh and Le Ngoc Hung wrote:

The history of Vietnam is full of many examples of great women who led troops and led the country in the construction of the nation. A long-standing tradition of the Vietnamese is respect for women. The problem of treating women unequally by overestimating men and neglecting women, which stems from feudal ideology, has been criticized, fought against and eradicated (1997:153).

Feudalism is not only blamed on colonialist or imperialist rule, but has in the past been regarded as primarily reproduced in the family. The family is seen as the last bastion of feudalism and 'an obstacle to the establishment and defence of the new society' (Pham V.B. 1999:47; see also Jayawardena 1986:196-212). While the rhetoric today does not stress it as much as in the 1950s, it is still present. In the period from 1945 to 1986 there were enormous efforts to restructure the Vietnamese family. Restructuring the family was specifically tied to the issue of women's emancipation, which related directly to the Communist view of the individual in society.
The so-called women's liberation movement emerged in Vietnam. 'Women's liberation' means the right to health protection, education, economic security, a job that will not break their back, the opportunity to rest, equal constitutional rights, and the freedom from polygamy. The concept also aims to put an end to the ideological and psychological subordination of women that was holding women in contempt (Eisen 1984:8). However, the crucial objectives of this were to restore women's social dignity, self-respect, social consciousness, and through all those aims, to release their potential for national goals under the Communist Party’s leadership (Pham V.B. 1999:62; emphasis mine).

The second half of the first floor of the museum is dedicated to showcasing women's role in the economy, as labourers working for national development. The museum portrays women as heroines, not only of the Revolution, but also in the economic development of Vietnam. An example of this type of representation can be seen in this passage from the Vietnamese-published Ten Years of Progress: Vietnam: Women from 1985 to 1995.

Over the past 50 years, Vietnamese women have made extremely great contributions to the struggle for national liberation and construction. No history book could fully record the great services and sacrifices made by the majority of Vietnamese mothers and daughters. The recent conferment of the ‘Ba Me Anh Hung’ (Hero Mother) title on nearly 20,000 women has, to some extent, told of the nation’s acknowledgment of the women's great services as well as the nation’s respect for them. They have not only fought heroically but also worked tirelessly, overcoming poverty and backwardness to build the country (Nguyen Thi Bich 1997:11-12).

Women are represented in a way that encourages an increase in labour output, and it is done in a way that reflects a particular vision of a gender order. The economic contribution of women is of central concern to the state, as can be seen from the Communist Party politburo’s resolution of July 12, 1992 which states: ‘The Vietnamese women have great potential and have become an important driving force of the renewal cause and the socio-economic development. Women are labourers, citizens, mothers and the first teachers of people...’ (Vuong 1997: 80). The rhetoric has changed little since the Renovation in the late 1980s, except that the struggle is no longer against foreign incursion but for national development. However, the similarities with the earlier Three Responsibilities campaign (Ba Đạm Dăng), which the VWU implemented during the American conflict, are notable. It consisted of (1): responsibility in production; (2) responsibility in caring for the family; and (3) responsibility in serving
the state and in readiness to fight against the aggressors. Both the recent rhetoric and the campaign for the Three Responsibilities draw on traditional Confucian ideas of mothers as care-givers of the family, while insisting on their labour contributions.

Plate 7: Women's Labour

Women' as Bearers of Disparate Discourses

The official representation of women is contradictory: it depicts women as being labourers and freedom fighters, purportedly showing how women are equal to men, yet maintains the primacy of traditional family-based roles and responsibilities for women. Yuval-Davis and Anthias have noted that rationalist representations of women commonly exhibit these contradictions, and 'notions of what are specifically women's needs or duties often reassert themselves in very traditional ways even in revolutionary societies' (1989: 11). Vietnam is typical in these terms. In the Vietnamese Women's Museum women are shown as workers, but the most prominent display in the section on women's roles as workers shows a woman in a kitchen, preparing food for her family. Women are principally represented as engaged in occupations in the unskilled labour sector:
labour that has little or no social prestige and small financial reward. Only minor displays are dedicated to the exceptional professionals. For instance, there is a small display that shows female doctors, but the display relates to gynaecology and obstetrics, locating even the exceptions back in an area that is traditionally women’s domain.

This disunity in the representation of women by the state and the academy in Vietnam arises because there is more than one agenda directing them. Yuval-Davis and Anthias have written about ways in which women are incorporated in state ideology and practices, ‘as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectives’; ‘as signifiers of ethnic/national differences – as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories,’ and; ‘as participants in national economic, political and military struggles’ (1989:7). Contradiction in the images that are presented of women can be expected, given the wide range of rhetorical loads they are made to bear.

Despite the rhetoric of gender equality already existing, and the tremendous role of women in Vietnam’s history, women remain aware of their disempowered position relative to men. Women can achieve positions of power in business and the government, but it is rare. Most women opt for traditionally available forms of labour. Most wives are expected to cook and care for the family, even if they have a full-time day job:

Women’s work never carries with it the prestige of men’s work and the men generally take the most important family decisions. In a lot of families, the wife alone is responsible for all the manual work; her husband does nothing. Household chores and childcare are still largely carried out by the wife, with little help from her spouse, even if she has an outside, full-time job (Pham V.B. 1999:67).

Further, if a woman does have an outside job that is more prestigious or higher paying than her husband’s, ‘they have to be extremely tactful and avoid any action or word that might hurt the masculine pride of their husbands’ (Pham V.B. 1999:66).

Jayawardena has claimed that women have ‘achieved equality with men in education and in the economic and social spheres’ (1986:212). This claim is debateable, and it appears that in many ways there has been serious back-sliding since the end of the American Conflict. However, she also correctly points out that ‘this equality is not reflected in an adequate presence of women in the Vietnamese
economic and political structures' (1986:212). Further, the role of women in positions of state leadership has declined, as the below table of shows:

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**Figure 1: Female Representation in the National Assembly**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Total number of members</th>
<th>Female Number</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>1971-1976</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>1976-1981</td>
<td>492</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>1981-1987</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII</td>
<td>1987-1992</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX</td>
<td>1992-1997</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


---

This disparity is not only at the level of the National Assembly, but remains consistent through all levels:

---

**Figure 2: Percentage of Female Leaders in the Communist Party (Congress VIII)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Central level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Total number at Central</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>10.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Members of Politburo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Provincial (city) level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Standing Committee</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>14.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. District level*</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>1860</td>
<td>11.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Commune level</td>
<td>12111</td>
<td>112784</td>
<td>10.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ministry level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15.00 [sic]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The figures that they gave were Total 2094(1860) – 11.25%, which makes no sense, so the above correction is my best guess on what they intended.

Source: Research Center for Female Labour (1997:92)
State Discourses and Lived Contradictions

At first glance, the constructions of Vietnamese women by the state seems totally at odds with how Vietnamese women view themselves. Women are represented as revolutionaries, soldiers and labourers, not weak and gentle – which is the most common image in the media and the one most prominent in the minds of Vietnamese. However, there are multiple images of women being presented by the state (including the VWU) and the academy, and they are created for different ends. The image of women as being strong and fighting for the country is a nationalistic statement rather than a feminist statement. The representation that is directed more towards women instructs them to labour hard in the field or factory and return home to care for their family by cooking and cleaning and doing all of the other chores that are romanticised as being a display of love and caring (discussed further below). The representation of women by the VWU does not stray very far from the traditional Confucian Four Virtues of Women, enjoining them to follow a gendered division of labour, a prescribed mode of physical appearance, self-censorship which conforms to notions of ‘appropriate speech’ for women, and the creation of a habitus of inequality described as ‘proper behaviour’. The state brand of feminism, rather than challenging the hegemonic masculine structure, tends to become only a vehicle for carrying broader policy issues of nationalism and mobilisation.\(^{11}\)

There are three interlinked structures which maintain the dominance of men over women, and reinforce patterns of gender behaviour and difference: the structure of labour; power; and cathexis (Connell 1991 [1987]; 1995). The structure of labour refers to the control of the means of production, control of the dispensation of wealth, and the general division of labour, both inside the household and in the work force. In the Vietnamese context, and example of this structure is the way that women, generally speaking, fill labour niches that are undervalued, and are responsible for taking care of the family. The structure of power represents what is often called ‘patriarchy’, and is manifest in:

\(^{11}\) Similar processes have also taken place in China, as M. Wolf (1985) and Barlow (1989) have noted.
(a) the hierarchies and work-forces of institutionalized violence – military and paramilitary forces, police, prison systems; (b) the hierarchy and labour force of heavy industry (for example, steel and oil companies) and the hierarchy of high technology industry (computers, aerospace); (c) the planning and control machinery of the central state; and (d) working-class milieux that emphasize physical toughness and men's association with machinery (Connell 1987 [1991]:109).

Women in Vietnam hold little power within the academy (see Chapter Six); the government, as was illustrated above; and are underrepresented in managerial positions in the emerging private sector, as illustrated by this table:

**Figure 3: The Number and Rate of Women Managers, 1992**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minister</th>
<th>Vice-minister</th>
<th>Department director</th>
<th>General director, director</th>
<th>Deputy-general director, director</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The final structure – cathexis – refers to the power that sexual emotion plays in exerting pressure for conformity to a gender norm. I will discuss this further in the next section.

I will end this discussion with the words of two women in positions of power in the Vietnamese government. Hà Thị Khiết, the president of the VWU, discusses a resolution of the Eighth Congress of the VWU in 1998 in a way that is emblematic of the ambivalent position that women are accorded in state discourse:

I think we are focusing on materialising the Resolution by satisfactorily carrying out such major campaigns among women as "Let us help one another in developing the household economy," "Let us do our best in study and work, in bringing up our children and building happy families" (Vietnam Courier no.235, March 1-7, 1998).
Nguyễn Thị Bình, the Vice President of Vietnam echoes the above opinion in an interview on the 67th annual Women's Day in October 1998, when she said in her advice to Vietnamese women:

As we approach the 21st century, a modern Vietnamese woman should know how to harmoniously combine her roles in her family and society. Women are not only well-educated, creative people at work. They are also caring mothers and wives at home. Only happy, prosperous and equitable families can guarantee sustainable national development (Việt Nam News, Oct 22, 1998).

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ROMANTIC LOVE AND HAPPY FAMILIES: WOMEN’S MAGAZINES

There are a number of discourses and multiple images that target women in Vietnam. The museum represents a particular version of women’s roles; a version which comes through in academic writings and also in propaganda related to national development, health and family planning. The media produces different representations of women, focusing on women in sexually receptive and reproductive roles. It should not be forgotten, however, that the state controls the media, and therefore can largely control the content (Drummond 1999:131). Heng writes:

Hewing to its Stalinist proto-type, the media organisational structure in Vietnam ensures that all lines of control can be traced upwards to a common authority which is the Party Central. This involves a network of criss-crossing horizontal and vertical lines of control. The core feature of this system is that all media come under the leadership and ownership of the Party and State or a Party-approved mass organisation. Another feature of this system is sectorial content where, for instance, a paper Phú Nhu belonging to the women's organisation will focus on women's issues and the army daily Quan Doi Nhan Dan will cover military matters (1998:34).

There is an intimacy between the press and the state apparatus. The head of the Communist Party, Lê Khả Phiêu, was reported as saying, ‘The citizen’s duty requires the journalist to fight without compromise the dark plots and wrongful ideas of the hostile forces to protect the point of view of the party (and) policies and laws of the state’ (Reuters, November 28, 1998). The article goes on to report that
although there is no official censorship in Vietnam, journalists and editors who do not conform are imprisoned.

While in the past magazines were principally supported by state subsidies, these subsidies have largely dried up. Magazines are now expected to be marketable and financially independent. Contemporary magazines must walk a fine line between what is acceptable and expected from the state, and what is popular and marketable (Marr 1998:5). While the press has some freedom of movement, the editors have to be careful not to overstep the limits. Lê Khả Phiêu, made it very clear that the journalist was in the final instance meant to fulfil a function in society by reinforcing state policy: ‘The citizen’s duty requires the journalist to fight without compromise the dark plots and wrongful ideas of the hostile forces to protect the point of view of the party (and) policies and laws of the state’ (Reuters, Nov. 18, 1998, personal communication by mailing list). There is a certain amount of leeway given, and the media is now tentatively pressing the limits, but if they press too far precedent shows that it results in charges of conspiracy, prison and re-education for the guilty writers and editors.12

There are a large variety of magazines dedicated to women. However, they are not uniform in their message or their intended audience (Drummond 1999:107); there is a dual targeting that stresses sexual desire/receptivity for young women, while for older women the stress is much more on the family. This extends beyond Vietnam, being part of large-scale patterns of the global dominance of heterosexual men (Connell 1991 [1987]:187). While there are some magazines marketed to women of any age (e.g., Capital Woman and Sunday Woman),13 most magazines reflect their targeted age group in relation to these two subjects. The former category has such titles as Beautiful Vietnamese People, Young Fashion and Youth and Happiness,14 while the latter has titles such as Today’s Family and

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12 Heng (1998) argues that after an initial period of media liberalisation in the late 1980s, the state subsequently re-tightened their control. However, there has remained constant tension between the media’s need to follow Party guidelines with the increasing demands of their public for information that is more realistic.

13 Capital Woman (Phụ Nữ Thư Đồng); Sunday Woman (Phụ Nữ Chợ Nhội).

14 Beautiful Vietnamese People (Người Đẹp Việt Nam); Young Fashion (Thời Trang Trẻ); Youth and Happiness (Thời Trẻ Và Hạnh Phúc).
Family Happiness – Vietnamese Women. However, in both styles of magazine there is significant cross-over.

The Happy Family

In a magazine entitled The Cultured Family (Gia Đình Văn Hóa) there appeared an article typical of those aimed at married women. It was called ‘Rescuing a Depraved Husband’ (Trần T.H. 1997:26). It is paraphrased here:

A young couple grew up together in the same village. Eventually they got married and had a son and a daughter. The man, named Thanh, had good career prospects as a dynamic young engineer. However, one day he lost his job because he had become addicted to drugs. It destroyed their family happiness, and they sunk into an abyss of shame. Thanh would stagger home late, stoned out of his mind. His health deteriorated and he started to whither away; sunken, glassy eyes, pale and drawn skin and a body with the health sucked out of it was all that was left of him in the prime of his life. He sold everything of value in the home in order to pay for the drugs. Eventually he became abusive to his wife and children, and said to his wife: ‘If you can’t stand it any more then get the hell out of my house.’

It was at this time that his wife, Họp, decided to get a divorce. Half-stoned Thanh signed the divorce papers and they were submitted to the court. After two months the decision was made and the divorce granted. However, Thanh started to reconsider; he felt empty inside and sad at the loss of his wife. So, ten days after the divorce he wrote the court and said that he wanted to reunite with his wife. The court reconvened.

As Họp stood there in front of the court with tears streaming down her cheeks, the judge said to her:

Think about this carefully Madame, at this time you are the one that he needs and you can probably rescue him from his disease. If you run away, it will probably push him to become a criminal. Do you know that 85% of youths who become criminals are victims of broken families? What is going to happen when your innocent children have a mother but not a father? They will be stuck with an unbalanced life. For the children’s future, and in order to save your husband, who has made a mistake, you must be

15 *Today’s Family (Gia Đình Ngày Nay); Family Happiness – Vietnamese Women (Hạnh Phúc Gia Đình – Phụ Nữ Việt Nam).*
16 ‘Cậu với người chồng tôi lỡ.’
17 ‘Cô không chịu nổi thì cắt khỏi nhà tôi.’
courageous and return to him to build happiness for yourself (Trần T.H. 1997:26) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:1.1].

Through her sobs Hợp agreed to do so. The court cheered and encouraged her. From then on, she stayed by her husband and helped him to recover from his addiction. There were many nights when Thanh, in pain, let out heart-rending screams and even swore, but Hợp endured his insults and eventually everything returned to normal, having passed through this dangerous period together (Trần T.H. 1997:26) [paraphrased except for judge’s speech].

The ideal of the ‘happy family’ (gia đình hạnh phúc) is prevalent in Vietnamese women’s magazines, reinforcing the common opinion that women are principally responsible for its creation. It is characterised by a home where there is no friction between the husband and wife, where everyone is content and well-fed, where the children receive proper education and are well-clothed. Women are taught from an early age that they should value this ideal and strive for it above all else. Their expectation and desire for such a family helps them endure adversity in marriage, and is largely responsible for an ingrained moral expectation for self-sacrifice. In a concrete way, this translates to women trying to avoid causing friction and to making sure the family’s resources are properly used to keep the house running and the family fed:

If a family row breaks out, it is the wife who must back down. She is always supposed to remember: ‘If your husband is angry, refrain from talking back. Boiling rice does not burn when you lower the flame’, as a folk saying puts it, and fathers and mothers repeat this to their daughters (Pham V.B. 1999:67).

Gammeltoft points out that the value of the happy family is emphasised both among women and by ‘a more general celebration of the “happy family” in Vietnamese political and popular culture’ (1999:74-75; see also Barry 1996). However, while emphasis on the family is not new (being also crucial in Confucian thought), the way in which it is approached by the state today is particularly systematic: it is embedded in the 1992 Constitution, ‘describing the family as the “core” or “basic cell” of society, as the fundamental basis for social and economic progress’; it is widely disseminated in the media; and even the VWU ‘arranges competitions where people’s knowledge of how to create a happy family is tested’ (Gammeltoft 1999:74-75).
Gammeltoft sees the ideal of the happy family as having direct repercussions for women because of the way that it is linked to family planning programs. ‘In cities and along rural roads large billboard posters depict the happy one- or two-child family, declaring family planning to be the direct road to “a stable population; a wealthy country; a happy family”’ (1999:10). However, because of the way that fertility and contraception are viewed and associated policies implemented, the burden is principally on the shoulders of women. More specifically, the promotion of IUDs, primarily for the convenience it offers health workers, makes reproduction a ‘woman’s issue’. Women accept the IUD, despite the serious health problems it entails, because of the value placed on female self-sacrifice in the family (Gammeltoft 1999:91).

Frequently, self-sacrifice is an ideal characteristic used in conjunction with the happy family, as we saw in the story of Hgif and Thanh at the beginning of this section. Jamieson writes: ‘A “good” woman was self-sacrificing, frugal, industrious, chaste, and totally devoted to her husband’ (1993:27). An informant (a female doctor) of the researcher, Ngan Tam, replied to a question concerning the most important quality a woman should have for happiness within the family:

Forbearance. Yes. Because every husband, even the best one, wants to show that he is ‘master’ of the house, a wife must, in the first place, be forbearing. This is my experience (Ngan Tam 1988:53).

Though the expectations of female self-sacrifice create many disadvantages, its performance can provide a point of leverage for women in the family. Being the creators and sustainers of the family, women embody the core of Vietnamese society. Mothers invoke their self-sacrifice to make power claims within the family. By performing their role well, even if it is a role that is intrinsically subordinate, they make claim to, and are recognised as being good mothers and wives. If a woman is recognised as such, her husband is obliged to reciprocate. Being a good husband means taking care of the family, supporting and being kind to wife and children. If a woman fulfils her role properly, and the husband is bad, he will be looked down upon by those who are aware of the situation. Put more positively, a good wife deserves a good husband, and while this does not always happen, claims can be made against this ideal, and a failed husband will loose
respect in the community. Even between women, prestige can be gained by showing that they fulfil their roles as wives and mothers properly.

Also, appeals to self-sacrifice and suffering are often made by women to their children. Mothers use self-sacrifice to get their children to feel obligation and obedience to them. Children are taught from an early age that they must respect and honour their parents. Filial piety (hiēü) is seen as one of the foundational qualities of moral virtue, and failure to honour and respect parents invites not only criticism but a fair degree of social ostracism. In practical terms, this means following the opinions and decisions of parents and spending enormous amounts of resources on funerals and ancestor worship. Filial piety is reinforced through public criticism of those who do not respect their parents.

A fundamental difference that I encountered between masculinity and femininity was that the changes with age in feminine performances changed to a much lesser degree than masculinity changed for men. Young men performed a very different sort of masculinity than older men. Young men would try to display strength, self-reliance, and sexual potency, but older men instead performed a masculinity that had stronger ties to a vision of the Confucian literati, where erudition was far more critical than the characteristics of younger men (see Chapter Six). For women, however, the only major change was that the stress on sexual receptivity for unmarried women changed to a concern for the happy family. This concern for the happy family and role as the caretaker of the family did not change much even in old age. Older women would continue to do the cooking, and care of children usually became care of grand-children [Plate 8]. Where there was some lessening of responsibility for family-care, many older women increased their religious practice as a means for supernatural care (See Chapter Five).
Romance and Love: The New Hegemony

Romance and representations of romantic love are the images that are more common in media images directed at younger, unmarried women in the last ten years. Where strict prescriptions and prohibitions of Confucianism used to weigh heavily on expectations of women’s behaviour, behavioural expectations based on love has become a new hegemonic force. Representations of idealised romantic love are common in popular culture throughout Asia, and Vietnam is no different in this respect. In women’s magazines the connection between happiness, the family and love is explicit: the magazine *The Cultured Family,*\(^\text{18}\) features ‘happiness’ (hạnh phúc) and ‘romantic love’ (tình yêu) on the front cover (no.26, 1997) [Plate 9]. The contents of these magazines also persistently refer to love [Figure 4].

*Figure 4: Table of Contents from a Women’s Magazine*

| 2. Hạnh phúc chi một – những tình yêu muốn màu kỳ diệu | 2. Happiness is only one – but multicoloured love is marvellous |
| 3. Tình yêu và sự lãng mạn | 3. Love and romance |
| 4. Cuộc hành trình không nghỉ của những lửa đô! | 4. A journey without rest for couples! |
| 5. Sự huyền diệu của tình yêu | 5. The magic of love |
| 6. Tâm sự | 6. Affairs of the heart [Dear Abbey] |
| 7. Tình yêu cô gái... | 7. Girl’s love... |
| 8. Sự hập dàn lẫn nhau trong tình yêu lửa đô | 8. Mutual attraction in a couple’s love |
| 9. Bài học tình yêu. | 9. Lesson of love |
| 10. Hấp dẫn – vũ khí làm nén chiến thắng của Ca-mi-la | 10. Attraction – the weapon of victory for Camilla |
| 11. Tình yêu cần sự tinh tảo | 11. Love needs vigilance |
| 12. Tâm sự | 12. Affairs of the heart [Dear Abbey] |
| 13. Trong đâm đồng chốt gặp mặt người | |
| 14. Cầu lạc bố kết bạn | |

\(^{18}\) Cia Đình Văn Hòa.
This accent on romantic love is not limited to women's magazines. Movies, TV programmes, music CDs and karaoke in Vietnam reinforce similar themes. Marr reports that when Vietnamese musicians started to record their own songs in the 1940s, they were at the beginning mostly variations of sad European love songs (Marr 1998:9). These love songs were soon overwhelmed by martial songs that became 'part of the extraordinary upsurge of patriotic fervour during the August 1945 Revolution and subsequent Anti-French Resistance' (Marr 1998:9). However, love themes re-emerged in the form of 'yellow' music in the south,19 and after reunification this music made its way north, much to the dismay of the Party. In the 1980s, music from the West started to come into Vietnam from workers who were returning from the Soviet block countries. In the 1990s, Western, as well as overseas Vietnamese CDs (both pirated in China), are readily available in CD shops all over Hanoi. A whole range of music is available, but almost all contemporary music takes romantic love as the main theme. Air Supply, for example, remains popular in Vietnam twenty years after I heard them mentioned in Canada. This music has become available to the new urban consumer through a variety of possible experiences, beginning with the increased availability of tapes and CDs, but also through an increasing number of concerts and shows as well as through karaoke as a popular form of entertainment. Home karaoke machines are being bought by those with the financial resources, and karaoke bars are ubiquitous in Hanoi.

19 Yellow music is a style of romantic music, usually with depressing themes: failed or impossible relationships or unrequited love. Red Music, by contrast, refers to the strident propagandistic music of the Revolution.
Plate 9: Cover of the Magazine The Cultured Family
Karaoke, it seems to me, is particularly effective in inculcating these themes, because the passivity of listening to music is turned into the reproduction of it. Karaoke is an extremely popular activity. As such, the lyrics of favourite songs are known to most people by heart. As these lyrics are crooned, images appear on the TV screen along with the lyrics. Frequently these images seem to have no relation to the songs, but often they will feature couples in love or scenery associated with romantic love, like sunsets and beaches. These images add another dimension to the experience of media-driven love, making it a visual experience as well as a sonic one, serving to further internalise notions of romantic love by bringing together visions and words.

While gender equality is institutionalised and legislated, in social practice there remain substantial inequalities. The young women I spoke with would generally state that they thought women and men are equally capable in their productive capacity, but that inequality remained. Despite statements of gender equality, patterns of dominance and submission continued to be reproduced in the minutest of daily actions. Connell calls this 'emphasised femininity':

The option of compliance is central to the pattern of femininity which is given most cultural and ideological support at present, called here 'emphasized femininity'. This is the translation to the large scale of patterns already discussed in particular institutions and milieux, such as the display of sociability rather than technical competence, fragility in mating scenes, compliance with men's desire for titillation and ego-stroking in office relationships, acceptance of marriage and childcare as a response to labour-market discrimination against women. At a mass level these are organized around themes of sexual receptivity in relation to younger women and motherhood in relation to older women (Connell 1991 [1987]:187).

In Vietnam, this behaviour could be seen in the clothes that women wore; in the way they rode their bicycles or motorcycles; in the way they spoke and the way that they acted. In relationships, the differences became even more pronounced, so that women I knew to be strong-willed and self-assured, with their boyfriends would be sweet and submissive, and appear to relinquish control to them.

An example of this could be seen in the common practice of letting the boyfriend decide what activity to do, or where to go. This was explained to me by two young women as being because: 'it is not romantic for a woman to be too pushy', and 'if a woman loves a man, she will follow his decisions'. While reinforcing a hegemonic form of
gender, this type of behaviour is also used as a strategy by many women: often they get what they want while the men feel they have made all the decisions.

Connell develops his notion of hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity as a way to understand the relation of gender patterns to individual practice. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to other, subordinated forms of masculinity and in relation to women, and its main purpose is the dominance of men over women. By *hegemony*, Connell is referring to ‘a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes’ (1991 [1987]:184). Hegemonic masculinity is primarily a cultural ideal, and as such, does not correspond to the realities lived by the majority of men. Emphasised femininity exists in relation to hegemonic masculinity as two corresponding pieces of a puzzle (1991 [1987]:185), and is defined by its compliance to male domination. It is not the only pattern of femininity (just as hegemonic masculinity is not the only pattern of masculinity), but emphasised femininity does not exist in opposition to other femininities in the way that hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to other masculinities (1991 [1987]:183). Instead, other forms of femininity are defined by ‘strategies of resistance or forms of non-compliance’ to male hegemony (Connell 1991 [1987]:183).

Both hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity are very prominent in media representations. Emphasised femininity, in particular, is used in mass media and marketing to a greater extent, instructing women how to be feminine in order to attract the ‘perfect man’. Connell writes: ‘To call this pattern “emphasised femininity” is also to make a point about how the cultural package is used in interpersonal relationships. This kind of femininity is performed, and performed especially to men’ (1991 [1987]:188). The execution of these performances is the concern of a whole host of magazines in the West, such as *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, and dedicated to the task of making women beautiful. Vietnamese women’s magazines accounted for half of the magazines sold at the stands near my home in Hanoi. Significantly, Vietnamese magazines primarily portray ‘women in non-

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20 So, for example, Topley (1975) points out that from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century in Kwangtung, China, many women resisted arranged marriages by going to work in silk factories. In colonial India, Chowdhry (1996) describes how widows resisted the customary levirate by breaking the widow-remarriage taboos or taking a lover.
productive roles: wife, homemaker, girlfriend, mother, tourist, entertainment-seeker, and so on' (Drummond 1999:109).

It is easy to understand why most men are complicit with the hegemonic model of masculinity: they stand, as a group, to benefit from its existence through the subordination of women. Women’s acceptance is a little harder to understand. However, it can be explained partially by pointing out that in a very immediate and individual sense, women benefit from their compliance, whereas resistance (and resistance certainly does take place), usually brings more trouble than benefit. For example, while a young woman could pursue a career against her husband’s wishes, this could quite possibly result in her husband leaving her, and would certainly lead to heavy criticism from his family, her family and her friends. She would be considered a bad woman and be ridiculed in a number of ways. It is even possible that her employer might let her go, no longer trusting someone so deviant.

Although social and economic marginalisation are the negative reinforcements of emphasised femininity, there are also benefits (e.g., a happy family, or respect amongst other women), which serve as positive reinforcements for reproducing these structures. The processes by which this takes place is not consciously recognised by most people. People do not see their actions in terms of compliance or resistance to hegemonic forces. Instead, they phrase their daily lives, interactions, behaviour and performances in terms of appropriate behaviour and social acceptability. Women act a certain way because they are women and that is the way that they ought to act. To act differently is as ‘unnatural’ to most women as it is unappealing to most men. The structure of cathexis, which dictates a particular image of sexual practice and attraction, makes conformity to ideals of femininity powerful forces for guiding behaviour. It is especially potent when combined with marriage imperatives that exist for women, as I discuss below.

An example of how emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity are reproduced in practice concerns the use of pronouns. Amongst people of similar age, the kinship terms that are most usually employed are: *anh* – or ‘older brother’ – towards a man who is slightly older; *chi* – or ‘older sister’ – for a woman who is slightly older; and *em* ‘younger sibling’ – for someone who is slightly younger. If two people are of the same age then usually first names are used. In a sexual relationship, however, it is almost always the case that the man is older than the woman. So, the Vietnamese phrase for ‘I love you’ is
either *anh yêu em* (literally, older brother love younger sibling), or *em yêu anh* (literally, younger sibling love older brother), and it is a phrase that holds powerful emotional content. However, if one was to say *em yêu chị* (younger sibling love older sister), it would only be comical. The emblematic value of *anh yêu em* or *em yêu anh* for romantic love (the phrase is not used between siblings), is evident especially in the fact that when two people are of the same age, the woman takes up the personal reference for younger sibling and the man, older brother. Thus, a relationship that puts men above women in a hierarchy of reference is seen as romantic.

I knew a man of about twenty whose girlfriend became pregnant. She got an abortion at his insistence, as he could not yet afford to marry her. I asked him how it happened, was he not wearing a condom? Admitting his negligence, he reasoned that wearing a condom was not romantic, and it lacked a feeling of intimacy or sentiment (*tình cảm*). Her mother, who was a doctor, found out about what happened, but though she felt angry at the man, she did not tell her husband, who would have certainly forbidden his daughter to marry him. It was the sensible thing to do, given that few would want to marry her if they found out that she had had sex with another man before, had been pregnant and had undergone an abortion.

While the Communist regime took the emancipation of women as one of its goals, there is every indication that this has not happened. However, what has happened has been a criticism of the Confucian aspects of the Vietnamese family. Many of the rhetorical prescriptions about women’s place in the family structure and in Vietnamese society as a whole have been labelled as ‘feudal’ and ‘backwards’. Examples of the sort of Confucian doctrines that have been criticised are: ‘Four Virtues’ (*tuệ đức*), mentioned earlier, and the ‘Three Submissions’ (*tam tôn*), which enjoins all women to obey first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their sons throughout their lives (Marr 1976:372).

The formulation of these dictates concerning the place of women in society and the family, although still know, are not completely taken seriously today. Young urbanites, especially, see them as feudal ideas that have no place in today’s modern society, and associate them with backwards rural peasants (*nhà quê*). To a large extent this reflects the place that the rhetoric of emancipation has had in nationalist discourses (Jayawardene 1986:3). Their waning popularity
is not because of their content. Rather, the formulations themselves have been targeted by state rhetoric against feudalism. However, the contents of both the Three Submissions and the Four Virtues get reproduced in everyday actions. Few Hanoians with whom I spoke - young and old alike - would argue against proper decorum for women that followed along much the same lines as the Four Virtues if rephrased in less recognisably 'feudal' terms.

What this means is that formally rigid structures of the family and personal relationships have lost some of their compelling force. People accept the notion of gender equality as a principle, while the same patterns of gender asymmetry are reproduced. How is it that, having taken away the prescriptions regarding women's place in society and the family, unequal relationships continue to be reproduced in gender practice? I suggest that while much of the force of Confucian dictates about gender have been discredited, they have been replaced by other powerful, if more hidden, forms of gender hegemony. Much of this centres on ideas of romantic love. What has happened is that some of the force of the structure of cathexis has become a more potent aspects in the inculcation the gender norm.

In this century, previously held structures of power, such as Confucian dictates about the duties of a wife to her husband, have lost power when presented in formulae like the Three Submissions and Four Virtues. Further, personal choice rather than arranged marriages has become the ideal criterion (Pham V.B. 1999:57-59), and romantic love has become an essential part of partner selection. In the vacuum that was created by the state-sponsored denunciation of Confucian ideals and 'feudal' family patterns, what has emerged is a reinforcement old structures that subordinate women to men in new shapes. Ideals of romantic love appear to be equally effective in reinforcing gender hegemony, and perhaps more so, because of the non-confrontational way in which it is done. Similarly, values placed on the establishment of the happy family reinforce notions of women being tied to, and sacrificing for, the family rather than instilling a desire to pursue a career that brings prestige. To put it bluntly, women no longer serve their man because that is what women are supposed to do under the dictums of the Confucian patriarchal system. Women now serve their man because it is an expression of their love and out of a desire to reproduce the 'happy family', which has been given
increased emphasis in recent gender rhetoric. The media – magazines and music but also movies (Titanic was hugely popular) – seems integral to this process.

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MARRIAGE AND FEMININITY: THE STORY OF MISS ANH

Shortly after my wife and I first met, she introduced me to her group of friends. Among them was a young woman named Miss Anh. Miss Anh was twenty-seven years old and worked as an accountant for the state-owned petroleum company (Petrolimex). She, like many young people, made a group of friends at university which continues to meet regularly for parties. She has a very strong personality and, unlike the other women in the group, drinks alcohol and beer with the men rather than soft drinks (which is more normal for young women in Hanoi). She is boisterous and likes to joke and tease people. Her friends, both men and women, feel that no gathering is complete without her. However, she does not fit in with the Vietnamese perception of how a woman should act.

The first time my wife brought me to one of these parties she impressed me as unique. She helped to prepare the food for the party along with the other women in the group while the men sat around the TV and talked, but when the eating began she joined the men in teasing me and drinking beer while the other women continued to behave in a more normative feminine way. At the time, the relationship between Lan and I had not been made public. Miss Anh, upon hearing that I was Lan’s ‘English teacher’, unabashedly asked me if I could teach her English as well. At the time I did not think much of it, but it was to become a question that she would regularly use to tease me; the connotation being about having a relationship rather than learning English. After Lan and I were married, Miss Anh would jokingly commiserate that I should have taught her instead. Frequently she would pressure me about introducing her to a foreign friend; I was never sure to what extent she was joking.

During the whole time that I knew her, she did not have a boyfriend, whereas most of the other women in the group had boyfriends or were already married (as were most of the men). In university, I was told, she dated an older man who was quite wealthy,
but it did not last. She had to end the relationship with him because he asked her to try and be more gentle and feminine. She made an effort, but found it too difficult to hide her personality and act weak and dependent.

She was well liked by all, fun to be with, the life of the party, but still single. At her birthday party, more than a year after we had first met, she had stopped drinking beer with the men, and refrained from teasing me. It was a difficult thing for her to do as she got a lot of amusement out of trying to make me say something incorrect in Vietnamese. She said that she was now ‘acting like a lady’. Her friend later explained the sudden change by saying the reason she was trying to control herself was because she was getting worried about finding a husband. It is generally held that after thirty it becomes much more difficult for women to marry, although for men age does not matter. The result is that often women who have passed the age of thirty will be forced to marry a man who is less than ideal: too old, too ugly or of low social standing.

Her efforts did not last, for at my farewell party she was still drinking beer and joking in a loud voice. However, through all of her joking one can sense her concerns about the tension between her preferred behaviour and the ideal. She expressed her frustration to me once, saying that Vietnamese men only want a woman who is weak and compliant, but that she cannot act that way because she feels that she is equal to men.

The gender characteristics which were most frequently listed when I asked about the differences between men and women were that women are weak and men strong. The pervasiveness of these characteristics are noted by Gammeltoft:

In Vâi Sơn [northern Vietnam], even women who seemed to me to be physically strong and capable of shouldering enormous daily work tasks often felt their bodies were hopelessly weak and fragile. Most women seem to perceive physical weakness as simply a normal part of being a woman. This is often expressed in sayings like, ‘A weak buffalo is still stronger than a cow’ (Yêu-trau khoẻ hơn bò) [sic]; i.e., weak men are still stronger than women, or ‘strong/healthy as a man’ (Khoẻ như đàn ông) (1999:112).
Plate 10: Wedding Dress in 'Beautiful Vietnamese People'
However, the presumed weakness of women and strength of men has more than just physical ramifications. Women are thought to be weaker than men on an intellectual and moral level as well. The belief that women are more superstitious than men (Marr 1981:345) is attributed by many men (and by some state discourses on women) to a lack of rationality. As Peletz (1995, 1996) has described of Malay society, men and women are attributed the respective characteristics of reason and passion, a dichotomy that informs a great deal of the gender discourse in Vietnam.

These stereotypes, Gammeltoft points out, are both descriptive and prescriptive: ‘this is the way women and men are, and it is the way that they should be’ (1999:178). Deviation from the norm calls into question one’s gender, and invites derogatory comment. A man who is overly effeminate or gentle is called a hermaphrodite (đi nam đi nu) (Gammeltoft 1999:178), or a pansy/poofter (đồng cộ). Women who are too bossy, loud or who speak their minds are said to be ‘like men’ (Gammeltoft 1999:178). For example, one young man who spoke in a high voice and did not portray a self-assured attitude when visiting the house of a female friend was later called a pansy by the woman’s sisters. Even more common is the expression ‘scared of your wife’ (sợ vợ), which is usually used by men towards friends when they show too much concern for the wishes of their wives. It was used, for example, on one occasion when I was out drinking with a group of Vietnamese men, and one declared that he had to leave early because his wife wanted him home. An often heard expression for women who are overly domineering, and one sometimes jokingly directed at Miss Anh, is that they are ‘lionesses of Hà Đông’ (sư tử Hà Đông).21 I heard the term most often used in a joking way by friends towards a woman they regarded as not acting feminine, as being more domineering than is sanctioned by Vietnamese society.

In discussions with men about their ideal spouses, men expressed to me a desire to find a woman who was weaker than they, and similarly, women expressed a desire for a husband who is strong, both physically and more importantly, in character. Women are seen as being the emotional and spiritual provider in the family, where strength is not considered to be an important quality.

As we saw in the case of Miss Anh, these patterns of femininity and masculinity have direct repercussions for the way men and

21 Hà Đông is a town south-west of Hanoi, although the phrase originally derives from a Chinese story.
women behave. The patterns are not necessarily reproduced in total, but they still affect the embodied dispositions of men and women in the world. This structure, called cathexis by Connell, influences what people find sexually desirable and have an impact in the way that people perform gender. Jankowiak (1993:174-178) notes that in Huhot, Inner Mongolia, his informants performed gender expectations to a much greater degree when in the presence of someone of the opposite sex than if they were ‘outside the sexual encounter’ (1993:174). Miss Anh struggles with transforming her behaviour, and is often unsuccessful, but she still reproduces many aspects of emphasised femininity. Often at the core of her attempts is the marriage imperative, a subject to which we will now turn our attention.

In Vietnam, I was usually asked on a first meeting whether I was married yet. ‘Do you have a lover yet?’ was a common, informal question used to ascertain my marriage status. ‘Do you have a family yet’, or ‘Have you started a family yet’ were formal equivalents. For Vietnamese society, questions such as these (as well as questions about age and occupation), enable people to place one another within frames of reference, partially in order to ascertain the most suitable term of address. However, there is always an element of evaluation, and subtle pressure to conform can be seen to be exerted through such questions.

These questions, as well as the social institution of marriage itself, are a major part of the gendered structure of power (see Connell 1991 [1987]:107-111). Marriage is considered crucial for everyone, and there is no prestige for spinsters and bachelors:

it is still considered a woman’s duty to marry and have children. Spinsterhood and failure to have children, (especially sons) equate with failure in the most crucial aspect of life, no matter how well a woman may perform her role at work, or in other spheres of family life (Pham V.B. 1999:66).

While this is true to a certain extent in Hanoi, I would not go as far as Jankowiak in saying that ‘outside the sexual context men and women are more prone to assert nongender relevant traits in their interactions with siblings, parents, classmates, spouses, and the public at large’ (1993:174). While there was definitely a heightening of gendered performances in Hanoi when in a sexually potent situation, gender performances did not dissolve as soon as these encounters were over.

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23 ‘Anh có người yêu chưa?’
24 ‘Anh có gia đình chưa?’
25 ‘Anh lập gia đình chưa?’
Marriage marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood for both sexes. However, for women there is a great deal more pressure to marry than for men, and it is a major source of anxiety among young women and their families. Spinsterhood is a mark of absence or lack. ‘To suffer from a lack of a husband’ (bị hết chồng) is a common expression – ‘lack’ here carries connotations similar to having a store without customers. Pham Van Bich writes:

Unmarried women were identified as ế [unsold, left on the shelf] in Vietnamese. They experienced feelings of inferiority, like the shoddy goods that no customer wants to buy. They often lived with their parents while the latter were alive. Not only the spinsters themselves, but also their parents and siblings felt ashamed about the situation. There was another cause of concern: a young woman who lived at home too long might escape the control of her natal family, meet somebody of the opposite sex, then get pregnant, which would prove a disaster in the eyes of her family. That was why parents who had a young unmarried daughter regarded her as something of a time-bomb: they were really relieved if someone wanted to take her off their hands (1999:119).

After the age of thirty it is thought to be increasingly difficult for a woman to find a husband, and in the countryside it was more like twenty-five. The pressure on women to get married before this age creates an expectation that a woman must conform as closely as possible to an ideal of femininity. This is reinforced by parents, who seem to be constantly warning young women to behave in a suitable fashion, or else suffer the consequences: becoming an old maid. Parents worry about their daughter’s marriageability as much as the young women themselves, and sometimes more.

Young men are almost never anxious about getting married. There is no cut-off age and old men can still marry young women.26 Part of the justification for the imperative is the belief that women age faster than men. One older woman warned me, upon hearing that my fiancee and I were of equal age, that I would be better off finding a woman who was five years younger. The reason she cited was that my wife would age much faster than myself, so I would still look young when my wife looked old. The result would be that people would laugh, she would resent me, and I would feel unsatisfied being stuck with an old woman. Another reason she gave was that my wife would reach menopause when I was still sexually strong, and after menopause women can no longer enjoy sex. She cited herself as an

26 Remarriage is also considerably easier and has no social stigma.

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example, saying that she was dried up, and sex was only uncomfortable, not enjoyable. Years of unsatisfied sexual urges, or adultery, would be the unfortunate result of my marrying a woman of equal age.

Sexual promiscuity is considered a fact of life for men, but unacceptable for women. This double standard was seen by young women as unfair and they did not like the idea of their partner having had previous partners. The reality recognised by all, however, is that this discrepancy exists. Women said that they felt it unfair not because they want to have more boyfriends but, reflecting the romantic ideal, they do not want their boyfriends to have had many other relationships. In a lengthy group discussion with six young women and one young man, this is what transpired:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young woman A</th>
<th>In Vietnam men can have sex with girls but they don’t accept a girl who has had pre-marital sex when they get married. They consider that normal.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young man</td>
<td>I agree with her. That is the popular opinion of all of the men in our country: that they can make love with every girl but their wife or their girlfriend must be a virgin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>When you think of this how do you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young woman B</td>
<td>Angry!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young woman C</td>
<td>It’s not fair.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young man</td>
<td>For me that is just normal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is an element of resistance to the pressures that are exerted on young women to get married by their parents. I mentioned to the above group a story of one young woman that I had spoken with previously. When she was twenty she had been in love with a young man who she had been seeing for a couple of years. Her parents, however, did not approve of this young man. They urged her to forget him and find someone more appropriate to her social standing (her father was a director of a prosperous state-owned enterprise and her mother was a doctor). She resisted for some time, but eventually the ultimatum was delivered: ‘You choose between your family or him’. Distraught, she felt that she had to choose her family. There really was
no choice given the value placed on filial piety in Vietnam. In response to the story of the young woman's plight, one of the women in the group burst out:

I think she is crazy, because she could wait for an opportunity to persuade the father. I have a friend who had a relationship with her boyfriend for five years. At the beginning, all of her family did not accept her boyfriend, but now they got married because during the time... you know in Vietnam if girls at the age of twenty-eight to thirty don't have families (aren't married), everybody in the family will worry, so they must accept.

There is one non-Buddhist ritual, Cắt Tiên Duyên, directed specifically to the problem of not having found a partner, which is performed by a spirit medium called a bà đông. A persons having difficulty finding a partner will go to see a fortune-teller (thầy bói). One possible reason for their lack of success is that a ghost is in love with them, and is preventing suitors from approaching. The exorcism that needs to be performed – the Cắt Tiên Duyên ritual (literally, ‘severing the relationship of the last life’) – is essentially a divorce between the person and the love-struck ghost. Miss Hạnh was twenty-eight years old, and very worried that she was not yet married, an anxiety exacerbated by parental pressure. She had suitors when she was younger but at that time did not feel the urgency to get married, but recently she had become anxious that no one would be interested in her. She and my wife had the ritual performed. It worked for my wife who met me a few weeks later, but Miss Hạnh, unfortunately, is still waiting.

The views of most Vietnamese about women conflict with the strong, warrior images of women stressed in the Museum of Vietnamese Women. In response to my questions about representations there, women replied that this was during an exceptional time. Furthermore, they said that in a nationalist sense, they were proud of the capacity of Vietnamese women to fight, but despite this they insisted that women were fighting for their families, not their country. They described Vietnamese women's nature as being gentle and weak. I asked one woman about the two Trưng sisters as emblematic of women's strength. She replied that the two Trưng sisters mean nothing as an example for women to follow or as a symbol of women's strength. Women, she insisted, are weak and
caring, not strong warriors. This point of view represents a
significant disjuncture between state imagery and popular conception;
one that perhaps did not exist before the Renovation.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF BOYS: AN ERRANT SON AND A FATHER’S MISERY

I knew one family in Hanoi that had three daughters and one son. The
daughters all studied hard and succeeded, but the son was a continual
disappointment. He had gambling problems that led him to steal a
considerable amount from the family. As time went by the son grew
farther and farther from the family, saying little and returning home
only on occasion, seldom staying to share a meal. The father was
always distressed by his only son’s lack of feeling for the family,
thinking that because of the son, the family would have no solidarity
and life would therefore be worse for all. The mother often said to me
that sons were much more important than daughters. For her, the fact
that her daughters would one day leave her family and join another
was the quintessential problem, and she compared a daughter to a
‘flying duck’, taken from the common saying: ‘daughters are like a
flock of flying ducks, when they are small they live at your expense,
when they are big they fly away.’27 The daughters themselves,
although they may have felt devalued, tended to agree with the
opinion that their brother’s behaviour was detrimental to the whole
family.

The father of the family felt that he had wasted his life. He had
always worked hard for his family and expected little in return. He
was, in fact, one of the kindest men that I knew in Hanoi. Since his
one son had turned out so poorly, his good daughters were of little
consolation to him. He loved them and cared for them in the same
manner that he did his son, but saw that in the end they would not be
able to continue his line. The fact that he was the last male in his
family (two brothers had died in childhood and his parents had been
killed during the land reforms of in the mid-1950s), made the situation
more desperate. At the end of his life, he was forlorn, and once said

27 ‘Con gai là lũ vit giỏi, bé thi ăn lơn thời bây đi.’

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that he would be happy to die as soon as his youngest daughter had
grown up.

However, there is also a perception that daughters care more
about their parents, and daughters are seen as being more useful
around the house. Thus, all things being perfect, people would want
to have a daughter first and then a son. Given the risks involved,
though, this can only be appreciated in retrospect. Because of the
importance placed on having a son, almost everyone hopes that his or
her first child is a son so that the pressure to produce one is
eliminated immediately. The pressure brought to bear on a daughter-
in-law is substantial and usually the birth of a son will ease many
tensions within the family (Haughton & Haughton 1999; Pham V.B.

On one occasion I was on a pilgrimage up a mountain with a
group of people that included a monk and a nun. Lining the sides of
the path were stalls that sold refreshments to the pilgrims. We stopped
at one of these to drink and eat fruit while we caught our breath. We
paid for what we had consumed, but when it came time for the two
monastics to pay, the young woman who ran the stall refused
payment. She wanted to have a son and therefore she never let
monastics pay for refreshments at her stall. The monk, in return, gave
his blessing.

Sons are perceived as being essential to maintaining the family
(họ) — there must be a son to carry on the family name. Daughters
will, upon marriage, join another family, and are not thought of as
being entirely a part of the family. Sayings that underline this
attitude are plentiful: ‘One son and you have a descendant, ten
daughters and you can write nil’, and ‘Daughters are the children of
someone else, only daughters-in-law are your own since you have
brought them home’ (Gammeltoft 1999:70). As such, daughters are
seen as a liability: money spent on them, for instance in their
education, will eventually go to another family. This does not mean
that parents do not love them and do the best they can to ensure that
they will have a good life, but there is an imbalance in the value
placed on sons over daughters. Unlike the Taiwanese family described

28 Although, as Luong (1989) points out, there is a tendency in Vietnam towards bilateral
relations.

29 ‘Nhất nam viết Hữu, thấp nữ viết vô ’; and ‘Con gái là con người ta, con đâu mới thật
mẹ cha mua vô’ (Gammeltoft 1999:70).
by Margery Wolf (1968; 1972), in Vietnam ties are maintained by women to their natal families, and obligations of filial piety towards natal parents continue after marriage.

Ancestor worship is also implicated in this preference. The eldest son is expected to maintain the ancestor cult. His house contains the family ancestral shrine, with the tablets of the dead parents. Every year on the anniversary of the death of the father, the entire family gathers at the home of the eldest son. If there is no son, or if the son is not able to hold the family together, this ancestor cult will be weakened. Although adoption is possible, and the eldest daughter can take over the responsibilities, these solutions are thought of as a poor last resort. The maintenance of the ancestor cult is important for the general welfare of the family. If a family is having problems, such as frequent disputes or bad luck in business, it is usually attributed to the dissatisfaction of ancestors. One family that I knew experienced difficulties that were attributed to dissatisfied ancestors. The parents were getting into continual physical fights, one of the daughters was sick, and another was having problems with her husband, who had not come home for three weeks. They went to see a fortune-teller who used betel nuts and leaves to divine the source of the problem, an ancestor who wanted to have a special ritual performed for him/her.

The greater valuing of sons results in their preferential treatment, and in greater expectations on their future success. Sons are not expected to help out around the house, instead they are expected to devote their time to study. This is the case for the rich as well as the poor, although the latter may be forced to leave school and start work early if the family cannot afford continued education. If it is only possible to advance one of the children, the son will usually be chosen over the daughter. It is often the case that daughters are sent to work early so that the sons will be able to continue studies (Jamieson 1993:18):

My observations and interviews strongly suggest parents have different expectations of their sons over their daughters. The majority of parents wanted their daughters to behave in an exemplary manner and do housework well. For sons, parents appreciated good work (in terms of earning money), ambition and worldliness. Meanwhile, young men in rural areas value the ability of their prospective wives to manage household affairs more highly than their ability to earn money. Parents give higher priority to their sons than their daughters in education and vocational training. Mother in Giao village emphasised, more so than fathers, that their daughters do not need higher education but should work on the farm and know how to handle family affairs. Traditionally girls show their respect towards their parents in the way they fulfil domestic duties while
at home. Once they get married, this obligation is transferred to their husbands. Priority is given to sons because they are a source of security to their parents in their old age (Nguyen V.C. 1997:5-6).

The difference in education is reflected in statistics on education in Vietnam. For example:

**Figure 5: Attainment of Educational Degrees by Gender in Urban Areas, 10 and Above Age Group, 1989.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational degrees</th>
<th>National %</th>
<th>Urban %</th>
<th>Rural %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never went to school</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not finish primary school</td>
<td>52.8</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary education</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>22.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional school</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collage and University</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tran Tran Thi Van Anh & Le Ngoc Hung (1997:133).

Within the family, patterns of female subordination are reinforced. Not only are fathers expected to be the heads of families, and wives to defer to them in order to maintain the happy family, but daughters are brought up with the attitude that they are of less value than their brothers. Boys are taught not only that they are superior to girls, but are also expected to display masculine characteristics. They are expected, primarily, to excel in school, to have a good career and thereby better the situation of their families. They are taught that they are more rational than women and they need to be more responsible and in control than women. Thus, while women are burdened with certain expectations, men, too, have burdens to bear.
AMBIGUITIES OF PRACTICE

Some scholars have been lured into reductionist descriptions of Vietnamese women as either empowered or disempowered. Often these pronouncements are made in reference to the Chinese women. ‘The position of women in Vietnam’ (Coughlin 1954), is commonly the approach that is taken, as if their position could be fixed, pinned down. Reality is far more complex than can possibly be described by such an approach. In reality, women can have power in certain situations and at certain times, while at others they become completely subordinated. A good example of the ambiguity of many of the aspects of gendered practice can be seen in the use of the term ‘general of the interior’ (nữ tướng), which is used, by men, of women to describe the considerable power that women can hold within the home. Women make most of the day-to-day decisions, and while men are nominally the heads of the household, it is recognised that it is by women’s labour and planning that the household is able to exist. This fact is employed in resistance against the dominant patriarchal model:

When asked who the head of the household is, women in Vâl Sơn sometimes replied, ‘I am the head of the household. My husband is never here’, or ‘I am household head, my husband doesn’t know how to do anything’ (Gammeltoft 1999:186; emphasis in original).

The existence of this alternate paradigm is empowering in some ways, but also limited in its effect. It certainly exists and it is certainly spoken about, and there are examples that show the household is under the control of women. However, at the same time it reinforces structures of power that subordinate women. While women make most day-to-day decisions, the major decisions, such as substantial expenditures, are made by the husband, or jointly. Further, being a

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30 Some scholars have highlighted this in order to stress the power that women have in Vietnamese society. Jamieson, for example, writes: ‘Each family is like a small nation. The husband is the nominal head of state and in charge of foreign relations; the wife is minister of the interior and controls the treasury’ (1993:27). There are many other examples of basing an assumption of women’s high position on this trope (e.g., Tran T.V.A. & Le N.H. 1997:87).
'general of the interior' reinforces (or at least does not contradict) an inside/outside dichotomy where the outside is accorded more prestige than the inside. Thus, when men grant that women are the generals of the interior – and it is usually men, not women, who invoke this phrase – it generally means that they are happy to let women do all the work at home and, in return, they accord women some power within that domain. However, for major decisions, or even on a whim, the husband/father may exert his authority over her. At times, and at all levels of society, the threat of physical violence is present. In the case of family violence, there is usually no interference because it is considered a family affair (Gammeltoft 1999:167-168).

At the root of the problem is the way that the 'gender order' has been seen as being comprised of femininity and masculinity in a singular fashion, when in fact, 'multiple femininities and masculinities are... a central fact about gender and the way that its structures are lived' (Connell 1991 [1987]:64). Often, ideas of masculinity and femininity conflict with one another. For example, while a woman may be exemplary in managing the household finances, if her husband wants to gamble she is forced into the position of choosing between her responsibility for managing the family and the expectation that wives should follow their husbands. Or, a young woman may feel that getting a good education and establishing a career is the modern way, and while it is certainly sanctioned by the propaganda of the VWU, her husband may not agree, and if he agrees, his parents may not agree. Either way, there is sure to be confrontation.

Conceptions of gender are not even systematically held by individuals. In most cases, people will switch between conflicting models in different social situations. Although some of the young women with whom I spoke were critical of certain aspects of what they saw as an essentially unfair and repressive gender order, their actions were often, but not always, in accord with aspects of dominant patterns of femininity. Both their participation in and critique of it were actions that produced and reconstituted an ongoing definition of femininity. Frequently, these ideologies were only drawn upon when someone was required to justify their actions; for instance, when an anthropologist starts to ask questions about particular practices and asymmetrical power relations. At other times patterns were lived out in an unconscious manner – in the case of gender practice, through processes of habitus, actions that are reproduced due to life-long engagement in a society with particular dynamics of expectation.
The habitus is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. The dispositions generate practices, perceptions and attitudes which are 'regular' without being consciously co-ordinated or governed by any 'rule'. The dispositions which constitute the habitus are inculcated, structured, durable, generative and transposable... Dispositions are acquired through a gradual process of inculcation in which early childhood experiences are particularly important. Through a myriad of mundane processes of training and learning... the individual acquires a set of dispositions which literally mould the body and become second nature. The dispositions produced thereby are also structured in the sense that they unavoidably reflect the social conditions within which they were acquired (Thompson, J. 1991:12; emphasis in original).

The habitus is both structured and structuring, but should not be thought of as static, for it is constituted through practice (Bourdieu 1990 [1980]:52). In this sense, the habitus, as a structuring principle which is subject to historical change through practice, can be seen as having strong similarities with Giddens' theory of structuration (1984). He makes the point that structure is only constituted through action and has no fixed form: its existence is totally dependent on its employment. As Wolffensperger points out, 'A social system is the patterning of social relations across time and space, understood as reproduced practice' (1991:91). Connell's critique that 'Giddens closes off the possibility that its [ie. structure's] form might change in history' (1991 [1987]:94), is unfounded. In fact, a stress on the constitution (or being) of structure only through practice opens out wide possibilities for change. As practices change, so does structure itself. It becomes redefined through that practice.

Another important conceptual tool is the notion of 'performance'. Performance can be understood as meaning: 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (Goffman 1956:8). In terms of a dualism between structure and agency, the habitus may in some ways coincide (but is not synonymous) with the former, while practice is closer to the latter. However, it should be recognised that these aspects overlap to a tremendous degree. Thus, while habitus stresses embodied predispositions, it does not follow that the individual is always conscious of them. Likewise, performance can often be unconscious, therefore coinciding in particular instances with habitus. Vietnamese women perform their roles as caring mothers as predispositions of feminine behaviour which have been embodied; but they are also sometimes employed, or performed, as a strategy for gaining power in the family. There are certain situations in which people consciously
and forcefully insert themselves in social situations and others in which they more-or-less reproduce structures in social practice. It is in this way that some of the contradictions (not only between ideas and action but also between opposing ideas or actions which are held/done simultaneously), can be better understood.

I knew one woman, for example, who would yell at her husband and generally get her way in most arguments, thereby often getting the final decision in a lot of matters, while at the same time stressing to her daughters that they should follow their husbands, and offering herself as an example. She would often act in a subordinate manner to her husband, serving his food first, making sure that his glass was full and politely inviting him to eat before she started. What remained clear was that in some instances she was reproducing performance-based gender norms, at others she was resisting them and at others she was acting them out as a strategy – to be recognised as an ideal wife/mother brings respect and power in both the family and in the wider community, despite the fact that in a broader way it is reproducing structures that accord power to men and subordinate women.

The literature on gender in Vietnam is one sided: while women have been the topic of a number of works, in these studies men only ever feature as a backdrop in women’s lives, or as the causes of their suffering. I agree with Patricia Uberoi’s plea: ‘perhaps, in the future, “gender studies” will be something more than a rather pretentious synonym for “women’s studies”’ (Uberoi 1996:xiv). The complicated relations between men and women, masculinity and femininity, that I saw taking place daily, in the minutest of embodied actions as well as the most blatant ideological assertions, relied (absolutely) on the fact that there was an ‘opposite sex’ to serve as a reference; a process which Connell brings to light in his discussions on emphasised femininity and hegemonic masculinity (1991 [1987]:183-188). Men identified themselves as men by practices they were engaged in, by their performance of maleness: discursive practices, the ideas and beliefs they held, and by a general interaction with the world around them and the other people that inhabited the same social spaces.
CONCLUSION

I will end by bringing the discussion to where gender and religion coincide. The gender patterns that I have highlighted largely inform the ways in which individuals interact with and constitute religious practice and symbolism. Thus, it is important to draw attention to the gendered aspects of religious practice, and it is primarily this subject to which this thesis is dedicated. Below are descriptions of two young people I knew in Hanoi, which highlights how gender affects views on religion:

Miss Thào, age twenty-five, is a well educated young woman with values that are perhaps a little more ‘traditional’ than those of her peers. Despite her career and her education, which mark her as one of the emerging middle class (and therefore ‘modern’), marriage and children remain the central goal in her life. However, she is a thoroughly ‘modern’, urban woman, who comes into frequent contact with foreigners because of her job in a joint venture company. She wears fashionable clothing, is well-educated and multi-lingual, and sees many Vietnamese traditional attitudes towards women as outdated and unreasonable in today’s society. She thinks of herself as being modern – as part of the new group of well-educated, multilingual young people who are building Vietnam’s economy.

At the same time, she defines herself as being religious; even ‘superstitious’ (mê tìn), saying unabashedly: ‘I admit I believe in all “superstitions”’, conscious of the rhetoric against her beliefs, but confident enough not to be daunted by it. In an interview with her, she stated at first that her whole family was religious, but later qualified this by indicating that, while her father believed in Buddhism, he did not generally practice. In their house they have an altar that holds various statues of the Buddhist pantheon, and where sutras are

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31 In Vietnam the term is heavily politicised, being entwined with state-sponsored anti-religion rhetoric (see Chapter Two). As such, I use this term very specifically to indicate not a certain type of belief, but a particular person’s or institution’s views of a particular belief. For example: ‘spirit-mediumship is superstition’, will only be used in reference to the way that spirit-mediumship is regarded by the speaker. I will use ‘religious belief’, ‘belief’ or ‘faith’ as a non-judgemental way to describe all acceptance of ‘supernatural influences and signs’ and practices that are associated with them. Thus, I will refer to spirit-mediumship as religious practice and the idea that eating bananas before an examination will cause you to fail as belief from the perspective of a person who holds these to be true, and as superstition by someone else to indicate that person’s scepticism and a negative valuing of the belief and activity.
recited by the women of the family. It was her grandmother who erected the altar and, until she died last year, recited sutras at it daily. Now her mother (and sometimes Miss Thào) have taken over the responsibility for maintaining the altar and reciting the daily sutras. Miss Thào takes the opportunity when she can to visit a pagoda to make offerings and wishes for her family’s health and success, and to find a husband. On the first and fifteenth of every lunar month she makes a point of going because they are important days and this is when offerings are most efficacious and wishes most likely to be granted by the buddhas and spirits.

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Minh, twenty-two years old, comes from a poor family in a village one hour west of Hanoi. His father died when he was a baby, so his family had to struggle hard to survive and he was only minimally educated. Instead of going to school he would gather firewood to sell in Sơn Tây, the nearest big town – some five kilometres from his village. He, like many other young men from the surrounding rural areas, came to Hanoi to find a job. When I knew him he was working in a small hotel, owned by a distant relative, who took advantage of her relations for cheap labour. Not long after I left Hanoi, Minh moved back to his village in order to get married. The only time that he ever goes to pagodas is with friends for fun (để chơi), and that is infrequent (perhaps once or twice a year). He firmly maintains that all religion is superstition, and assumes an air of mockery when the subject is broached. He is ever-watchful of his mother wasting the family’s scant resources on religious practice, for she, in his eyes, is stupid (ngu) and superstitious (mê tín). His typical responses whenever I asked him questions about religion were humorous dismissals that not only betrayed his deep feelings of scepticism, but also indicated that his position was bound to issues of identity:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Me</th>
<th>What do you think happens to you after you die?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minh</td>
<td>Death is the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>What does burning immolative money do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minh</td>
<td>Nothing at all. It is literally burning money.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On one occasion he returned to his village to find that his mother was holding a séance at their house. Flying into a rage, he assaulted the medium and told everyone to leave. He then told his mother that if she was only going to
waste the money that he gave her, he would stop giving it. The depth of his conviction of the uselessness and wastefulness of all religious practices arises from the cultural and historical circumstances of Vietnam, which has juxtaposed religious belief and gender practice in this particular way. While his concern with waste is certainly heightened by his poverty, he draws on discourses against religion that originate in elite Confucian discourses that have been retooled for Marxism.

Miss Thào and Minh represent two different points of view regarding religious practice. While they are in many ways typical of the different ways that men and women think of religion in Hanoi, they are not emblematic, and there is room for considerable variation between the two approaches to religion. I have met women who do not believe in religion at all, just as I have met men who were very devout. In a broad sense, however, the variance in these two distinct attitudes towards religious practice holds true. The numbers of men who define themselves as religious is relatively small, and the number of women who do not practice at all is not large. Moreover, the ways that men and women either practice or disparage religion are distinct. My project will be to both draw out some of the reasons for this variance, and to explore variations from this norm in order to gain some understanding about the complexities of faith and gender in the Hanoi context.

Some of the issues that have been brought up in this chapter will become relevant as we start to look at how gender and religious practice interact in Hanoi. Men’s performances of knowledge and expectations of dominance; women’s concerns with the family or getting married — these are issues which have a determining effect on how Hanoians engage in the world. These in turn are influenced by historical changes and factors such as state policy and media images.

Religious practice is linked to overall social construction of gender identities. I insist that perceptions of gender shape what is considered appropriate religious action. In this sense, I am coming from an opposite, but not contradictory, direction to Keyes: ‘It is to be expected, then, that the culture of gender in Thailand has been shaped by Buddhist assumptions regarding the fundamental nature of reality; or, more precisely, since we are discussing a Buddhist culture, the fundamental nature of existential reality’ (1984:223). In order to understand how gender is related to Vietnamese religious practice generally, and Buddhist practice in particular, we must first look at men and women’s social roles more broadly, which is what this
chapter has been concerned with. Buddhist practice by women in Hanoi is tied to social structure as a whole, and participation by women in Buddhist activities must be understood in the context of Hanoi society.
Plate 11: Rural Women Selling in Hanoi
After my wife and I decided to marry, and after her parents had given their blessing, Lan’s mother, Mrs Loan, began making the wedding arrangements. Some of these arrangements were mundane: preparing invitations and setting up the wedding rituals and banquet. It was more difficult than usual because I had no family involved, which made the possibility of a strictly traditional wedding impossible. She also had to take care of a number of supernatural matters.

Mrs Loan is a very religious woman, and never fails to go to the pagoda on the first and fifteenth of every month. When she can, she goes to important events at the main pagoda in Hanoi, Quán Sở Pagoda, but it is seldom as often as she wishes because she lives on the outskirts of Hanoi and cannot get there unless one of her daughters or a friend gives her a lift on their motorcycle. She herself does not drive. Every New Year (Tết) she tries to visit a number of pagodas to make offerings and wishes for the new year, an activity undertaken by many Hanoians. However, her religious practice extends beyond what is defined by many Hanoians as Buddhism.

One of the first things she did after Lan and I became engaged was to take me to a famous temple dedicated to a mother goddess (thánh mâu), not far from her house. Once there, she arranged the contents of a large bag she had brought with her on a plate and we went to visit the various altars in the temple. After making the offerings, she prayed that Lan and I would have a good wedding, a
happy and successful life together and that we would be blessed with
a baby boy as soon as possible. She also wished success for me in
finishing my thesis.

A few days later, when I went to visit Lan at her house, Mrs Loan
declared that we were to see a fortune-teller that morning to pick out
an auspicious time and date for the wedding, and to ascertain the
nature of our future together. The date was picked, we were told that
we would have two sons and that I would be successful in my career.
Mrs Loan later explained to me that while the buddhas help with
some things, it was the spirits that were largely responsible for taking
care of things in this world.

Nonetheless, Mrs Loan saw herself as a Buddhist and it was with
activities that were commonly considered Buddhist in which she most
usually engaged. She hung Buddhist calendars and other Buddhist
iconography in her house. She made an effort to eat only vegetarian
food four days every month. If she had the opportunity to go to a
religious site, she would usually go to a pagoda. She never went to
séances or spirit possession rituals.

Mrs Loan represents the approach I encountered in most women
and participated in Buddhist activities with: while her energy and
devotion were directed to the Buddha, she did not discount any
aspect of the Vietnamese supernatural landscape. She would not deny
the existence or efficacy of ghosts, ancestors, spirits, gods and
goddesses, but would see them as being particularly relevant only in
certain instances. For her, Buddhism alone was the focal point of her
ritual life.

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At Phúc Lộc Pagoda,¹ a small pagoda in Hanoi, there is a nun named
Thành Tâm. The eldest daughter of a poor peasant family from a nearby
village, she was attracted to a monastic life by the possibility of
escaping her rural life of poverty. She once confided to me that one of
her reasons was that country life was hard. If she had had a good job
in Hanoi, she probably would not have become a nun. After she
finished high school in the early to mid 1970s, she decided to become
a nun against her parent’s wishes. She joined this particular pagoda
because she liked the old nun who was resident there.

¹ As I mentioned in the preface, the name of this pagoda and all names of people (except
Lan and her mother) are pseudonyms.
After helping the old nun for a few months, after which she decided that she liked life in the pagoda, she decided to stay. However, to do so she had to overcome several obstacles. In the beginning she wanted to shave her head (the sign of monasticism), but the police would not allow it. At the time she had thought that it was the old nun who did not want her to do this, but after the police directly forbade her, she realised that it was they who were preventing her from doing it. She convinced the old nun that someone was needed to take over the pagoda after she was gone, and with the agreement of the old nun, she shaved her head against the wishes of the police.

Her parents were another major obstacle. While living in the pagoda, prior to shaving her head, she would periodically return home to visit her parents. Her father was furious at her decision to become a nun, and would not speak to her, and for several years refused to acknowledge his daughter’s greetings. Thày Tâm’s mother was also unhappy about her daughter’s choice, but was less severe than her father.

A few years later, when she went home as a full nun, both parents greeted her warmly. All the previous anger had dissipated. Her father excused his previous actions by saying that they had been afraid she couldn’t bear the life of a pagoda. If this had happened, the whole family would have lost face (mất mặt). Further, they felt that she would waste her life in a pagoda. When they saw that she was happy and was resolute about wanting to become a nun, they gave her their blessing.

Thày Tâm was in her forties when I met her. She was content with her life in the pagoda and did not regret her decision. She became, to a certain extent, the hub of a pagoda family. Her mother bicycled in to spend every day around the pagoda, becoming one of three or four pagoda volunteers, and she daily cooked meals for her daughter and cleaned the pagoda. Thày Tâm’s sixteen year-old nephew, named Dúng, also stayed at the pagoda. He wanted to become a monk, but he was still of high school-age, and had to graduate before an application could be made to Quán Sú Pagoda for him to be admitted into the Sangha. Still, his hair was virtually shaved and he wore monastic-brown clothes when he was in the pagoda. Dúng’s mother also came in regularly to help clean the statues, and do other chores. Both of these mothers spent a great deal of time helping maintain the pagoda, but never participated in ritual life.
Not long after we first met, Thầy Tâm invited me to attend a spirit possession ritual (lên dòng) that was to be held in the shrine for mother goddesses (nha mãu) inside the pagoda. I had seen this ritual before, but was surprised that it would take place in a Buddhist pagoda. The ritual followed the same basic pattern as others I had seen, the medium (ông dòng) becoming possessed by a succession of spirits. Each of the spirits had a different character and the possessed medium was dressed in specific clothes by the medium’s assistants. Each time after dressing, the medium bowed down before the altar a number of times and then performed a dance specific to the spirit, while holding a particular object (for male spirits it was usually martial in nature – a sabre or a sword; for female spirits, the dance was usually performed with fans, torches and sometimes with oars or a paddle). After the dance the spirit sat, was given something to drink (usually tea or alcohol for male and tea or water for female spirits), and either smoked cigarettes (male) or chewed betel (female spirits). The spirit then accepted requests from supplicants, imparted wisdom, mostly to Thầy Tâm, and gave out objects infused with the energy of the spirit (lộc), which bring good luck to the recipient. (The objects were most often food but sometimes objects such as fans, pens, combs, etc. were given).

These rituals are normally conducted a few times each year by mediums, but unscheduled rituals may be sponsored by someone with a specific problem. In Thầy Tâm’s case, she needed to have the ritual performed for two reasons. The first was because she was the custodian of the pagoda, and because the pagoda had a shrine for the mother goddesses, she was responsible for ensuring that the ritual was performed at specific times of the year. However, the second reason she gave was because she had a ‘heavy fate’ (năng cảnh) as a result of actions in a past life. This fate caused her to suffer from several ailments, which could be remedied only by sponsoring a number of these rituals.

There are various ways in which this condition of being heavy fated is manifested, but it is usually indicated by a string of bad luck, illnesses or insanity. Correspondingly, there are different degrees of involvement. I knew one old woman who had been a medium for forty-six years. Her first child died, after which she said she went insane (bị diễm). She described how she would wander around the village wearing flowers in her hair and saying strange things (nói lung tung). After she ‘opened a palace’ (mở phủ – a colloquial expression for sponsoring a lên dòng or becoming a medium), her insanity
vanished. She said she had this difficulty because her mother in her previous life (kiếp trước) had been bad, and the debt had been passed on to her, and it had to be repaid. However, not everyone needs to get involved to this degree. Some only have to repay their debt by helping, or attending. Some need to sponsor a ritual or act as a bà/đồng đong (female/male medium) once. Some people can get away with paying a little money to have an incense bowl put for them in the shrine (diện) of the bà đong.

Thầy Tâm was heavy fated, and her absolution came through sponsoring a number of lể đong, the last of which was the one that I attended. In her case, she was not required to act as a bà đong. She only needed to have someone perform the ritual. Strictly speaking, one could say that she was not allowed to do it, as she was a member of the Sangha. However, though monastics are not supposed to do it, I have heard on number of occasions of a nun acting as a bà đong. This case was even more unusual in that it was performed by a young monk of slightly higher rank than Thầy Tâm.

This ritual is generally regarded as being non-Buddhist. However, contrary to the claims of some Buddhists whose view is more doctrinal, it is seen by many as being complementary rather than antithetical to Buddhism. In a conversation we had a couple of days after the ritual, Thầy Tâm told me:

The two religions are very close, like a father and mother. Both the Buddha (Phật) and the mother goddesses (thành mẫu) must be addressed. In general one shouldn’t follow superstition (mé tín), but some of it is true, and it still has to be followed or bad things will happen to you. If you do something wrong, you can be penitent to the Buddha (sám hối) and the Buddha will be aware of this and help you to do better. However, the gods (thành) are not the same. If you do something wrong the gods (thành) will hold you responsible and will punish you immediately. There are rituals that you can do, such as hâu thành (another word for lể đong) that will help [translation mine, see Appendix 1:2.1].

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When confronted with the complexities of Vietnamese religious practice, it is immediately apparent that there is a fluidity that makes strict categorisation impossible. Cadière,2 one of the most influential

2 Leopold Cadière was a Catholic priest who lived for many decades in Huế and did research on a variety of topics, but is most noted for his extensive work on religious beliefs and rituals. For an English translation of the Introduction to Croyances et Pratiques
and prolific scholars of Vietnamese religion this century, used this analogy to illustrate the interwoven nature of religious ‘systems’:

...here and there, great trunks which plunge their roots into unknown depth and support a vault of foliage shrouded in the shadows; branches which take root bending towards the soil; lianas, that run from one tree to another, come into being at unknown places and seem to have no end; inextricable brambles, fronds having extraordinary fineness and elegance; great flowers, strange flowers which litter the ground, cover the top of a tree with a fire canopy or crouch at the fork of two branches; rough, black, thick, barks which make people shiver; dead branches, a thick carpet of humus, rotting; everywhere an abundant sap, a profound life that submerges you (Cadière, L. 1958:1; translated by Simon, Pierre J. and Ida Simon-Barouh 1996:122-123).

My aim in this chapter is not to try to undo Cadière’s metaphor. On the contrary, I hope to be able to highlight the complexities of religious practice as I saw it in Hanoi. The tangled nature of the explanations I encountered in discussing religion with people occurred both between individuals and within individuals. Thus, Thây Tâm sees spirit possession rituals as superstition, but still participates in them. An intrinsic part of the overall complexity results from the involvement of the state in religious discourses, which long existed in Vietnam, but has increased as a result of the colonial experience, protracted war, and almost half a century of communist rule.

When scientific studies of religion first became a part of Western post-Enlightenment study, Asian religions were examined by Western scholars primarily through the translation and interpretation of sacred texts, such as Muller’s series The Sacred Books of the East (1879-1910). What students of religion found when they looked at religious practice on the ground contradicted the textual traditions so violently that some concluded the religious were not actually followed by their adherents. This was certainly the case for China and Vietnam, where there has been a mixing of different religious strains so that for the majority of practitioners they form a whole in which the differences are distinctions within the complex rather than distinctions between religions. What followed were interpretations which were either top-down, such as de Groot’s (1989 [1892-1910]) for China, which stresses that religion becomes ‘diluted’ as it ‘descends’ to the popular level; or bottom-up interpretations, such as Granet’s (1975 [1922]), which takes ancestor worship, the worship of heaven, divination and sacrifice to

_Religieuses des Vietnamiens [Religious beliefs and practices of the Vietnamese], see Mabbett (1989)._
be elements of 'official religion as distinct from peasant religion' (Yang 1961:106). Both of these approaches are problematic for the way that they presume a distinctness of religious traditions. Nonetheless, they did not dismiss religious practice at the day-to-day level.

In Vietnam, Cadière proclaimed that the Vietnamese were not Buddhist, but animist, worshipping the spirits of trees and rocks (1958:6):

Buddhism is a philosophy, a conceptualisation of human life and the world; and yet, the number of Vietnamese who pay attention to this philosophy is nonetheless minimal. Buddhism is a source of religious life, it excites sentiments of fear, hope, trust, perhaps love; yet most of the Vietnamese who take water from this source only do it in passing, and the acts that they perform are only an accessory in their religious life. Except for monastics, there are no real Buddhists amongst the Vietnamese (and even amongst them, not all, for many it is just a job); and above all a few noble souls, passionate about an ideal, who, without entering a monastery, search to escape from the miseries of the world, take the monastic habit, and follow the precepts and beliefs of Buddhism. Besides these exceptions, we can say that nine tenths of all Vietnamese in Annam [the central region where Cadière worked] – a little less in Tonkin [northern Vietnam] where the numerous pagodas attract the devout – live and die without performing the least religious act inspired by the Buddhist religion (Cadière 1958:5-6) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:2.2].

He was not the first to reach this conclusion. Many French scholars were reluctant to say that the Vietnamese were Buddhist. In 1912, Giran wrote:

Moreover, Buddhism has only had a limited influence in Vietnam, where its practice only first started around the tenth century of our era. Furthermore, it was considerably altered as soon as it was introduced; the doctrine of world renunciation is, in effect, too discordant with the popular positivist spirit. The sole element of Buddhism which remains more or less intact is the moral code, which is what penetrated some of the religious doctrines of the Vietnamese, and again is it not inconceivable that this moral element came spontaneously, without the help of Buddhism (1912:220) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:2.3].

While it is true that there is a strong tendency towards animistic beliefs and practices, such a statement both ignores the complexity of their beliefs and presumes that anything outside of the textual, 'orthodox' tradition of Buddhism is not Buddhist. Such a presumption does little to explain why so many Vietnamese call themselves Buddhist, the ubiquitousness of Buddhist architecture throughout
Vietnam, and the existence of a Vietnamese Buddhist monastic institution.

Students of Chinese religion have largely stopped trying to dissect the mixture of religions that makes up religious practice. A categorisation of the three major religious traditions (Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) which packages them into discrete boxes was an unproductive and purely academic endeavour which only explained practice poorly. While there have been those who have labelled themselves (and continue to label themselves) Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian, it is the discourse (i.e., who makes them and what is being claimed by their employment) of these labels which ought to be the focus of attention for scholars rather than attaching importance to the labels themselves. The term ‘Chinese religion’ as a more open label has become the norm (e.g., Thompson, L. 1975). This point of view is summed up by Jordan in his work on popular religion in Taiwan:

There is something called Taoism, with certain tradition [sic] and religious specialists and books associated with it; and it is Chinese. There is also something called Buddhism, with certain traditions, religious specialists and books. It is different from Taoism, but in most ways it is equally Chinese. There is in addition to these two traditions, with their specialists and their books, a corpus of beliefs and practices, the folk religion, which has variously been described as Confucian ([de] Groot 1910) (which it is not), as animistic (Reichelt 1951), and as popular (Maspero [1950]). All three of these strains, Taoism, Buddhism, and folk religion, have contributed heavily to Chinese religious life, and their interpenetration is so extensive as to prevent a thoroughgoing sorting of the elements one might associate with each in its ‘primal’ state (1972 [1985]:27).

Zurcher (1980) introduced the metaphor of mountains to describe the religious landscape of China. At the elite, orthodox level, represented as the mountain peaks, the various traditions seem distinct and far apart. However, when at the bottom – the level of ‘popular religion’ – it is far less clear where one mountain ends and the other begins (Zurcher 1980). The differing approaches of historians and anthropologists have tended to focus respectively on the top and the bottom, not surprisingly producing vastly different results (Shahar and Weller 1996:2).

The French tended to regard Vietnam as a smaller version of China, or as ‘a somewhat eccentric and stunted extension of China’ (Woodside 1988:11), which was not the case. While Vietnam was
deeply influenced by the religious traditions of China, the merging with the indigenous traditions is so complete that the religious landscape can only be regarded as Vietnamese. Cadière's poetic imagery accentuates how the various religious strains cannot be satisfactorily separated in an accurate account of religion in Vietnam. The core of the problem is similar to that of the gender order discussed in the preceding chapter: the ideological level presented through the discourses of religious and secular institutions does not represent the practice of religion at the lived level.

There has been an effort made by a number of authors to critique prior assumptions founded in the inconsistencies between the textual and the practiced traditions. Along this line, Simon and Simon-Barouh write:

In fact, in Vietnam we have not three separate religious systems but according to a general consensus on this subject, there is a religious mosaic, a mixture, a superposition and mutual penetration of cults, rites, beliefs and myths. In short, there is a magico-religious whole having a complexity that seems to challenge the analysis... (Simon and Simon-Barouh 1996:122).

And Cleary, who writes that the interpenetration of 'elite' and 'folk' cultures,

call into question the validity of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea (recycled in the twentieth century as the Great Tradition/little tradition [sic] dichotomy) that generally one can expect to find a more intellectual, philosophical version of religion in the higher reaches of the social hierarchy, while the masses hold to a more emotional, superstitious set of beliefs. The interpretation of 'elite' religion and 'folk' religion... suggests that there may be a basic flaw in separating the study of folk religion and the study of scriptural religion into distinct specializations (Cleary 1991:94).

Thiên Đo has recently taken it a step farther by pointing out that even using the terms 'textual' and 'practical' are problematic, as though the production and consumption of texts were not in themselves forms of practice (1998:2). He instead adopts the term 'Vietnamese supernaturalism' (1995) to describe the religious complex of Vietnam.

So, in this study, I follow Đo's (1998) lead in rejecting a dualistic division between the 'elite', 'orthodox', 'text-and-clergy based' or 'great' traditions on the one hand, and the 'popular', 'heterodox',

3 For example, Cleary (1991); Nguyen, C.T. (1997); Do (1998).
‘folk’, or ‘little’ tradition, on the other. Tambiah critiqued the same division in 1970 by pointing out that anthropologists, especially those working in India, have dealt with the problem by trying to determine the relationship between the great tradition of civilisation and the little tradition of the village, or Higher Sanskrit Hinduism versus Lower Popular Hinduism, but these efforts failed for two reasons: First, there is the problem of the variations within the great literary religious tradition which is both cumulative and changing. Second, it ignores how the literary tradition is absorbed at the village level:

Brahman priests, Buddhist monks, ritual experts and scribes in some measure deal with literary and oral knowledge transmitted from the past and which they themselves systematically transmit to their successors. And for the common people at large such texts and knowledge have a referential and legitimating function, even if they themselves have no access to them (Tambiah 1970:4).

Tambiah is interested in how these levels come together through historical continuities and transformations. This is, in itself, a valid task. However, I am more concerned with practice, and with the discourses which contribute to the employment of doctrine; that is, why references are made to a textual tradition, and by whom. In order to do so, I find it necessary to take a ‘Buddhist’ to be anyone who declares himself or herself as such, regardless of whether their practices and conceptions of Buddhism comply with ‘orthodoxy’ or constitute what some have problematically called ‘syncretism’. Similarly, I take Buddhist practice to include any activity that is regarded by practitioners as Buddhist. I do not intend to dwell on the incongruities between these practices and Buddhist texts (‘Which texts?’ one might ask), though in this thesis I will be looking closely at the differences between individual practices and individual conceptions of what these practices mean.

Although there are some problems with starting from this basis, it is methodologically imperative in order to take seriously conflicting claims of legitimacy and illegitimacy, and to understand the discourses from which such claims emerge. When I mention religious traditions, they should not be taken as self-contained, but merely as different facets of a total religious landscape, the differences being

4 I do, however, refer to an orthodox or doctrinal opinion. It can be seen as shorthand for elite, hegemonic cultural pronouncements on ‘popular’ practice, and should not be seen as having implications of what is ‘correct’ or ‘true’ in relation to popular practices.
most often in the kind of activities (e.g., rituals) and the spaces in
which these practices are performed rather than as a cosmological
conceptualisation that is irreconcilably fractured with what the
practitioners view as ‘non-Buddhist’. For example, while I may speak
of spirit possession rituals (lên dông) I am not referring to a distinct
cosmological understanding with an irreconcilably different set of
deities. Nor am I speaking of a distinct soteriology or eschatology.
What I am referring to is a specific set of practices (possession by
spirits) that take place in specific places (đền, nhà mầu, phu or diên)
as distinct from, say, chanting sutras in the main hall of a pagoda.
Further, those who participate in both sorts of activities do not
necessarily experience a conflict in taking part in both, though at an
abstract level one may be found by academic analysis.⁵

Tam Đạo: Discourses of Religion in Vietnam

In Vietnamese academic accounts of religion in Vietnam, the term tam
dạo or tam giáo is frequently employed. It literally means three paths
or three religions, and refers to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.
It is a concept that has roots in Vietnamese understandings of the
religious landscape. It is also a concept borrowed from China. Thus,
though it has been extensively used in state and academic discourses
on religion, it must be understood as being heavily laden with political
meaning. In terms of the mountain analogy, the peaks are seen as
Chinese, while at the base, the diffuse level, Vietnamese indigenous
traditions are merged with the three Chinese traditions. However, the
use of the concept of tam giáo should be seen as part of a discourse
which separates legitimate or orthodox (chính đạo) and illegitimate or
heterodox religious practice (tà đạo); (acceptable) belief (tin ngưỡng)
and superstition (mê tín); and, to some extent, the majority, traditional
and good (lương) from the minority and foreign Catholics (giáo).

Fundamental to this concept is a distinction between ‘high’
religions that came from China (Taoism, Confucianism and Mahayana
Buddhism) and popular ‘low’ traditions. Thus it is an orthodox, elitist

⁵ For example, general Buddhist understandings of karma is that it is a process of cause
and effect and constituted from the actions and attachment to those actions by individuals.
However, the central purpose of spirit possession rituals is to effect a change in one’s fate.
While seemingly contradictory to me (and to some Vietnamese), because it is not
accompanied by moral improvement and cannot counteract karma that has already been
produced, they are not experienced as such by those engaged in these practices.
perception of religious practice which has its roots in Confucian concepts adopted by the Vietnamese literati. Indeed, a similar discourse of distinction is found in China with the neo-Confucian critique that disparaged Buddhism for promoting unfilial behaviour (Ch’en 1964:394-398; 1973:48)). Because of the way that the distinction is fraught with political implications, involved as it is with discourses of China as the ‘other’, it is unsuitable for uncritical adoption. However, it remains important for understanding discourses of religion in Vietnam.

While the term, on the one hand, assumes an elitist division of religion, it was also unifying in some ways, because it stressed that the three traditions in some way make up a complementary whole. Historians have argued that religion has been used in important ways in Vietnam for political unification and for providing authority from the time that Vietnam gained independence from China. Keith Taylor’s reading of eleventh to twelfth century Buddhist texts shows that during the Lý dynasty, Buddhism and the spirit traditions (together called ‘Lý dynasty religion’ by Taylor) were fundamental for the legitimation of rulership:

The Lý dynasty rose so spectacularly in the eleventh century because there was an unbroken series of believable kings; it faded and fell a few generations later because the Lý kings were no longer believable in terms of the pattern of thought embodied in ‘Lý dynasty religion’. The Lý dynasty was essentially the growth and decay of a religious idea (Taylor, K. 1986 [1990]:170; emphasis in original).

However, the most significant factor in the use of the term tam đạo is that it accentuated the commonalities between China and Vietnam. For the Vietnamese court, especially during the Nguyễn dynasty, identification with an ideal of classical China was crucial to their self-conception. It provided legitimacy because of the place that these ideals held (and to some extent still hold) as the cultural model for the Vietnamese elite.

There is a second to advantage that association with China had. In Southeast Asia, borrowing from China had significant practical significance, besides the importance that association had for (especially elite) national identity. Given the fact that the Chinese were at the time by far the most ‘developed’ and ‘innovative’, borrowing from China gave Vietnam significant advantages over its neighbours. The exam system and administrative structure, borrowed from China,
gave Vietnam better centralised bureaucracy than other Mainland Southeast Asian polities. As a result, by the Nguyễn dynasty, Vietnam was able to expand and then govern 'a unified kingdom from the China border to the Gulf of Siam through sophisticated, zealously domesticated Chinese administrative laws (Woodside 1971:60). Even printed money, which existed in Vietnam by the twelfth century, but did not exist in neighbouring Cambodia until the nineteenth century, gave the Vietnamese advantages over their neighbours (Woodside 1988:25)'.

However, the identification with China was a discourse purely at the level of the literati, who identified themselves as Confucian and relegated Vietnamese indigenous knowledge to a lower status. Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes: ‘Confucian scholars, who prided themselves upon their rationality, often scoffed at what they considered the superstitious nature of peasant religion’ (Ho 1987:113). For example, Marr describes how there were three distinct medical traditions, which themselves had a religious character, and existed in Vietnam before the French introduced Western medical concepts. The most respected of these was called ‘Northern medicine’ (Thuốc Bắc), which drew on the Chinese classics and was only practised by those Vietnamese capable of reading Chinese characters (Marr 1987b:28). The second medical tradition, called ‘Southern medicine’ (Thuốc Nam), was the cure of first resort, the poor man’s medicine, and consisted of the use of local plants and animals (Marr 1987b:33-34). The third tradition had no specific name and looked to the supernatural for cures through the use of charms, amulets and exorcism. Some mixing between the traditions did occur, and most people would resort to any and all if they could afford them (Marr 1987b:38-39). However, the local traditions were nonetheless derided by the elite, as can be seen in the example of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, a writer and adherent of Northern medicine in the late nineteenth century:

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, for example, urged that quacks be punished severely by the state. Rather wistfully, he painted a dream of medical charlatans being denounced by outraged poor farmers and hauled before a judicial mandarin. First on trial was an uneducated simpleton who relied solely on family traditions plus a few ancient ideas learned orally and applied dogmatically, not realizing how many different permutations were explained in the medical

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Woodside (1971) thoroughly examines Vietnamese borrowings from the Chinese in the Nguyễn dynasty. For a more concise but historically broader essay, see Woodside (1988). For a comparative look at the influence of China on the Vietnamese legal codes, see Ta Van Tai (Ta 1981).
classics. Second was the acupuncturist... who also had no comprehension of the underlying principles, and, besides, charged exorbitantly. Third came the Southern medicine practitioner who had the temerity to mix long-established Northern medicines with his questionable jungle and mountain drugs, partly to trick patients into paying higher prices. Then there was the Taoist priest, condemned for departing from Lao-tzu’s legitimate teachings and promoting rank superstitions. Finally came a Buddhist monk, seemingly the worst offender, who on the one hand refused to offer practical solutions to life’s problems, yet on the other accepted gifts from ill people in exchange for a vial of water mixed with ‘sacred’ ashes (Marr 1987b:38).

French scholars found the *tam dao/giao* construction and adopted it, although because of scholarly preoccupations with categorisation rather than the reasons of Confucian usage. Souvignet’s work *Variété Tonkinoises*, for example:

However, among these different cults, there are three that dominate and sum up all of these: these are the ones called *tam giao* or the three religions, which are: Phật Giáo or Buddhism, Nho Giáo or Confucianism and Đạo Giáo or Taoism (1903:241).7

Others accepted the division, but did not explicitly use the term. Diguet, for example, wrote in 1906:

A Vietnamese, like a Chinese, is therefore at the same time Buddhist, Taoist, and a follower of Confucius; the Chinese philosopher whose precepts served as a morality for the Chinese soul and whose altars are raised to equal status with the first two (1975 [1906]:207).8

For those scholars, use of the *tam dao* framework was a way to describe ‘the tops of the mountains’, and provided a convenient way to compartmentalise the different systems. An additional advantage was that it stressed similarities with China, especially because studying

7 ‘Toutefois, parmi ces différents cultes, il en est trois qui dominent et résument tous les autres: ce sont ceux que l'on appelle les *tam giao* ou trois religions, à savoir: le Phật Giáo ou Bouddhisme, le Nho Giáo ou Confucianisme et le Đạo Giáo ou Taoism’ (Souvignet 1903:241) [translation mine].

8 ‘L’Annamite, comme le Chinois est donc à la fois bouddhiste, taoiste, et celle de Confucius, le philosophe chinois dont les préceptes ont servi de morale à l’âme chinoise et à l’âme annamite et auquel des autels sont élevés au même titre qu’aux deux premiers’ (Diguet 1975 [1906]:207) [translation mine].
Vietnam was often used as a back door to Sinology, rather than deriving from an interest in Vietnam in its own right.

For this reason, as well as because a primary focus on the textual tradition, very little work was done on ‘popular religion’ until very recently; scholars choosing instead to focus on the elements that most closely fit in with their model of Three Religions (notable exceptions being the work of Cadière and Durand). Simon and Simon-Barouh write:

In Vietnam, The cult of dòng – ông dòng [male medium] especially dedicated to the cult of Đức Thánh Trần and the Tiger Lords, and bà dòng [female medium] was rather popular and continues to be well known for its appearance, the most ‘spectacular’ dances, dress, etc. However, it has not been studied. It is because other phenomena concerning this popular religion have been taken by Confucian scholars, Westernized Vietnamese and European researchers for rather vulgar, childish, ridiculous magico-religious practices, little more than exotic amusement (1996:113).

French scholarship deeply influenced the way that Vietnamese intellectuals looked at themselves, and the usage of the tam đạo framework has remained prominent in academic writings on Vietnamese culture and religion produced in the country. French-educated Vietnamese became a new elite. Vietnamese social scientists have taken on board most of the French conceptions of their religious traditions, and uncritically accepted the tam đạo framework as a starting point that is then added to by reference to what they describe as specifically Vietnamese religious traditions.

We understand that it is said the Vietnamese people have three religions besides Christianity, which have recently been introduced: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Some also say that the Vietnamese follow animism (linh giáo) and worship nature. In this chaos there is the issue of the spirit (tầm linh), in which we distinguish customs of worshiping ancestors (tố tiên) and worshipping tutelary gods (thành hoàng). In fact, all of these systems (hệ thống) have been severely altered. The vast majority of people in the country have one very lively and flexible popular religion, which is characterised by a number of rituals, maybe belonging to Confucianism, maybe Taoism or Buddhism, and everyone practices independently for different situations in their lives: for funerals we look to Buddhist monastics, Confucian scholars and Taoist ritual experts. For weddings, we honour Confucian ceremonies... (Nguyễn V.H. 1996:721) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:2.4].
Similarly, Dao Duy-Anh writes that, 'If we look at the past history of our country's modes of thought, we see that there are only three popular schools, which are: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.' (1938:239). More recently, Trinh Ngoc Thinh's (1997) overview of Vietnamese culture devotes a chapter each to Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, while all other aspects of Vietnamese religion are covered in a chapter entitled ‘beliefs’ (tin ngưỡng).

While this may have been the case in Vietnamese academic circles, ordinary people would not describe Vietnamese religion in these terms. I only once heard the tam dạo formula being used in a non-academic setting in Vietnam. Significantly, it was used by an old man named Ông Hưng in order to explain to me the religious tradition(s) of Vietnam. He had a reputation for his academic knowledge, although he was not a professional academic.

A new trend in Vietnamese scholarship has emerged which, rather than taking Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism as being central to Vietnamese religion, has moved towards studies of gods and goddesses that are claimed to represent the ‘truly’ indigenous Vietnamese tradition. The strongest emphasis is on the cult of the mother goddesses. For example a recent issue of Vietnamese Studies, a social science journal published by the state-run foreign language publishing company (Thế Giới Publishers), was devoted solely to the topic.

One of the principle ways that the present government claims legitimacy is that it is distinctly Vietnamese, governing a distinctly Vietnamese population. Because of this, elements in the state apparatus accentuate the unity of a Vietnamese people. Vietnamese academic writing has become one of the key sites of this cultural production. Rhetorical claims about religion participate in this nationalist discourse, along with other subjects, like women, the

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9 'Xem lịch sử tư tưởng nước ta thấy rằng xưa nay chỉ có ba học phải hành, tức là Khổng học, Phật học và Lão học' (Dao D.A. 1938:239) [translation mine].

10 'Ông' is a polite pronoun, literally meaning 'grandfather'.

11 The pantheon of 'the cult of female spirits and mother goddesses', as it is called by Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996a), is a loose collection of female deities rather than a coherent 'system'. Prayers to these deities generally concern fertility, health and wealth, and other imminent benefits.

12 Vietnamese Studies (1999, no.131). Other recent publications in Vietnamese language focused on the cult of the mother goddesses include: Đặng Văn Lương (1991); Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996a, 1996b); Phan Huy Đông (1998); and most of the chapters in Nguyễn Minh San (1994).
family, and minorities. Evans points out that, in Laos, the state continually tries to accentuate ethnic solidarity through portraying the minorities as part of the Lao nation, de-emphasising the differences and historical divergences. Following Gladney (1994), Evans points out that particularly in Communist states minority people are paraded in their ethnic costumes and perform dances at major state occasions. He writes: ‘The display of ethnic difference is to confirm or reinforce a sense of commonality amongst the culturally dominant group (which is perhaps regionally divided), and indeed to reinforce the dominant culture which stage-manages these occasions’ (1998:152). The same could be said of Vietnam, as the points where they come together (e.g., mother goddess worship) are emphasised, while disunity and historical conflict is ignored. Meanwhile, the state is implementing a systematic Vietnamisation of these groups, primarily through education being given solely in Vietnamese.

This new stress on the indigenous traditions of Vietnam is, to use Hobsbawm and Ranger’s term (1983), an ‘invented tradition’. In anthropological discourse, ‘traditional culture’ is recognised as being negotiated and constructed in a process. Hanson writes: ‘Tradition is now understood quite literally to be an invention designed to serve contemporary purposes’ (Hanson 1989:890). In Vietnam as in other places, the use of the concept of ‘tradition’ (truyền thống) is intrinsic to the production of national identity. Traditions are not invented in the sense that they had no prior existence, but they are invented in terms of the way that they are used to make evident Vietnamese cultural uniqueness, with the specific political intent of distancing Vietnam from China. Vietnamese tradition and culture has become ‘fixed’ in such a way that historical processes are ignored: ‘a set of basic dispositions or traits establishes the nation as an entity in relation to all other national entities, and any future developments must be built upon this base’ (Handler & Linnekin 1984:278). In this, they are not very different from the Quebecois described by Handler and Linnekin. As with the Quebecois, Vietnamese national identity is collectively held in such a way that it seems to be fact, and state discourses draw on these cultural presumptions. Handler and Linnekin’s informants statement, ‘we are a nation because we have a

\[13 \text{For examples of this literature see: Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983); Handler and Linnekin (1984); Hanson (1989); Anderson (1983); Linnekin (1992); and for a review of the effects of this debate, see Briggs (1996).}\]
culture' (1984:277), echoes the claims of countless academic books in Vietnam.

The fact that the state has allowed village rites (discussed further in Chapter Three), to resume is significant, for in relation to the invented tradition, they can be seen as an appeal to Vietnamese culture. As Evans (1998) has shown in Laos, the socialist symbols have proved largely ineffective in providing legitimation for the regime, and have come under threat because of the tenuous rhetorical line that is sustaining the present regime in power. Likewise, in Vietnam the Renovation has been associated with a general dissatisfaction with the socialist state. In response, elements in the state apparatus have stressed national symbols. For example, Vietnamese tradition is created around cultural artefacts such as architectural structures and communal house festivals. In a similar way, Buddhism is coopted in academic works as a representative of Vietnamese culture. Traditional festivals and rites commonly appear in the news, especially at the beginning of the year, and TV programmes dealing with Vietnamese history, art and architecture are becoming commonplace.

Dreams of Zen

Buddhism has been described by Vietnamese scholars (both in the academy as well as the Buddhist Institution) in a way that implicates issues of national identity. It has generally been assumed by the few scholars who have written about it, that Vietnamese Buddhism is essentially Zen (Thiê̂n in Vietnam).

For example, The Hung (1979:30) asks: ‘How was it [Zen] able, at certain moments, to play the leading role in the national ideology, contribute to the formation of Vietnamese civilization and hold an important position in the evolution of Vietnamese thought?’

Zen Buddhism placed its emphasis on the primacy of direct experience of the truth – that this world is essentially empty (sunya) of reality – in contrast to textual or devotional forms of Buddhism. Zen stresses the fact that everyone has within them a buddha-nature, meaning that we are all already buddhas, which puts the stress on realisation rather than on transformation. In other words, one does

14 See, for example: Bechert and Vu Duy Tu (1976); Durand (1959); Mai Thọ Truyền (1959); Thích Mật Thê (1960); Nguyễn Đăng Thức (1967); Nguyễn Lang (1974); Nguyễn Tài Thư et al. (1988); and Thích Thien An (1975:23).
not need to do anything special to become enlightened, only to become aware of this pre-existing buddha-nature. The paradigm of this enlightenment experience is contained in the story of Kasyapa, one of the Buddha’s main followers. One day the Buddha held up a flower to a group of devotees, and of all of those in the crowd, only Kasyapa smiled. The Buddha then recognised that Kasyapa understood, had gained sudden enlightenment through this one action.

Although there is no particular practice that needs to be performed in order to realise the truth and become enlightened, there are a number of methods that are used to help one achieve this realisation. The most common is sitting in meditation (Zen literally means just that). However, there are a number of other schools that use more flamboyant methods. Masters of the Lin-chi sect approached the problem by trying to jolt disciples out of their stupor through the use of nonsensical riddles or answers to student’s questions, called koan in Japanese and kung-an in Chinese (literally meaning ‘public document’) (Robinson & Johnson 1982:180). The intention was not to solve the riddle so much as to allow a person’s mind to be freed from the bonds of reason, or, as D.T. Suzuki put it ‘the main thing is to know the universe itself and not the problem of koan as set forward by the old masters’ (Suzuki 1970 [1953]:18). Beatings of disciples by Zen masters are meant to achieve the same end.

Vietnamese Buddhist identification with Zen has become more pronounced and systematic because of academic work on the subject. In 1932 Trần Văn Giáp, a French trained Vietnamese scholar, wrote about the history of early Vietnamese Buddhism, basing his work on a ‘rediscovered’ text called the Thiên Uyên Tạp Anh, which was modelled after the ‘transmission of the lamp’ texts that recorded the history of Zen lineages in China. Virtually every description of Buddhism in Vietnam has been a reproduction of Trần Văn Giáp’s work. It has strongly influenced not only academic descriptions of Buddhism in Vietnam, but has also been taken up by the Buddhist institution as a self-description. To this degree, Zen could be said to be part of the discursive practice of some individuals and institutions.

Cuong Tu Nguyen writes:

15 In a lengthy and enlightening endnote, Cuong Tu Nguyen gives a concise evaluation of the different works on Vietnamese Buddhism to illustrate how they have all been based on Trần Văn Giáp’s work, and finds them all misleading in their representations of Vietnamese Buddhism (1997:342-343, n.54).
Since Trần Văn Giáp published his work, this viewpoint has become the basis for a rediscovered sense of identity and orthodoxy among Vietnamese Buddhists. Moreover, it was accepted enthusiastically in the mid-1960's in South Vietnam by the Vietnamese Buddhist community in the wake of its presumed "political victory." This resulted in a self-conscious re-thinking on the part of the Vietnamese Buddhist elite of the role of Buddhism in Vietnamese history, and an urge toward a reassertion of this role in modern times. Since Nguyễn Lang published his book sentimentally and confidently reaffirming the Thần Uyên's account as veridical history, it has become the "official viewpoint" on Vietnamese Buddhism. Vietnamese Buddhists nowadays, both clerical and lay, approach the Thần Uyên with an atavistic reverence. Even scholars in North Vietnam - so far behind and out of touch with the rest of the world in the field of the study of religion - also subscribe to this viewpoint (Nguyen, C.T. 1997:24-25).

Roughly at the time that Trần Văn Giáp wrote his influential paper, Vietnamese Buddhism was resurgent, and was taking part in regional exchanges. Vietnamese monks were studying in a number of different Asian countries, especially Japan and Taiwan. The result of this exchange was an elitist Buddhist critique against local variants of Buddhist practice. Local traditions that did not tow the doctrinal line were denigrated as superstition, and attempts were made by the elites to separate them from 'doctrinally pure' Buddhism. At the same time, and as part of this movement, there was increased publication of Buddhist literature, especially about the historical Buddha's teachings. Marr writes that religious publications, especially Buddhist, made up twenty per cent of all titles published between 1923 and 1942 in the Romanised Vietnamese script, which, because of its greater accessibility than Chinese characters, allowed more people than ever to have direct access to Buddhist teachings (1981:51). At this time, the Cao Đài religion arose in the south, a synthesis of Catholicism, Confucianism, Buddhism and Western rationalism. Another southern Buddhist movement at the time was the Hòa Hào, a reform Buddhist movement which was based on mysticism and centred on its founder Huỳnh Phú Sổ. It was distinctly political in its aspirations, preaching the overthrow of the French and independence for Vietnam (Marr 1981:305-306). Both these sects remained in the south and were never a religious force in the north.

Zen in Vietnam, Cuong Tu Nguyen persuasively argues, is an imagined tradition that has become prominent in the self-description of Vietnamese Buddhism. Vietnamese Buddhist elites were influenced by Zen literature that started to arrive from China around the time of the Lý Dynasty. Zen, which conveniently shunned text, provided
legitimation for a Vietnamese Buddhist tradition in the absence of any significant corpus of specifically Vietnamese writing. The creation of a Zen identity provided Vietnamese Buddhism with an orthodox identity that becomes especially appealing because of the strong link between Zen and elite Chinese culture. The high regard for Zen as a school admired by aristocrats and mandarins in China gave it an aura of prestige and respectability: ‘In the Vietnamese Buddhists’ hearts and minds, Zen is felt to be the essence of Buddhism, and its highest form’ (Nguyen, C.T. 1997:99).

While Vietnamese scholars claim Buddhism in Vietnam to be Zen, I saw almost no trace of any Zen during my research in Hanoi. Architecturally, the pagodas of Hanoi lack meditation halls – an architectural feature that could be said to be essential for a Zen monastery. Nor did I ever see anyone, or hear of anyone, who practised meditation (despite the fact that people still associate Buddhism to some degree with meditation). Ông Hùng, the old man mentioned above, once said to me that there was no one (monastic or lay) in northern Vietnam who knew how to meditate. Nonetheless, there have been various manuals that have appeared which instruct on meditation. Although Ông Hùng’s comments to me may not be entirely correct, they certainly indicate how the practice of meditation, or any other Zen practices for that matter, are not prominent in the Buddhist practice in northern Vietnam:

There are few recognizable traces of any specifically “Zen Buddhism” in Vietnam. In the still extant bibliographies of Buddhist books in Vietnam, we find more writing on sutras, rituals, vinaya, but almost nothing on Zen in the form of either independent works or commentaries on Chinese Zen classics. There are no Zen monasteries, no sizeable Zen communities (we can even say no Zen community), no recognizable Zen monasticism or practices as in the case of Japan or Korea. The only literary traces of Zen we have is Zen poetry, that is, poetry that employs Zen anecdotes, jargon, metaphors, and symbols (Nguyen, C.T. 1997:98; emphasis in original).

Behind the assertions of Vietnamese Zen lingers the recurring problem of Vietnamese identity in relation to China. There are two different aspects to this. The first concerns a perceived need for legitimation by virtue of association with China: ‘...Zen literature was

16 While I take Buddhist practice to be whatever is claimed and recognised as such, I feel that this statement about Zen is valid because Zen is constituted of certain specific practices, recognised and agreed upon by all. They are, however, not present in the activities of Hanoi Buddhists.
more a means for the medieval eminent monks of Vietnam to express an aspiration to emulate the heroic ways of the Chinese patriarchs than a description of what is actually practiced' (Nguyen, C.T. 1997:98). The second is the reflexive making of distinctions: while Vietnamese Buddhism as a whole is Zen, following the great traditions of China, a claim is made of one school, (the Trúc Lâm – Bamboo Grove School) being genuinely Vietnamese (Thích Thien An 1975: Ch.5). Cuong Tu Nguyen remarks of this short-lived school that its adherents were primarily aristocrats (1997:21).

While no one I spoke to ever made direct claims to be either Zen or Pure Land Buddhists, their practices more closely resembled the latter. Claims for Zen as being the tradition of Vietnam are largely invented. Vietnam did not stand alone in reinventing the Buddhist tradition. It was part of a Pan-Asian movement that sprang from Asia’s colonial encounter with the West.

For the Vietnamese Buddhist masses Zen was (and still is) merely ‘rumours from the monasteries,’ and they never actually embraced it as they did the devotional, ritualistic Buddhism that bears more resemblance to Pure Land. Even for most of the clergy class, Zen at best represents a romantic, mystical glory of the past and at worst some aristocratic leisure-philosophy (Nguyen, C.T. 1995:113).

Pure Land Buddhism is devotional in nature, believing that that there are buddhas and bodhisattvas who will help one to achieve religious goals. This is in stark contrast to the Theravada Buddhism of neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, which stresses self-reliance in attaining arhantship, at least at the doctrinal level.17 It is also in stark contrast to Zen, which also stresses the heroic efforts of the individual, though differently from Buddhism in the Theravada manifestation (Levering 1985). Central to Pure Land Buddhism is the belief in Amida

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17 The most fundamental difference between Mahayana Buddhism (found today in China, Vietnam, Korea and Japan), and Theravada Buddhism (found in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, as well as southern Vietnam) is that the latter stresses that each person is responsible for their own enlightenment. The ideal religious figure is the arhat or saint and he, like the historical Buddha, provides an example for us all to follow. By contrast, in Mahayana Buddhism the ideal figure is the all-compassionate bodhisattva who forgoes nirvana in order to stay behind and help others. However, it should be noted that in Theravada countries there are other cults that supplement Buddhist ritual, and which are more devotional in character. For example, in Sri Lanka Buddhists also worship Hindu deities and spirits such as Suniyam or Huniyam (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Kapferer 1997), or phii in Thailand (Tambiah 1970:263-284). Many lay Theravada Buddhists also pray to Mahayana bodhisattvas, especially Guan-yin.
Buddha. In the Pure Land Sutra and the Amida Sutra it is written that Amida dwells in the Pure Land (also called the Western Paradise), and has vowed that whosoever recites his name in faith will be reborn there. The assumption is that our world is too polluted for most of us to make significant spiritual progress. In the Pure Land the Buddhist message is always being taught, everything is in a clean state and the path to spiritual perfection is readily accessible to all.

SPECIALISTS, LOCATIONS AND PRACTICES

Although *tam đạo* is a term used by Vietnamese themselves (albeit almost entirely by academics), it should not be uncritically adopted as an explanation of the Vietnamese religious landscape. From the beginning it has been part of multiple discourses that swirl around the political and academic elite, both Confucian and French in the past, and now Communist. The Chinese etymology of the term is itself a signifier of its external origins. It has been embroiled in the discourse of association with China. It has been a part of political struggles with national unification. It has been a part of orientalist, colonial discourses that relegated Vietnamese religion to a lower form on an evolutionary scale (animism), and labelled it superstition because it did not conform with the textual traditions. Most recently, the terminology has been perpetuated by the current regime’s academy, for political ends, perhaps, but also because of a general lack of critical engagement or dialogue with foreign scholars or ideas.

Even when not using the term directly, the conceptual framework that has been imposed on the religious landscape of Vietnam is assumed by most scholars. For example, Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes:

Vietnamese religion was a syncretic amalgamation of the three religions of East Asia – Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism – onto which had been richly added a variety of preexisting animist beliefs. All Vietnamese believed in this single religion conflation in one form or another, but these forms varied greatly. Scholar-officials put more emphasis on Buddhism and on Taoism in its popular religious form (Ho 1987:119).

I am not arguing that this statement is entirely incorrect, but that this framework should not be uncritically accepted. To begin with, assumptions that class categories are discrete are problematic. More importantly, however, it is inadequate to simply accept Buddhism (as
an example of one part of the ‘three paths’) as being simply a Chinese import that took on certain Vietnamese traits. Rather, the assumption that Vietnamese Buddhism is a continuation of Chinese Buddhism is implicated in discourses of legitimacy.

*Plate 12: Woman Praying at Two Trưng Sisters Temple*

Slotting the various aspects of Vietnamese religion into the three categories ignores the complexity of practice. It also fails to acknowledge the terminology that most people use in their daily lives. The way that the religious landscape is most usually described by Hanoians is through the particularities of specialists, locations, and activities. To illustrate this, I list the various religious practices that I encountered in the north. Thus, fortune telling is performed by a specialist anywhere, while ancestor worship is performed primarily by the family at the home altar.

It does not encompass all Vietnamese. For instance, it does not incorporate Catholics or agnostics, nor the state-cult, which centres on the figure of Hồ Chí Minh.
Figure 6: Religious Activities, Locations and Specialists

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIVITY</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>SPECIALIST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist rituals (Phật Giáo, Đạo Phật)</td>
<td>Pagoda (chùa)</td>
<td>Monk/nun (nha sút)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make official (annual) offerings (te)</td>
<td>Communal house (dinh)</td>
<td>Ceremonial master (ông tế) and the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship (cúng lễ) and make Personal offerings</td>
<td>Pagoda (chùa), temple (đền), ancestor altar (bàn thờ tổ), shrines and ‘palaces’ (phù, đền, miếu)</td>
<td>Non-specialist, individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune telling (xem bói)</td>
<td>Anywhere</td>
<td>Fortune-teller (thầy bói)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit possession ritual (đồng)</td>
<td>Temples, shrines and ‘palaces’ (variously called đền, phù, đền, miếu...)</td>
<td>Spirit medium (bà/ông đồng)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Séance (gọi hồn)</td>
<td>Đền (usually constructed in the home of the medium)</td>
<td>Medium (no specific term)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancestor worship</td>
<td>Home/grave</td>
<td>Family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A variety of Buddhist and Non-Buddhist rituals</td>
<td>Any religious site</td>
<td>Ritual specialist (thầy cúng)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing petitions to the gods, or charms</td>
<td>Usually at the entrance of non-Buddhist, religious sites</td>
<td>Scribe (ông thầy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healing</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Physician (thầy thuốc)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The practices listed above were referred to by my informants - both religious practitioners and non-practitioners – most often not as Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian, but usually by the specific practices, locations or specialists that characterise the activity. At the same time as drawing on particularities, they were understood as being part of an implicit whole, as a feature of a landscape (though they did not use the analogy of a landscape). Thus, my mother-in-law, though a self-proclaimed and actively practicing Buddhist, did not hesitate to make offerings at locations she recognised as non-Buddhist (that is, anything other than a pagoda), such as temples (đền), which may be labelled Taoist under the tam đạo scheme. Likewise, Thầy Tâm, the nun at Phúc Lộc Pagoda, saw no contradiction between Buddhist practice and the practice of spirit possession, although she drew a distinction between the two. The distinctions, however, did not imply conflict, as do the distinctions made by the elite discourses which
issue from the academy and the Buddhist institution. These distinctions labelled the former as being a legitimate, orthodox religion (chính đạo) and an acceptable belief (tín ngưỡng), while the latter would be seen as illegitimate, or heterodox (tà đạo) and as superstition (mé tín).

An Alternate Framework: Bên Phát – Bên Thánh

When I spoke of religion with people, there was a common framework that was often used by people to differentiate between aspects of the Vietnamese religious landscape. It divided the cosmology into two sides. The Buddha side (bên phát), included buddhas (phật) and bodhisattvas (bồ tát). The spirit side (bên thành), included immortals or fairies (tiên).

*Plate 13: Cúng Cháo Ritual to Feed the Hungry Ghosts*

...holy sages or saints (thánh), court-appointed spirits (thần), the complex of mother goddesses (thánh màu), God or Heaven (Ông...
Trời),\(^{19}\) the Earth God (Ông Địa), and the Jade Emperor (Ngôc Hoàng) and other figures associated with the Chinese Taoist pantheon (e.g., the Kitchen God – Ông Táo).

### Figure 7: Bến ~Phật/Bến Thánh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bến Phật</th>
<th>Bến Thánh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>buddhas (phật)</td>
<td>holy sages or saints (thánh)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bodhisattvas (bồ-tát)</td>
<td>court installed spirits (than)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>immortals (tiên)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mother goddesses (thánh mẫu)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Earth God (Ông Địa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jade Emperor (Ngôc Hoàng)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>God (Ông Trời)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Kitchen God (Ông Táo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ancestors (tố tiên)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ghosts and demons (ma quỷ)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(All capitalised words are proper names)

The basic division was made between the Buddhist pantheon and the assortment of gods, goddesses and spirits. On the Buddhist side, the stress is on devotional aspects of Buddhism and, thus, more of a Pure Land than a Zen formulation of Buddhism. It presupposes that the buddhas and bodhisattvas intervene in the everyday world, and can, like the spirits of bèn thành, aid people with their mundane concerns. Moreover, the buddhas can have a soteriological and eschatological effect. Whereas the spirits are seen as mainly operating in this world, affecting one’s fortune and luck, the buddhas and bodhisattvas have the ability to affect what happens after death. They can also have an effect on the punishment that one will receive in hell.

Bèn thành refers specifically to gods and goddesses thanh, thanh and thanh mẫu. However, the implication is that virtually all other spirits, tutelary gods and deified heroes can be placed in the category of bèn thành, for they are all essentially of the same order. They range

\(^{19}\) Ông Trời was used by the Catholics to translate ‘God’, because of the universal connotations, but it also means the sun, the sky, heaven, or weather, and thus has some connection with the Chinese Tên.
from demons (qui) to ghosts (ma), spirits of rocks and trees, of places, national heroes (thàn and thành) who have been deified, or mother goddesses (thành mâu). The difference in the conception between them is in their potency and whether they are locally or nationally recognised, rather than in any essential quality. Even ancestors have been included by some of my informants in this division.

Đặng Nghiem Vận (1996) implicitly makes a similar argument, saying that the cult of ancestors (tọ tiên) (which could easily include national ancestors: Hồ Chí Minh’s picture or bust can be commonly seen on people’s home altars and on communal house), is the main religion of Vietnam. He divides these up into national, village and family levels, but argues that they are all essentially of the same order. He also argues that the popularity of Buddhism and Confucianism can be attributed to their eschatological associations (1996:57). What is important in this statement is the fluid nature of religious practice, including action and ideology.

The essential difference, then, that separates bèn thành from bèn phật is that in the former the interactions of the gods and goddesses with humans is entirely centred on this world. They were not seen as having any soteriological effect, and practices associated with them focus more on imminent gain. Thus, while the buddhas and bodhisattvas can assist in this life as well as with hell and rebirth, the various gods, goddesses and spirits of bèn thành are propitiated for help in examinations, in business, wishing for a son, or to cure an illness.

Another distinguishing feature is that the spirits of bèn thành are more dangerous and fickle. The spirits of bèn thành are just as likely to cause problems as they are to help if they feel that they are not properly cared for, or if they feel that they have been insulted.20 Thus, Thầy Tâm stressed that the spirits punish, something that people never associate with the Buddhist pantheon. This was demonstrated for me once when I went to a séance. One woman, who had suffered from a number of afflictions, was seeking to be cured by the goddess who gave powers to the medium. This is the woman’s story as told by the informant that brought me to see the spirit medium.

The family of the woman didn’t obey the spirit. [That is why she is afflicted]. They followed the goddess for four years, then the goddess (through the

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20 For instance, I was told once not to point at a statue, because the god would get angry and would curse me with a bad fortune.
medium) asked them to devote themselves. They needed to be at the service of the goddess for more than 100 days, but they left. So, the woman is punished to be blind [again]. Before that, she was deaf, dumb, blind and paralysed. After nearly four years she is getting better, but now she has left the temple...21

Because her blindness recurred, she realised her error in allowing her devotional activities to lapse and returned to the medium. The medium became possessed by the goddess and proceeded to admonish the lapsed disciple. She was sent home, and later returned with her husband, who was also rebuked. The couple spent the next hour repeatedly saying prayers and prostrating before the altar. After her husband left, the woman stayed behind and started to do chores with a stormy expression on her face.

The spirits and deities of bến thành are different in character and function to the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Buddhas and bodhisattvas are more compassionate by nature and never punish humans. Instead, there are moral repercussions of karma, and the buddhas (and bodhisattvas) remain somewhat distanced (with the possible exception of Guan-yin, who embodies all of the positive but none of the negative attributes of bến thành).22 By contrast, all of the spirits of bến thành are at least potentially dangerous, though to varying degrees. Thus, ghosts and demons will never help, but if propitiated, one may get by without them causing trouble. Before most important rites, whether Buddhist or otherwise, an offering is made to hungry ghosts (cúng cháo), so that they will not interfere with the proceedings [Plate 13].23

The ambiguous nature of bến thành is evident in the difference between ancestors and ghosts, which are two aspects of the same supernatural entity. Wolf comments for Taiwan: ‘One man’s ancestor is another man’s ghost’ (Wolf, A. 1978:146). Someone who dies before

21 She was herself going to the see the medium in order to speak to her dead brother. She ended up having to wait twelve hours before her turn came. She left feeling that this particular spirit medium was a fake because she was not able to provide convincing detail in her performance of her brother. It did not, however, convince her that they were all false, just this particular one. We communicated in English.

22 Sangren (1983) suggests that Guan-yin’s power arises from the fact that she is not associated with symbolism of women that has negative resonance with Taiwanese kinship (i.e., wives and daughters-in-law).

23 Hungry ghosts are a category of spirits who were potentially ancestors, but for one reason or another they have been neglected, and have literally become hungry. They are sentenced to roam the earth in a near-permanent state of starvation, and are depicted as having big bellies and very small necks that prevent the passage of food.
their time, by unnatural causes, or without heirs to make offerings will become a hungry ghost (*ma đói*), who are an undifferentiated mob that wander the earth making trouble for the living.\(^{24}\) It is their proximity that makes them potentially dangerous. Although theoretically people say that ancestors can help, it is also often their malevolent and vengeful aspects that people are trying to deal with. Special rites are performed not only out of filial piety but also because ancestors pose a real threat. In extreme cases ancestors may require locations of graves to be changed. These things are always in response to negative circumstances in people’s lives, and unhappy ancestors are one of the first causes attributed to instances of bad fortune.

Because of the soteriological importance of *bển phát*, when people recite sutras most feel that it will have some effect after they die (see Chapter Five). It is believed that almost everyone will have to spend some amount of time in hell, but by taking part in Buddhist ritual the time will be lessened, and one hopes for a better rebirth next time. The spirits, on the other hand, can only help with mundane matters. One of Philip Taylor’s informants described it like this:

> Buddha helps you become a good person, improve your character and behave well towards other people. But if you need help with business, or with other external things – things like health, studies, relationships, love and jobs -- you should go to request help of these other deities (1999:32).

The following explanation, given to me by an elderly woman when I asked whether it was important to worship the buddhas as well as the gods, is typical of the holistic conception that many people held:

> Both. You have to follow the Buddha as well as the mother goddesses. Firstly, the Buddha is the highest, and after that the various goddesses are on a lower level. In other words, regarding religion, God (*Ông Trời*) is highest, after that the Buddha, and then the other components... like that. It isn’t only the Buddha alone, nor is it only the mother goddesses [translation mine, see Appendix 1:2.5].

Her account is clear about the division between *bển phát* and *bển thành*. This conception is expressed in the practices that address specific lived circumstances, and the locations in which they take place.

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\(^{24}\) Jordan’s (1985 [1972]) description of the ambiguities between ancestors and ghosts in the Taiwanese context can be applied without modification to the Vietnamese context.
place. Also important is that neither ‘side’ is regarded as being irrelevant or dispensable. They are two sides of a whole, and only together are things complete. For this reason, it was pointed out to me by Thầy Tâm that pagodas have an area for the buddhas (which is the most important in the pagoda) as well as an area for the mother goddesses (nà màu). People who come to make offerings at pagodas in Hanoi always offer first to the buddhas, but the other altars, to the various deities of the bèn thành, also receive offerings of incense and money immediately after.

The main difference between this vision of the Vietnamese religious landscape and that put forward in the tam dão division is that in the former they are not seen as being entirely separate. They are ‘sides’ in the same way that heads and tails are two sides of a coin. They are not separable. The way that it was described to me was essentially holistic. Divisions were made, based primarily on the different practices, locations and religious specialists involved, but at the same time, the various aspects were complementary in the final instance. The gods had their place and their modes of interaction with humans, different from the buddhas, but not mutually exclusive. For this reason, all but the most doctrinal of Buddhists (which I only ever encountered at Quán Sứ Pagoda) did not feel that their devotion to the Buddha meant that they should, or could, stop other religious practices outside of Buddhism.

A final word about this division between bèn phát and bèn thành: not all (religious) people I spoke to agreed entirely with this formulation. Principally, those who objected were those who made the most effort to conform to a more doctrinal, textually-based Buddhist practice. It was notable that many who went regularly to Quán Sứ Pagoda (the centre for the state controlled Buddhist organisation) opposed the above conceptualisation. They would say that if you follow the Buddha there is no need to worry about the deities. Bèn thành in these circumstances was usually described as superstition (mè tín), although I suspect that many would nonetheless make offerings in other locations, such as temples (dën), and certainly all would participate in ancestor worship, reclassified as distinct from bèn thành.
CONCLUSION

Buddhism, or at least its representation at the elite level, is embroiled in processes of the invention of national, local and individual identity. Today, elements of Buddhism, particularly Buddhist architecture, are used by some elements of the state to highlight Vietnamese tradition. At the centre of it is the ambiguous position that the Vietnamese hold towards Chinese culture: both association with, and distinction from it. Association with elite Chinese culture is important because of the awe in which Chinese culture is held, and disassociation because of the necessity for a distinct Vietnamese culture that gives authority to the present government. Both association and disassociation, in their own way, give legitimacy in different contexts, and so the equivocal attitude towards China continues.

The use of the terms of *tam đạo* or *tam giáo* (which defines the Vietnamese religious landscape by the centrality of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism), and the way that Buddhism has been constructed, must be approached from this perspective. During the Nguyễn Dynasty, the main proponents of the *tam đạo* model were the Confucian scholarly elite, whose agenda was to unite different factions within Vietnam, but also to pursue association with Chinese culture. In the French period, the use of the *tam đạo* terminology was maintained, but the reasons for its use had changed. In the colonial setting, there was a strong tendency to dismiss indigenous tradition as being inferior to that of the colonisers, but simultaneously fascinating for their exotic quality. Claims by French scholars that the Vietnamese were animist rather than Buddhist (or Confucian or Taoist) are directed towards this end. Buddhism had an appeal in the West because of the secular aspects of its philosophy, and had been granted a position as a so-called ‘world religion’. Therefore it could not be as easily dismissed. But the problem was solved by denying that the Vietnamese were really Buddhist. Thus, while Cadière recognised that the Buddhist doctrine and philosophy is of a high nature, he emphasised that virtually no one practiced Buddhism. Such pronouncements have continued to some extent. Bechert and Vu Duy-Tu, as late as 1976 wrote: ‘The Buddhism of the pagoda is a form of folk religion; little of the philosophical content of Buddhist teachings is known there’ (1976:188). However, recent work by scholars such as
Thiên Dô and Cuong Tu Nguyen are starting to re-examine these categories, and call them into question.

A good start in this direction can be made by recognising the validity of local beliefs. It is the peculiarities of the local that make the Buddhism that is practised in Hanoi distinct from Buddhism elsewhere. However, to deal with it in terms of ‘syncretism’ strikes me as incorrect, for the term somehow presumes a pure tradition that is then added onto the local. As Winn writes of this term, ‘If the source of its appeal to religious historians and theologians lies in an emphasis on the often rarefied concerns of canonical orthodoxy, its use by anthropologists frequently reveals a persistent essentialist perspective of monadic “culture”’ (Winn 1998:78). Buddhism, as with other ‘world religions’, does not exist beyond the local variations.

We cannot talk about the process in terms of a ‘fusion’ of the local with Buddhism as a ‘world religion’, either. The problem is not that local adaptations have not taken place, for it is intuitively obvious that Buddhism in Vietnam (or even in different regions of Vietnam) is different from other places. The problem is with the presumption that there is ‘a’ Buddhism for it to fuse with. Syncretism presumes an apparently monolithic tradition for the local to fuse with and modify. Buddhism came to Vietnam from both the north and the south, and represented a number of traditions that had split apart in India, and no doubt changed further as Buddhism travelled through Asia. Within Vietnam, the local is no more static than that which was introduced, nor is the introduction a singular event, but a historical process. A model of syncretism between the global and the local is misleading.

A tension exists between the doctrines of world religions, which seek to ‘articulate a more generalized, elaborated code capable of shaping a religious allegiance above the clamouring diversity of restricted social groupings and local ways of speech’, and the specific demands of the groups that interact with these ideas (Hefner 1985:263). Further, world religions ‘are institutionalized in political worlds animated by needs and imperatives other than those of the faith alone’ (Hefner 1985:263). Thus, the task that occupies me here, is to draw out these dynamic tensions rather than to point out ‘local’ variants.

This chapter has introduced the reader to the complexities of the Vietnamese religious landscape, critiqued the manner in which it has been divided up and compartmentalised for academic and political purposes, and brought into focus the multiple discourses involved in Vietnamese religious practice. The alternative conceptualisation,
which drew a distinction between the buddhas and the spirits that are nonetheless complementary, more directly expresses the ambiguities and blurred boundaries that I encountered in my discussions with people in Hanoi about their conceptualisations of cosmology.
Plate 14: Women Praying at Quán Sư Pagoda
My research was principally conducted in two pagodas of dramatically different character: Quan Sti Pagoda and Phuc Loc Pagoda. The first is the headquarters for the Vietnamese Buddhist Association¹ (hereafter the VBA) and the Branch of the Institute of Buddhist Studies.² The other could be said to be a ‘typical’ pagoda, representative of the majority of small pagodas in Hanoi.

In Chapter Two I discussed the way that the religious landscape of Vietnam has been described. Elite discourses of the academy and the Buddhist Institution make claims to a particular vision of the religious landscape: Vietnamese religions have been described by reference the tam đao framework; and, the identification of Vietnamese Buddhism with the Zen tradition. In this chapter I will show how these official discourses have influenced the physical structures and practices of these two pagodas. Quan Sti Pagoda reflects both the state discourses on religion and Buddhist reform movements that started at the beginning of this century, manifested in the architecture and statuary. The state influence was concurrent with Buddhist reformism which tried to strip Buddhism of what made it particularly Vietnamese, and attempted to bring it line with the conception of Buddhism as a

¹ Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam.
² Phần Viên Nghiên Cứu Phật Học thuộc Giáo Hội.
‘world religion’. However, the effect of these discourses was not uniform: at most pagodas (including Phúc Lộc Pagoda), Buddhism continues to be practised in ways that reflect a more holistic vision, in line with the *bến thành/bến phát* framework introduced in the last chapter.

These processes strongly implicate gendered practices, in ways which will be drawn out in Part Two of this thesis. The Vietnamese state has a deep interest, and an ambivalent attitude towards, religion. Religion is an important location of Vietnamese national identity. What is regarded as orthodox ‘religion’ (as opposed to heterodox ‘superstition’), tends to be the practices associated with China through the *tam đạo* framework. However, at the same time religion is used by the state to illustrate the uniqueness of Vietnamese tradition, in opposition to China, underlining the conflicting position that religion holds for the state.

The discourse on superstition is particularly relevant in relation to the way that it informs gendered religious practice. The practices that are specially targeted by the media are, by and large, practices that women are involved in. These practices are marginalised in relation to the academy’s construction of *tam đạo* as authentic religious traditions. When the media lampoons ‘superstitious’ practices, it is usually women who are represented as mediums, fortune-tellers and misguided believers. Further, the practices within Buddhism that women usually engage in tend to be guided by the holistic cosmology of *bên phát/bên thành*, which is disparaged by the Buddhist (male) elite as not conforming to doctrinal, canonical understandings of Buddhism.

The spirit possession ritual exemplifies the manner in which women’s practices are targeted. Before the Renovation this activity was banned by the Communist government as representing superstition, and while recently the enforcement of this prohibition has slackened, the practice continues to be regarded negatively by enforcers of state-sanctioned orthodoxy: the police and military, the press and the academy. Because of this, practitioners are cautious about where and when they perform the rituals. At the possession ritual that Thây Tâm sponsored (see Chapter Two), the immolative offerings (*mặ*) were burned in the kitchen rather than out in the open so that it would not attract the attention of people who might tell the police. Other spirit possession rituals I attended began at three o’clock in the morning so that they would not be noticed and attract police attention. The fact that attendees at spirit possession rituals are closed
to the general public points to the caution that is taken when performing them. Channelling spirits of the dead (gói hồn - literally, 'calling souls') is likewise held in semi-secrecy in people's homes rather than in public spaces. Even practices such as burning spirit money (vàng mặ) are looked down upon by the state as superstition, though they are tolerated.

I heard of an incident in the early 1980s when a woman who was known in her village as a fortune teller and spirit medium was made to engage in self-criticism and formally apologise in front of her fellow villagers after predicting someone's death. The man did not die, but was so angry and frightened that he reported her to the police.

At Quán Sú Pagoda we can see how these discourses are played out in the practice of Buddhism in Vietnam. It is notable that a far greater number of men can be seen here than at other pagodas. When men do take part in religious practice, there is a strong tendency to steer away from those practices that come too close to being labelled as superstitious. This is due to the political ramifications of participating in something that is condemned by the state. But perhaps more importantly, it is because of the association of these practices with women and their perceived feminine deficiencies: irrationality and backwardness. Women are associated with superstition, the illogical, the non-modern (as opposed to the traditional).

RELIGION AND TRADITION AS THE CURE TO SOCIAL EVILS

Since the advent of the Renovation, positive notions of modernity have gone together with development and prosperity. However, in the minds of Vietnamese politicians (as well as a large part of the population), the negative aspects of this modernisation process are associated with foreign (i.e., Western) corrupting influences, termed 'social evils' (tế nạn xã hội). It is a discourse that increased with the opening of the doors to the West in the late 1980s, but originated in attacks on 'bourgeois culture' starting in the 1930s. Pornography, violent crime, drugs, prostitution and a lack of respect towards elders (bất hiếu - literally, no filial piety) on the part of youth are the more prominently cited examples of this, but smuggling, AIDS, homosexuality and selfish materialism are all negatively attributed to modernisation. The frequent reaction of some Party officials has been
a call to pull back from an openness (cởi mở) to the West that accompanied the economic Renovation. These individuals argue that when the door was opened (mở cửa), too many evil influences from the West entered Vietnam along with the good aspects. Meanwhile, there are other elements in the government, notably younger Party members, who believe that Vietnam is on the right track and should continue to open up to the West. More consistently, there has been an appeal to Vietnamese traditional culture, fetishised as a talisman that will ward off bad influences. This valorising of the past has been attributed by Fahey to ‘the demise of the communist moral code’ (1998:233), and the search for an alternative.3

Traditional religious values are often perceived as the main bulwark in the defence of Vietnam. So, despite the Party’s routine reaffirmation of its ‘commitment to materialism and its rejection of religious explanations of reality’ (Marr 1987a:2), state discourse and Vietnamese scholarship, at least implicitly, continue to recognise certain religious traditions as being fundamental to their conception of Vietnamese culture.4 It is in this light that we can best understand what Mac Duong, then the director of the Institute of Social Sciences, meant when he wrote:

We must therefore wipe out unscientific prejudices on religions, overcoming one-sided, dogmatic views. Under socialism, religions have a bright future which can satisfy religious believers in their private lives and religious believers will become an active force for the building of socialism (1993:20).

The deputy Prime Minister’s view that ‘religious activities had contributed significantly to maintaining social stability in many areas’ (Vietnam News, Thursday, March 19, 1998), parallels the academic view. The state often tends to praise ethical (đạo đức) contributions of

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3 This idea seems less persuasive than both Keyes’ (1994) of Cambodia, and Evans’ (1998) of Laos, who argue that the symbolic system of socialism never adequately replaced the preceding ones. This argument, I think, can be extended to the moral code. In Vietnam, the conflict with the Americans presented a more pressing problem than internal affairs and served as a rally-point of nationalism, effectively covering up the inadequacies of the socialist symbolic system in the north. In southern Vietnam, the socialist symbols have never been accepted (Taylor, P. 1998).

Buddhism or Confucianism, while implicitly separating them from spiritual, emotional and ideological dimensions of the religions.

This view of Vietnamese traditional culture is implicated in the state’s nationalist discourse that measures itself against China as the cultural ‘other’ (Evans 1985:127):

The numerous artefacts and linguistic vestiges witness that the autochthonous inhabitants, the Việt (ethnic group that makes up the majority of Vietnam’s present-day population comprising 53 other nationalities) has had their own cosmology long before they were influenced by ancient Chinese and Indian cultures (Thanh Huyen 1996:5).

Vietnamese academic writings construct a monolithic tradition that can be seen as part of the nationalist discourse. This was evident at the International Conference on Vietnamese Studies held in Hanoi in June 1998, where most papers by Vietnamese scholars celebrated their cultural uniqueness.5

Buddhism plays a significant role in this discourse. It is viewed as a proper religion, being part of tam đạo and therefore in a better position than other practices, such as the spirit possession rituals, for portraying a Vietnamese tradition that is ‘high culture’. Religion in general, but Buddhism in particular, is used by the state to represent what is unique about Vietnam. However, it is done largely through a process of sanitisation. What emerges is a tradition imagined by the scholars and the state alike, lacking ‘superstitious elements’.

Pagodas are highly valued in Vietnam as architectural embodiments of Vietnamese tradition. For that reason, books about pagodas in Vietnam are prolific. Most often they come in a glossy coffee-table format. These books are most often bilingual (English and Vietnamese) or trilingual (English, French and Vietnamese) and at least one volume includes Chinese (Hà V.T. et al. 1993; Trần Đại Vinh et al. 1993; Võ V.T. 1993, 1994; Võ V.T. and Huỳnh N.P. 1995). While I was in Hanoi a CD ROM on Pagodas was released. The Vietnamese government is not as interested in highlighting the religious activity

5 For reviews of the event see: The Economist (July 25, 1998); and Keyes (1998).
6 Though Buddhism cannot be claimed to have originated in Vietnam, it is often claimed to have come to Vietnam before China; this despite the lack of evidence. For example, see Minh Chi et al. (1993:12); or Nguyen Tài Thu (1992:4).
(with the possible exception of village festivals), as it is the architectural structures.7

The high regard for the architectural representations of ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ as embodied in pagodas in Vietnam has led to ever increasing numbers of pagodas being given the status of ‘historical and cultural relic’ (đi tích lịch sử văn hóa). The Ministry of Culture (Bộ Văn Hóa) grants this status to both pagodas and temples that it views as being of historical value. The certificates are usually framed and kept prominently within the pagoda or temple. Certificates are also given to donors, listing the amount of money, their name and where they are from, and this information is written in a book kept at the pagoda or temple [plate 15]. The status of ‘historical and cultural relic’ is given out quite freely, but is regulated by the state. Nguyễn Thế Long and Phạm Mai Hùng (1997:307-311) list one-hundred and thirty pagodas that have been given this status in Hanoi alone.

By highlighting the static architectural objects as symbolic of Vietnamese culture and tradition, the state is able to maintain the distinction between Buddhism and superstition. Furthermore, they are symbols that are more controllable and easier to manipulate than practices. By using these static objects, the state attempts to use religion as a symbol of Vietnamese tradition while maintaining a program of eradicating ‘superstitious beliefs’ and ‘feudalism’. State practice is mirrored in the writing of Vietnamese scholars. When addressing the topic of Buddhism, they write about either art and architecture or history.

This process of purification in the fabrication of national symbols has been remarked upon in other societies. Rege, for example, writes of how lavani performances of rural erotic songs was appropriated by Maharashtra cinema, but only after the erotic elements were replaced by non-erotic representations (Rege 1996). Similarly, Salamone describes how the Mormons appropriate traditional Polynesian dance for their amusement park in Hawai‘i after cleansing it of all erotic elements (1999). In a similar way, religion has been appropriated by the Vietnamese state for the creation of a legitimising national discourse, but only after the unwanted (i.e., superstitious) elements are taken out.

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7 Tourism, which is increasingly important for the economy, is also an important factor in the production of these books.
PLATE 15: CERTIFICATE FROM A 'HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL RELIC'

DI TÍCH LỊCH SỬ VĂN HÓA
BÌNH CHÚA THANH AM - XÃ THƯƠNG THANH HUYỆN GIA LÂM
THÀNH PHÔ HÀ NỘI

PHIẾU GHI NHẬN CÔNG DỨC
BÌNH CHÚA THANH AM XÃ THƯƠNG THANH HUYỆN GIA LÂM - THANH PHÔ HÀ NỘI
DI TÍCH LỊCH SỬ VĂN HÓA ĐƯỢC NGƯỠNG KẾP HÀNG NĂM 1990

GHI NHẬN

Ông, Bà:………………………………………
Đã đóng góp công đức trong tu nång cấp đình chùa Thanh Am
Với hiến vật:………………………………………
Trị giá:………………………………………
Với số tiền:………………………………………
Nam mở trap phương chữ phát chứng minh công đức

台南 Thanh 1990
Trưởng Ban Di tích
NGUYỄN VAN KÍNH

116
QUÁN SỦ PAGODA

Quán Sủ Pagoda is politically the most important pagoda in northern Vietnam, and in some ways the most important in all of Vietnam. It was built during the later Lê dynasty (fifteenth century) and was used to accommodate visiting dignitaries from neighbouring Buddhist countries such as Laos, Cambodia and Thailand (Võ V.T. 1993:460; Nguyễn Thế Long et al. 1997:227). Hence the name, which literally means ‘Ambassador’s Pagoda’. The structure was restored in 1855, to be used for prayer by soldiers of a nearby garrison. After the soldiers left it was turned over to the local villagers and the resident monk, Thanh Phương, who made additions, including colonnades, coloured statues and bells. In 1934 the Association of Buddhists in Tonkin (Hội Phật Giáo Bắc Kỳ) established their headquarters there (Hà V.T. et al. 1993:306). In 1941 it was repaired and rebuilt according to the architectural designs of Nguyễn Ngọc Ngọc and Nguyễn Xuân Tùng (Hà V.T. et al. 1993:306).

Quán Sủ Pagoda is not an attractive structure, being more monumental and less graceful than other famous pagodas in the Hanoi region. It is tall, square and blocky, where others are low-lying with broad, sweeping roofs that curve gracefully at the ends. Its architecture does not distinctly conform to the style of most other northern pagodas. Despite its somewhat ungainly appearance, it is by far the most active pagoda in Hanoi. The appeal of Quán Sủ Pagoda is not aesthetic:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Me</th>
<th>Why do you go to Quán Sủ Pagoda? It is so far. Why don’t you go to the pagoda close to here?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Phương</td>
<td>Because I like Quán Sủ Pagoda; it is more credible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>But Quán Sủ Pagoda isn’t beautiful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Phương</td>
<td>Quán Sủ Pagoda isn’t beautiful, but there are monastics with a high level of culture; a high level of Buddhism. At other pagodas the monastics have simply been assigned there to take care of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>The reason is that the monastics are better, then you always speak with monastics there?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Phượng</td>
<td>Usually, if I have the opportunity to go there. For example, you can meet one if you go into the office of the monk, but you can only talk for a short while; you can’t say much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Is there one monastic especially that you talk with or will any one do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Phượng</td>
<td>If you meet any monastic it is okay, you don’t need any one monastic in particular. At Quán Sũ Pagoda there is one monk called the Venerable Thích Tâm Tích who is the oldest and the best there. At the fourth National Congress of Vietnam Buddhist Association, that just took place, he was elected the leader of Buddhism in Vietnam. This year he is eighty-eight years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>So, you have spoken with him?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs Phượng</td>
<td>Mostly to wish him good health and to listen to him give us a few words, but he doesn’t have time to spend [translation mine, see Appendix 1.3.1].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Most other pagodas in Hanoi are quiet, almost sleepy places. If there is no ritual underway you might only find a woman cleaning the pagoda and doing other chores, or a monastic studying or speaking quietly with someone. Often, when I entered pagodas, the monastics dropped whatever they were doing to speak with me over cups of bitterly strong tea. They were happy for the distraction and for the break in their routines. At Quán Sũ Pagoda the difference is dramatic. Everyone is busy and little notice is paid to foreigners; not surprising given the status it has as a ‘tourist pagoda’. Despite (or perhaps because of) its being unique in both architecture and function, it is billed as a showcase example of a Hanoi pagoda – complete with an explanatory tourist plaque written in English and French describing the landmark.\(^8\)

The pagoda always has people coming and going. When an

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\(^8\) Only one other pagoda bears such a plaque, the One-Pillar Pagoda (which is too small to completely enter and is more of a monument and shrine than a pagoda proper). In another part of Hanoi I once visited a small pagoda where I was told by an old nun that if I only wanted to visit a pagoda for sightseeing then to go to Quán Sũ Pagoda. The reception was so hostile that I presume she was exasperated with tourists coming in with no intention other than looking around. I should add that at most pagodas I was made considerably more welcome, even if I was only sightseeing.
Plate 16: Communist Flag at Quán Sứ Pagoda
The pagoda always has people coming and going. When an activity is taking place, the courtyards are jammed with people, and long rows of motorcycles and bicycles make passage along the sides of the pagoda slow and difficult. Vendors always wait at the outside gates and, depending on the mood of the state-paid custodian, inside the courtyard as well. The wares that they sell include supplies for rituals such as incense, roses, immolative spirit money (*vàng mạ*) and cheap rosaries, as well as books and pamphlets concerning Buddhism, fortune telling and astrology [Plate 17 & 18].

*Plate 17: Pagoda Vendors*
Beggars are everywhere. Waiting around corners of the pagoda were old people with imploring eyes, conical hats placed upside down in front of them to receive the fruits of heightened Buddhist generosity. The younger and more agile, but no less dirty, street children needed not wait for people to come to them, but actively sought out charitable Buddhists and foreigners in the front courtyard [Plate 19]. People frequently came in to make offerings of incense on the altars of the buddhas and to make wishes for the well-being of themselves and their family, stuffing money in the ‘charity box’ (hộm công đức) on their way out. By the door to the lecture hall (giảng đường) in the back of the compound, an old woman daily sat in a fold-out chair, counting her prayer beads and chanting quietly to herself from a book that rested on her lap. Sometimes others used the space in the lecture hall to talk with a friend or to read sutras – when it was not being used as a classroom for the monks studying at Quản Sử Pagoda.

The pagoda has a small store facing out onto the street with a side door to the main courtyard. The store was run by three women of late middle age who sold books and paraphernalia to Buddhists (porcelain
Plate 19: Beggars at the Pagoda
statues, incense pots, Buddhist robes and monastic shoulder bags, tapes of Buddhist lectures, calendars, etc.). The woman who ran the store was notable for her near-monastic appearance. Her salt-and-pepper hair was cut short, barely covering her ears. She always wore a plain monastic-brown shirt that further heightened her monastic appearance.

A regular group of people also gathered in the library. The main librarian, named Ông Đức, was always of great assistance to me, pointing me to books as well as offering me lessons whenever the opportunity arose. Not surprisingly, his version of Buddhism was among the most text-based of the interpretations I encountered. He tended to stress the Buddha’s teachings while de-emphasising Buddhism’s Vietnamese particularities. He was among the most critical of informants when speaking of popular practices like the burning of spirit money (dõt mã), dismissing them as superstition (mê tín). We once had a long discussion on images of hell (địa ngục) that I had recently seen at Trấn GIan Pagoda, a famous pagoda in Hà Tây province:

| Ông Đức | ‘Địa’ means earth; the stratum below the earth. ‘ngục’ means ‘prison’. In this world there are ‘prisons’. But below the earth, (that is after you are dead)... according to the sutras they say that after people die there is also a world, which is the world of the dead. In this world of the dead those who do evil also go to prison as in this world. However, according to the Buddha, it is only symbolic – it is not based in reality at all – these symbols are only to teach people that when they are living they have to do good things. However, those who believe too much that hell is below are not correct at all. If you do evil, do bad, then you also will have to endure bad things. It is done that way to teach people not to do wicked things. And now, science asks us: can you prove whether hell exists or not. We can’t do that because no one has ever seen hell. No one can see hell. However the hell that is mentioned in the sutras is only symbolic to teach people that if your heart is bad you will be punished in this way, and therefore you better avoid doing bad things. |
| Me | But in your opinion, do the majority of people who go to pagodas know that hell is not real, or do they think that it is real? |
Many people who go to pagodas think that it is true because their level of education is low. That is called superstition (mê tịnh). They burn fake money and gold. What are immolative objects (hạng mỉ)? They are things made of paper: bicycles, motorcycles also made of paper. They are burned to send down to hell [for souls] to spend. [Practices] like this are not correct.

Making immolative offerings is not correct, eh?

It doesn’t do anything. Modern ideology, modern science and Buddhism proves that doing this isn’t correct. Sakyamuni Buddha only acknowledged that we should only cultivate ourselves. To cultivate yourself is the main thing in order to become good, not worshipping. That is only intended for showing your respect [Appendix 1:3.2].

Quán Sử Pagoda, as mentioned above, is the headquarters for the VBA, which is the only official Buddhist organisation in Vietnam. I did not ask directly about the formal connections between the pagoda and the state for fear that it would make my research difficult. However, it seems that there are three separate avenues by which the pagoda is answerable to, and receives directives from, the state. The first of these is the Ministry of Culture, which issues administrative guidelines about what the pagoda should and should not do. The second is the Fatherland Front, which is an umbrella organisation for all mass-organisations and clubs, and a representative of the VBA probably sits on the national executive committee. Finally, there is the Communist Party’s Office of Ideology and Culture, which sets policy on all ‘spiritual’ dimensions of life and monitors the operations of the VBA. While these institutional connections are not entirely clear: Quán Sử Pagoda, by and large, reflects the Party line. For example, the sermons that are given every Sunday in the lecture hall often reflect state propaganda. On one occasion, after the monk had given a sermon on the meaning of a Buddhist legend, and he went on to warn the people not to be swayed by foreign religions that were entering the country and bringing social evils, reflecting the state’s concern for the impact of foreign influences.

9 Mật Trấn Tố Quốc.
10 Ban Tư Tưởng Văn Hóa.
Control of the institutional aspects of Buddhism is aided by placing all of the Sangha regulatory bodies within the compound of the one pagoda. Thus, Quán Sứ Pagoda houses the two administrative branches of the VBA, which direct the institution internally: the office of the Central Management Council\textsuperscript{11} and the office for the Sangha Council.\textsuperscript{12} It is also the main branch for the Vietnamese Buddhist Research Institute\textsuperscript{13} and the headquarters for the Institute of Buddhist Studies,\textsuperscript{14} where Buddhist monastics are trained. The presence of this monastic school as well as the role that the pagoda plays as central to the VBA dictates the presence of the Buddhist Library\textsuperscript{15} at Quán Sứ Pagoda. The library is open daily to the public as well as to the monastics, and books can be borrowed on a short-term basis.

The publication of some books and a magazine is also done in a top floor room of the pagoda. *The Research Journal of Buddhist Studies*\textsuperscript{16} is one of two Vietnamese Buddhist magazines; the other, *Enlightenment*,\textsuperscript{17} is published in Saigon. *The Magazine of Buddhist Research* also deals to a much greater extent with the activities of the VBA than does *Enlightenment*. However, few books come out of Quán Sứ Pagoda compared to the enormous number that are published in the south. Often the books that are published at Quán Sứ Pagoda are concerned with the proceedings of particular congresses, which decide the future direction of the VBA, rather than with teaching Buddhist doctrine.

Because of the importance of Quán Sứ Pagoda for the state control of Buddhism, the pagoda is more carefully monitored than other pagodas in Hanoi. While the institution is regulated through the chains of command that link the VBA to the state, the police also watch daily activity. Whereas most pagodas are maintained through volunteer work and donation, the state pays for repairs at Quán Sứ Pagoda, and pays the salaries of a number of people who work there, such as the custodian (who doubtless has to report on activities at the

\textsuperscript{11} Hồi Đông Trị Sự Trung Ương.
\textsuperscript{12} Hồi Đông Chung Minh.
\textsuperscript{13} Phân Viện Nghiên Cứu Phật Học Thuộc Việt Nam.
\textsuperscript{14} Học Viện Phật Giáo Việt Nam.
\textsuperscript{15} Thư Viện Phật Học.
\textsuperscript{16} Tập Chí Nghiên Cứu Phật Học.
\textsuperscript{17} Giác Ngộ.
pagoda). I was once introduced to a high ranking, non-Buddhist, police officer in Hanoi, who told me that at Quán Sứ Pagoda many of the monks were really policemen in disguise. More likely they simply report to a police ‘agent handler’. Connections which link the supervisory organisations to each other appear to be minimal. They all work under the general control of the Communist Party in a top-down framework. In other words, ‘the state’ cannot be thought of as a unitary force. There are competing factions and departments that may at times give contradictory directives and have wide variations in the policies they wish to implement.

Plate 20: State Worker at Quán Sứ Pagoda
Since coming to power in 1945 in the north and 1975 in the south, the Vietnamese communist government has attempted as total a control of religious practice as they could manage. The Constitution states that there is freedom of belief (tin ngưỡng), but clauses allow for the government to intervene. For example, in one text written in French and published in Hanoi in 1955, the section entitled: *Extracts from the resolution of the national assembly of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on the question of religion (4th session of the 20th to 26th of March 1955)* lists six points. They outline the right to freedom of belief, and the protection of places of worship, but the final point reads:

> All individuals who hide behind the cover of religion to sabotage the country, the unity, the independence and democracy, to sabotage the union of the people, to prevent those who are loyal from accomplishing their duty as citizens, to attack the freedom of opinion of others or to commit illegal acts, will be punished (République Démocratique du Viet-Nam 1955:15) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:3.3].

Thus, while freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the constitution, the state retains significant power to override those rights. While recently there has been a general climate of tolerance, there continue to be instances of state repression: ‘national security’ or ‘the protection of the people’ are the reasons officially given for the imprisonment of dissident monks or crack-downs on “illegal” religious groups’ (U.S. State Department on Religious Freedom for 1999). For example, *The South China Morning Post* recently published an article reporting that the police have fined members of a ‘Hanoi-based doomsday cult’ for ‘gathering in crowds which affected public security and for taking advantage of people’s ignorance to propagate their religion with bad intent’ (Huw 1999).

The Communist government in Vietnam was never as hostile to religion as the governments of China and the USSR (Marr 1986:129). As I argued in the previous chapter, religion is embedded in state and academic discourses of Vietnamese tradition and nationalism. The state’s branches, such as the Ministry of Culture and the police, are more often preoccupied with issues of institutional control and power

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18 See Appendix 2 for full transcript.
than the specifics of doctrine, unless those doctrines are overtly political.

The Communist Party of Vietnam wants a monopoly of power at all levels of society. Hence, religious organizations must be infiltrated, circumscribed and controlled – in the same manner as political, economic or ethnic organizations (Marr 1987a:3).

Pressure by the state at the rhetorical level has mostly been exerted through a call for the elimination of ‘superstitious’, ‘feudal’ and ‘backward’ practices. Anti-religious campaigns have always centred on superstition, drawing a strict, but constantly changing, distinction between superstition and religion. These have gone alongside more concrete pressures, such as arresting dissident monks, closing religious sites, and fining people for producing unauthorised religious publications.

What was regarded as superstition, and therefore open for state intervention and correction, has always been somewhat ambiguous. Recently, there has been an atmosphere of acceptance, and the state is now ignoring activities that in the past were suppressed and condemned as superstition. Correspondingly, there has been a religious resurgence that can partly be attributable to the loosening of government restrictions, but is also a result of changing social and economic conditions, increased market activity, disposable wealth, the influence of and reaction to foreign ideas and values. In the north, because of its longer isolation from foreign countries other than the Soviet bloc, the influx of foreign ideas has perhaps had a more profound effect.

State control over Buddhism must not be thought of as merely a recent phenomenon stemming from Marxist suspicion of religion. Rather, Buddhism, along with other religions, was subject to state control from the inception of the Vietnamese monarchy:

One method of enforcing orthodoxy applied mostly to Buddhism. It consisted of imposing bureaucratic control over the organization and size of the Buddhist clergy through the supervision of doctrinal examinations and ordinations into the clergy; limiting the number of temples that were built and the amount of land they were given; and manipulating the distribution of cultic and scriptural materials that were channelled through the court... The state's concern over the
link between religion and rebellion was far from fanciful. In times past, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests had been known to lead movements of rebellion. Monasteries were still being used as places of refuge by rebels against the throne (Ho 1987:134).19

The state’s concern for the control of religion is not totally ill-founded. This century religious organisations have continually challenged the political order. In the south, especially, the often violent confrontations of the state with religious groups is well documented during the period from 1954 (partition) to 1975 (reunification). Buddhists and Catholics, but also the millenarian movements – the Cao Đài and Hòa Hảo – were significant political forces in the south.20 Buddhist dissatisfaction played a major factor in the overthrow and assassination of Ngô Đình Diệm. Who can forget the 1963 image of the monk being engulfed in petrol-fed flames as he sat on a Saigon street in meditation to protest against Ngô Đình Diệm’s persecution of the Buddhists? Today, the car in which that monk was driven down from Thiền Mụ Pagoda in Huế sits in the grounds of the pagoda, with the photograph of the burning monk propped up on the dashboard. In the background of the picture, the car can be seen parked with its bonnet up. Its presence symbolises the continued political activism of the Sangha, especially in the Huế region.

Quán Sư Pagoda’s Physical Structure: Discourses of Purification

The structure of Quán Sư Pagoda is not typical of pagodas in Hanoi or in northern Vietnam. It was set in the centre of a rectangular courtyard, and the large front doors are always open, unlike most

19 Hue-Tam Ho Tai is not specific about when she is writing. Sacks (1971), who comes to the same conclusion, is also imprecise about which period, other than referring vaguely to the period from when Vietnam gained independence in the tenth century, to the late nineteenth century, when French colonial rule made the Vietnamese monarchy, name only.

20 For accounts of the Hòa Hảo, see Dao Hung (1934) and Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1963); for the Cao Đài, see Oliver (1976) and Werner (1981); and for Buddhism, see Schreiner (1967), and Thích Nhất Hạnh (1967) Sacks (1971); and for a brief overview of all see Rambo (1982) and Ho. Hue-Tam Tai (1987).
pagodas. There is no side entrance, which in the majority of pagodas is more commonly used as the everyday entrance into the main sanctuary.

The nature of Quán Sứ Pagoda is immediately revealed by the inscriptions on the main gate. Unlike every other pagoda in the region, Quán Sứ Pagoda has no Chinese inscriptions. Instead, quốc ngữ, the Romanised script adopted this century as the writing system for Vietnam, is used. The adoption of the Romanised script was an intrinsic part of the modernising debates that took place earlier this century.\textsuperscript{21} The fact that it is used on the main gate reflects the extent to which this pagoda participated in the process.

\textit{Plate 21: The Main Gate at Quán Sứ Pagoda}

There are certain elements that Quán Sứ Pagoda has in common with all pagodas. The main sanctuary is shaped like an inverted ‘T’, as are many pagodas in northern Vietnam. It is, however, more grandiose, with high ceilings, giving it a feeling of space and light not common in pagodas of the region. Some significant distinctions can also be seen in the statuary. Usually statues of Hộ Pháp, the dharma guardians of the pagoda which protect it from malevolent spirits, would stand in the antechamber. But they are conspicuously absent at Quán Sứ Pagoda. Another common feature of many northern pagodas are statues of the Ten Kings of Hell.22

These, again, are missing at Quán Sứ Pagoda. To the left and the right of the main sanctuary, in the antechamber, are statues of Ksitigarbha (Địa Tạng) and Quan-yin (Quan Âm Bồ-tát). These statues are usually not in such prominent spaces, and this arrangement, with these two bodhisattvas in line with the main altar, is reminiscent more of the placement seen in pagodas of southern and central Vietnam. Given the dissimilarity with other northern pagodas, it seems likely that this arrangement was made in accordance with movements for a pan-Vietnam Buddhist organisation that took place earlier this century. Most significant is the absence of a mother goddess shrine, in which the mother goddesses of bến Thành are displayed and worshipped. Quán Sứ Pagoda has not only no special shrine room, but also no representations whatsoever of mother goddesses, the closest being statues of the bodhisattva Quan-yin, who is still part of the canonical Mahayana Buddhist pantheon. By contrast, most other pagodas have at least some representations of mother goddesses, even if they do not have a nhà mẫu as part of their architectural structure.23

Thus, the arrangement of space at Quán Sứ Pagoda does not conform with the norms of northern Vietnam. Probably the present arrangement of statues and organisation of space was put in place when the pagoda was rebuilt in 1941.

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22 Từ ng Thập Điện Diệm Vương. The Ten Kings of Hell each preside over a different court in which sins are judged and souls punished. The concept of hell having courts comes from China. For information on hell, see Donnelly (1990); Duyvendak (1952); Maspero (1963); Riotor and Léofanti (1895); and Teiser (1988, 1994).

23 For example, Mía Pagoda in Hà Tày province has a well known statue of the goddess Liễu Hạnh, and the goddess Bà Ý Lan in Phú Thị Pagoda in Giã Lam (on the outskirts of Hanoi), not to mention the statues of the Cloud Goddess (Pháp Vân), the Rain Goddess (Pháp Vư), the Thunder Goddess (Pháp Lợi) and the Lightning Goddess (Pháp Điện) in Đậu Pagoda, Hà Bạc (Hà V.T. et al. 1993:91).
On the main altar are the standard statues of the Mahayana pantheon. In the back row is the Trikaya. On the next row down, in the centre, is a large statue of Amida Buddha, flanked on his left by Guan-yin and on his left by Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva.

*Diagram 1: Layout of Quán Sư Pagoda*

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24 Tam Thệ — representing the past, present and future buddhas.

25 A-Di-Dà Phất.

26 Đại-Thế-Chữ Bồ-tát. Robinson & Johnson writes of this bodhisattva: 'Mahasthamaprapta is mentioned in the lists at the beginning of the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Vimalakirti*. Sakyamuni addresses a discourse to him in Chapter 19 of the *Lotus*, and... the *Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra* places him on par with Avalokitesvara [Guan-yin in East Asia and Vietnam] as an attendant of Amitabha's [Amida Buddha]. In Far Eastern art he is frequently represented standing on the right of Amitabha while Avalokitesvara stands on the left' (1982:82).
Diagram 2: Layout of the Main Hall at Quán Sử Pagoda

1. Amida Buddha
2. Sakyamuni Buddha
3. Maitreya Buddha
4. Mahasthamaprapta
5. Guan-yin
6. Kasyapa (Arhant)
7. Ananda (Arhant)
8. Birth of the Buddha
9. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva
10. Guan-yin
11. Main altar
12. Ancestor altars (for lay-devotees)
13. Charity box
In front of him is Sakyamuni – the historical Buddha. On either side of him are statues of his two most prominent disciples, the Arhants, Kasyapa and Ananda. In the front is a statue of the birth of Sakyamuni, typical of the style of northern Vietnam, surrounded by nine dragons.

There is, in keeping with other pagodas, a shrine dedicated to the patriarchs, which is like an ancestral hall dedicated to the former patriarchs of the pagoda. The most unusual feature here is the large murals of the Arhants, the followers of the historical Buddha, that run along the periphery of the room. This juxtaposition of the pagoda patriarcs with the saints of Buddhism further suggests an attempt to tie the patriarchs of Vietnamese Buddhism, as well as the pagoda's own lineage, specifically to the historical Buddha and his followers – with the ‘pure’ Buddhism. It is not uncommon to have statues or images of the Arhants in pagodas of the north. However, I have never seen them placed inside the sanctuary for the patriarchs.

In addition to the absence of architectural and artistic elements present in most other northern pagodas, Quán Sử Pagoda also has some special features. Most obvious is the lecture hall (giảng đường), in which lectures are given every Sunday to the laity on the meaning of Buddhist sutras, open for all to attend. The lecture hall is set up with two different rooms, divided by columns as well as by the positioning of the furniture. In the front section, organised perpendicular to the entrances, are rows of benches and tables facing the lectern. Behind the lectern is a large mural of the enlightened Sakyamuni sitting under the bodhi tree. Around the exterior of this section are paintings of the life of the Buddha, not dissimilar to the Twelve Stations of the Cross found in Catholic churches.

In the adjoining section of the hall are tables and chairs arranged with the chairs facing the tables rather than the lectern. At the far end is an altar which has a number of statues, the most prominent of which are of the birth of Sakyamuni Buddha, and an image of Guan-

27 Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni Phật.
28 Ла Hán – the prominent followers of the historical Buddha.
29 Ca-Diép and An-Nan-Dà.
30 Trụng Tọa Cuú Long – ‘the Nine Dragon Throne’.
31 Nhà thờ or điện thờ tọa.
yin with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes\textsuperscript{32} symbolising the omniscience and omnipresence of her compassion. On the walls to either side of the altar are two large plaques that list the names of past lay members of the Buddhist Association.

The iconography at Quản Sứ Pagoda bears witness to the almost self-conscious cleansing that this pagoda has undergone of the symbolic elements of what Thiên Đô calls ‘the grassroots level of a locally based, adaptive Buddhism’ (1998:7), which has happened in conjunction with the politico-religious events of this century. There are references that remain to mark it as being a Mahayana pagoda, statues of bodhisattvas for instance, but the accent on early Buddhism is much more prominent than in other pagodas of northern Vietnam.\textsuperscript{33}

Since the beginning of this century, there have been movements throughout Asia to purify Buddhism of ‘superstitious’ elements and to bring it back to what is seen as the original teachings of the historical Buddha. In Sri Lanka, Obeyesekere has called this movement ‘Protestant Buddhism’ because, firstly, it originated in a protest against British rule and Protestant Christianity, but also because it called into question the necessity to withdraw from the world, and therefore of the primacy placed on the Sangha (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988:7, ch.6).\textsuperscript{34} This latter point is particularly important in the context of Theravada Buddhist Sri Lanka, because of the traditional feeling that spiritual progress can only be made as a monk, and the centrality of the Sangha as mediators between the laity and their means of salvation. Further, the label denotes a parallel with the Protestant Reformation of Europe. In Vietnam, Thiên Đô has attributed the revitalisation of Buddhism in the 1930s to a historical junction. It was at this time that Buddhism in Vietnam became institutionally linked. Firstly, he describes what he calls ‘reverse Orientalism’, in which a pan-Asian re-enchantment with Buddhism took place largely as a response to an increase in Western interest in Eastern Philosophies, culminating in the founding of the Maha Bodhi Society in Colombo. The Theosophical Society was a key organisation

\textsuperscript{32} Tượng Quán Âm Thiền Thủ Thiên Nhãn.

\textsuperscript{33} Pagodas in southern Vietnam are quite different to the pagodas in the north. From what I have seen, the movement towards a more doctrinally ‘pure’ form of Buddhism has also been far more successful in the south than in the north.

\textsuperscript{34} See also Gombrich (1988:172-197); and Obeyesekere (1972).
in providing the impetus for this movement. In tandem with this, print technology made scriptures, commentaries and translations of sacred texts more available than ever before (Dô 1998:6-7). Secondly, national Buddhist leadership arose out of a need for leadership in the anti-colonial struggle, as well as the French agenda for anti-insurgency:

Traditional as well as modern educated elite looked to Buddhists as main contributors to the struggle against colonialism in Vietnam, when Confucian literati failed to provide effective leadership. Thus a large number of Buddhists taking advantage, as Keyes remarks (1977), of the French gambit in encouraging a Buddhist renewal, managed to create on nationwide basis a religious identity (Dô 1998:7).

In Vietnam, as in Sri Lanka, the purification movement was largely the concern of the Vietnamese colonial elite. The stresses of this movement on the teachings of early Buddhism at the expense Mahayana (i.e., Pure Land) beliefs and practices is evident in the official representation of Buddhism today, as we have seen at Quán Sứ Pagoda (Bechert and Vu 1976:192). The Buddhist institution at Quán Sứ Pagoda presents Vietnamese Buddhism as taking part in Buddhism at an international level. The Buddhist organisation has maintained an international focus for most of this century.

For half a century, Quán Sứ Pagoda has witnessed many important events of Vietnamese Buddhism, including the unification of all Buddhist organisations in the country and the integration of Vietnamese Buddhism with international Buddhism. At this place, on the thirteenth of May, 1951 (the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, year of the Cat) was the first time that the Buddhist flag for the world, brought back by the Venerable Tố Liền from Colombo, flew in the sky of Hanoi (Võ V.T. and Huỳnh N.P. 1995:39) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:3:4].

This international focus is also represented at Quán Sứ Pagoda. In an alcove that houses a statue of Guan-yin there is a display of photographs that depict monastic delegates from a number of other countries, including Japan and Taiwan, a delegation of German Buddhists, and the prince of Thailand.

Despite the general lack of success that Buddhist reforms have met in the north, the state-controlled vision of Buddhism adheres to these notions of reformed Buddhism because it reflects the rationalist discourse that distances religion from superstition. Quán Sứ Pagoda tends to reflect this reformed Buddhism in its valorising of the
historical Buddha, in its institution-wide portrayal of Buddhism, and in the practices and opinions of a greater number of the community there, much more than in other pagodas in Hanoi. The gate, with its substitution of Chinese characters for the Romanised script indicates how involved it was, and continues to be, with nationalist discourses. The librarian, Ông Đức, always spoke of Buddhism in a way that primarily drew on understandings of what the historical Buddha taught, never discussing Mahayanist concepts with me. Instead, he spoke of fundamental Buddhist concepts: the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The book that he stressed I must read for an understanding Buddhism was a translation of Walpola Rahula’s *What the Buddha Taught* (1974 [1959]).35 These reforms had the effect of institutionally marginalising Buddhist practice at the grassroots, though the effect that these discourses had on the practices of most Buddhists in Hanoi was limited.36

When looking at the overall structure and imagery of Quán Sứ Pagoda, the historical Buddha is emphasised at the expense of the Mahayanist pantheon. By placing an emphasis on Sakyamuni, Vietnamese Buddhism is stripped of those elements that are referred to as ‘superstition’ by the state. In so doing, Quán Sứ Pagoda presents Buddhism as distanced from ‘superstition’. The murals of the Arhants in the shrine for the patriarchs, and of the life of the Buddha in the lecture hall, illustrate this, as does the absence of statues representing elements of the _bên thạnh_. In not having any mother goddess shrine, or representations of goddesses incorporated into the art and architecture (with the lack of a shrine for mother goddesses), Quán Sứ Pagoda is purified of the type of imagery typical of northern Vietnamese pagodas. Architecturally then, Quán Sứ Pagoda can be seen as representing what Ông Đức has described to me as the ‘real’ Buddhism (*Đạo Phật thậ́t*), stripped of ‘superstition’.

35 This was the text that I had to read as an undergraduate in an introductory course for Buddhism. It presents the most fundamental and least contentious philosophical concepts that the historical Buddha gave to his followers. It represents Buddhism before subsequent elaborations, and consequently contains concepts that are accepted by all Buddhists. Walpola Rahula was a Sinhalese monk who received a Doctorate of Philosophy at the Ceylon University, and spent many years at the Sorbonne.

36 My research in Montréal and observations of the message that prominent overseas Vietnamese monks are teaching (e.g., Thích Nhất Hạnh) leads me to believe that the change (or lack thereof) has not been uniform. The overseas community, mostly coming from southern Vietnam, practices a form of Buddhism more strictly in accordance with early Buddhist teachings.
More than simply reflecting state visions of Buddhism, Quán Sứ Pagoda is constructed as a central, uniting force. From a regional perspective, the Buddhist organisation needed to become an institution that was acceptable to all regions of Vietnam, as well as both Mahayana and Theravada Buddhism (as both traditions coexist in Vietnam).

Despite the fact that Quán Sứ Pagoda does not reflect popular conceptions and practices, it remains centrally important as the major pagoda in northern Vietnam. It is seen as being authoritative because it represents reformed Buddhism that hold hegemonic sway over other understandings and practices. Further, it represents rationalist discourses of how Buddhism fits into the today's world that are acceptable to the state, and accepted by almost all as being legitimate, despite the incongruities with popular conceptions of Buddhism. Quán Sứ Pagoda has cultural capital.

**PHÚC LỘC PAGODA**

Phúc Lộc Pagoda is like dozens of other pagodas in Hanoi which do not get a mention in the coffee table books on Buddhist pagodas in Vietnam. It is not regarded as being historically or architecturally important, although its Lý dynasty heritage would make it old enough to merit recognition. As one of the many pagodas that are dotted around Hanoi, most of which hold similar pedigrees, it could be said to be typical, unimportant and anonymous. Such pagodas are ubiquitous in Hanoi, but most are well hidden down side roads and small alleys, buried behind the city that has grown up around them.\(^{37}\) Small doors on side streets will let you into a different world if you know how to look for the signs that indicate the presence of a pagoda. Bà Đà Pagoda, for example, is one of the most important pagodas in Hanoi after Quán Sứ Pagoda and perhaps Trần Quốc Pagoda. However, because it is buried behind a wall of shops that are giving way to expensive cafés and restaurants for foreign consumption, it can only be reached through a small, inconspicuous gateway.

\(^{37}\) Especially since the late 1950s, when much of their lands were confiscated.
Like Bà Đá Pagoda, Phúc Lộc Pagoda is buried in the city. It is situated beside a large market that spreads out from the main market building down the surrounding side-streets like iodine on the creases of skin. In the middle of this commercial activity – market women haggling and arguing with prospective buyers; cyclos\textsuperscript{38} and motorcycle taxis waiting around and shouting at weary, overburdened shoppers in the hopes of getting a customer; lazy groups of policemen surveying the scene with cynical grimaces on their faces, awaiting the opportunity to harass a bribe out of someone – the pagoda is a surprisingly serene oasis. The large front gate that once loudly announced the presence of the pagoda is now crowded by market stalls selling ceramics. I lived in the area for more than half a year before realising that behind that gate was a living pagoda. I had noticed the gate before then, but thought that it was only a remnant of something that had long ceased to exist. You cannot actually see the pagoda through the gate entrance because of the piles of pots and dishes wrapped in brown paper and straw which are stored there.

One day in the winter of 1998, a little before Têt (Vietnamese Lunar New Year), I looked through the gate a little more closely than I had previously done, and saw that inside there was a white statue of the bodhisattva Guan-yin, and so I decided to forge my way through the piles of merchandise and see what was on the other side. To my surprise no one stopped me, though at the time I felt as though I was walking into someone’s house.

Once inside, I found myself in a small pagoda courtyard with old wooden planks piled in one corner and four (somewhat run down) white stele houses.\textsuperscript{39} The most recent of the four was dedicated to the soldiers who had died fighting for the reunification of the country. Behind the statue of Guan-yin was a pile of stones in a large ceramic container of water, modelled to look like a limestone mountain. By the large closed doors of the pagoda there were some bushes in pots that were obviously under someone’s care – indicating that the pagoda was still active – but there was no way to gain entrance. The main doors

\textsuperscript{38} Bicycle rickshaws.

\textsuperscript{39} Stele are large stones that are inscribed with, in this case, the names of the war dead from the conflicts with the French and Americans. However, they can have a variety of inscriptions, from royal edicts to the names of graduates from the imperial examinations.
which I faced were shut and bolted from the inside (main doors of pagodas are usually only opened on special occasions), and from this courtyard there was no path leading around to a side entrance.

*Diagram 3: Layout of a Typical Pagoda*
On my way back out the gate I asked a man piling crates of plates how I could get into the pagoda. He directed me down a side alley that led to a small, unmarked door between stalls that sold cheap food. Once through the door, I entered a different world. The long passage brought me to a reception area that was freshly painted and tidy. Plants and a few birds singing in cages transported me out of the noise and bustle of the market.

Like many pagodas in Hanoi, Phúc Lộc Pagoda is quiet and unobtrusive. There are occasional visitors who come in to make offerings at the various altars, but unless it is the first or fifteenth of the lunar month, such visitors are so rare that the lights in the main hall are usually switched off. Once I had spent enough time there, I realised that there is a small community of people who were quietly but continuously active: every morning at 7:00 a small group of elderly people gathered in the front courtyard to practice Tai Chi, and twice a week a group of old men got together and practiced drumming and reciting sutras for the rituals held at the pagoda. Four times every month, the most devout gathered for the Sâm Nguyễn (Penitence ritual, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Five). Aside from these special activities, two or three women came in regularly to dust the statues on the altars, clean the floors, and cook the meals for the one nun, Thầy Tần, who lives there.

Phúc Lộc Pagoda is not a political pagoda; it is not under the gaze of the state, though like all pagodas it receives an occasional glance. It does not receive a wide variety of visitors; only people from the surrounding neighbourhood; and they only go there because it is the pagoda closest to where they live. Thus, unlike Quán Sứ Pagoda, it does not have a bookstore, a research centre, a lecture hall, a library or a training institute. There are no talks given by monastics to the Buddhist laity. There are no classes.

All of these lacks make it even more beautiful and peaceful. There is no weighty feel of state or institutional presence; no signs marking rooms like the offices in a government building. There is no presentation of orthodoxy for conformity to political dictates. There seems to be less competition and dissimulation amongst the community of the pagoda. People were more willing to talk to me about why they went there and how they thought of their religious practice without being worried about expressing a view considered incorrect, unlike Quán Sứ Pagoda, where people would frequently ask if I had written permission to ask questions before they would answer.
(and even then would often decline to comment). There was an informal and unhurried feel at Phúc Lộc Pagoda.

**The Tai Chi Group**

The qualitative difference between Quán Sứ Pagoda and Phúc Lộc Pagoda can be seen in the community that surrounds the pagoda. Part of this community was a Tai Chi group that met daily. I was often invited to attend the Tai Chi group that met in the front courtyard of Phúc Lộc Pagoda, and they consistently referred to it as ‘exercise’ (tập) rather than as ‘Tai Chi’ (thái cực quyền). However, it is clear from the sessions that I attended that they were as much about social interaction as exercise. They spent as much time sitting and talking as exercising.

The group consisted of a floating number of about eight or nine, all of whom were above the age of sixty and all retired. Their routine rarely deviated from the same leisurely routine. They would arrive one-by-one at around eight o’clock from their homes in the neighbourhood. The front doors to the pagoda would be opened to let some light in, and they would sit down cross-legged on the grass mats laid out in the front sanctuary, under a large statue of the spirit the pagoda was named for. A thermos of hot water would be brought to make tea in a small white teapot of cheap, Chinese porcelain. As people arrived, cups of tea were filled for all and most of the men smoked a pre-exercise cigarette. While drinking tea and smoking they would discuss various topics. During the World Cup season the conversation was inevitably about the game the night before and the relative merits of the different players. Names like Ronaldo, Zidane and Campos were often repeated – names which meant little to me (not being a soccer fan), but were familiar to most Vietnamese men, young and old alike, as well as many young women. Score cards and game schedules distributed by foreign cigarette and drink companies were often produced out of shirt pockets to look up the game statistics and to see which teams would be matched next. These conversations would last anywhere from fifteen minutes to a half-hour. The group would then go out to the pagoda courtyard (if it was not raining), turn on the tape deck that played gentle music as background to the male

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40 Tập literally means exercise or practice.
voice slowly counting out the one hundred and twenty-something Tai Chi positions. They would run through the set of postures twice. After, they would go back into the pagoda and sit back down on the grass mats to drink more tea, smoke more cigarettes and eat candies and biscuits that were brought in by one of the women in the group. A half-hour or more of this break would be followed by two more sets of one hundred and twenty-something positions before they would clean up and go home to continue the rest of their daily routines.

The men did not describe their purpose for spending time in the pagoda as religious, and none of them attended rituals at the pagoda. They were however an integral part of the pagoda community. Of the participants, three were women, but only one came every day. This woman was the only one of the group that took part in other aspects of pagoda life, also regularly attending the Sâm Nguyễn four times every month. Although there are many groups that do Tai Chi every morning, they come to Phúc Lộc Pagoda because it is the closest place that offers them the space and because many of them know each other in contexts outside of the pagoda.

That this group is regarded as a part of the pagoda community was clearly displayed at the anniversary celebration held for the ancestors of the pagoda (Lê Giơ Tố), where, just as in the family, the ancestors of the pagoda are given offerings, rituals are performed, and a feast is held for the pagoda ‘family’. The Tai Chi Group was also present for the feast, and ate together as a cohesive group within the larger pagoda community, at one of the more important tables. They were all known to the nun, and though they did not usually stay around after they had finished their morning exercise, they would sometimes engage in conversation with her. Furthermore, they regarded the pagoda as an important place for its religious function, its place in Hanoi’s history and as an integral part of the larger community. They would delight in telling me about its history and architectural merit. They truly valued it for its role as a haven from the busy neighbourhood in which they lived.

The Physical Structure: Integration of the Supernatural

Phúc Lộc Pagoda’s architecture and statuary incorporate the bèn phát/bèn thành cosmology in a way that is more common to Buddhist practice, and to Buddhist pagodas in northern Vietnam. In contrast to
Quan Sú Pagoda (which reflects the state discourse on religion, with its architecture and statuary emphasising the historical Buddha and his life, and down-playing the aspects that are specifically Vietnamese), Phúc Lộc Pagoda has no orthodox, normative pretensions. In both architecture and practices, it reflects the commonly held views and practices of non-doctrinal, grassroots, adaptive Buddhism.

Directly behind the main sanctuary that holds the Buddhist statues is a model of a green mountain festooned with small statues of male spirits, and at which offerings of meat and alcohol are made (something which would never be done at a Buddhist altar). Behind that is a statue of a deity named the Great Uniting Mandarin, flanked by two small statues of the male and female child-deities Little Aunt and Little Uncle, both of which are incarnated in spirit possession rituals.

Like Quan Sú Pagoda, Phúc Lộc Pagoda has a main hall dedicated to the various buddhas and bodhisattvas of the Mahayana pantheon. The main altar holds statues of the Trikaya (the past, present and future buddhas – standard for all pagoda altars); immediately below is a statue of Amida Buddha, flanked on either side by his helpers Guanyin and Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva, below is a statue of Sakyamuni Buddha flanked by Manjusri and Samantabhadra. Below them, and on the last level, are a statue of the Buddha’s birth, surrounded by nine dragons, with Maitreya Buddha on his right, and a statue of Sakyamuni fasting in the Himalayas before he became a buddha on the left.

Where the statuary starts to differ from Quan Sú Pagoda is in the rows of statues of the Ten Kings of Hell that line either side of the main hall. In addition, in front of the main Buddha altar is a large statue of

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41 Công Đồng Quan Lón.
42 Cô Bé (Little Auntie – cô means father’s younger sister) and Cậu Bé (Little Uncle – cậu means mother’s younger brother).
43 Quan-Âm Bồ-tát and Đại-Thê-Chí Bồ-tát.
44 Văn-Thù and Phổ-Hiền. Manjusri and Samantabhadra are generally paired. They are both celestial bodhisattvas that appear in the Lotus Sutra.
45 Tượng Tòa Cửu Long.
46 Di Lặc Phật; the fat Buddha so common in tourist shops.
47 Tượng Tuyệt Sơn.
Diagram 4: Layout of a Typical Pagoda Main Hall

1. Ananda (Arhant) 15. Mahasthamaprapta
2. Brahma (Hindu god) 16. Manjusri Bodhisattva
3. Tiểu Diện 17. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva
5. Sakyamuni Buddha 19. The Eighteen Arhants
7. Guan-yin Bodhisattva 21. Indra (Hindu God)
8. Jade Girl (Fairy – Ngọc Nụ) 22. The Buddha’s Birth
9. Golden Boy (Fairy – Kim Đông) 23. The Four Bodhisattvas
10. Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva 24. God of the Earth
11. Samantabhadra Bodhisattva 25. The Dharma Guardians
12. Sakyamuni Buddha 26. His Highness (Đức Ông)
13. Kasyapa (Arhant) 27. The Ten Kings of Hell

a spirit (thần) of bèn thanh. In the antechamber there are also a number of statues that are not part of the canonical Buddhist pantheon.

There is a shrine for the patriarchs of the pagoda, differing little from the one in Quán Sứ Pagoda other than in the absence of imagery representing the Arhants. However, the biggest difference from Quán Sứ Pagoda is the large amount of pagoda space given over to altars dedicated to the mother goddesses or other spirits of the bèn thanh.\(^48\) It is to the relevance of shrine for the mother goddesses (nhà mẫu) that we will now turn our attention.

\textit{Nhà Mẫu – Mother Goddess Shrine}

Though mother goddess shrine is never central, it is a distinguishing feature of Vietnamese pagodas, indicating the integration of Buddhism to the broader religious landscape in the north.\(^49\) There is an expression concerning the construction of pagodas that goes: ‘The Buddha in front, the saint/spirit behind’.\(^50\) At Phúc Lộc Pagoda it holds true: the shrine for the mother goddesses is situated behind the main hall holding the altar to the buddhas.

The shrine for mother goddesses has a number of statues, but almost all are anonymous. Rather than representing a cult dedicated to a specific figure (as with the cult of Liễu Hạnh, for example), it is dedicated to a holistic cosmological concept, known as the Three Palaces or the Four Palaces.\(^51\) For example, the altars in this shrine hold the statues of the Lady of the Market (Bà Chúa Chợ); the Five Guardians of the Goddess (Ngũ Vị Châu Bà); the Three thrones of the Queen Mother (Tam Tọa Vương Mẫu); the Five Lords (Ngũ Vị Tôn Ông), and a statue of the Great Virtuous King (Dục Đại Vương) the Five Tigers (Ngũ Hổ). As is common of the gods in the Taiwanese

\(^{48}\) Kleinen describes a pagoda in a northern Vietnamese village, reconstructed in 1990, which similarly combines both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements (1999:166).

\(^{49}\) I have never encountered such a structure in Buddhist pagodas of the south, though Ngoc Hoàng Pagoda in Saigon (which is a converted Taoist temple built by the Chinese community at the beginning of the century) has a room dedicated to mother goddesses of a different cult.

\(^{50}\) ‘Tần Phát, hầu thần thânh’ (Hà V.T. et al. 1993:24).

\(^{51}\) Tam Phú and Tứ Phú respectively.
pantheon described by A. Wolf (1978), it is the ranks and positions that are important rather than the actual personalities. The concept of who they are is vague, not only for me but also for almost all of the Vietnamese with whom I spoke, and for informants of other researchers as well (e.g., Simon & Simon-Barouh 1996:120). What is distinguishing about these representations of the supernatural is not the cosmological view, but the ritual by which it is addressed: the spirit possession ritual (lên dộng). 52 This fact has allowed for the main figures to be interchangeable in various parts of Vietnam. For example, in Huế the goddess of heaven (Thiên Y A Na), of Cham origin, stands at the centre, whereas in the north another goddess, Liễu Hạnh, is much more prominent (Bertrand 1996:272).

Plate 22: An Altar for Mother Goddesses

52 It is not uncommon that these rituals take place at pagodas, but they are generally disparaged by purists. I know of at least one other pagoda across the river from Hanoi where spirit possession rituals are also performed by a Buddhist nun. I have spoken with Vietnamese from the south and with southern-based researchers who were shocked to hear that len dộng were taking place inside a pagoda, and even more surprised to hear that they were being performed by Buddhist monastics.
The shrine for mother goddesses is an important religious space within Phúc Lộc Pagoda. Almost everyone who goes into the pagoda to make an offering to the buddhas will also make offerings at the mother goddess shrine. At Quán Sứ Pagoda many people told me that belief in the spirits and saints (thần thần) was superstition, or at least that they are lower than the buddhas and therefore need not be addressed. At Phúc Lộc Pagoda, it is accepted by everyone that I spoke with that while the buddhas may be more important, the gods and saints cannot be neglected (as the discussion of Thầy Tâm’s sponsorship of a spirit possession ritual in Chapter Two showed). Quán Sứ Pagoda's separation between figures of worship stems from the reformist movement in Buddhism that has emerged this century. Thus, practice at Phúc Lộc Pagoda is significantly different than at Quán Sứ Pagoda. Thầy Tâm, like most of the women who regularly attend rituals at the pagoda, do not see a clear difference between Buddhism and what the state calls ‘superstition’. It may be that the influence of the state’s discourse on her has been minimal. Nonetheless, discourses which marginalise these practices are prominent in the media, and everyone is aware of them. Thầy Tâm’s statement about superstitions being bad indicates the extent to which these discourses permeate self-reflexive attitudes towards religion.

Superstition Revisited

It is precisely the practices at places like Phúc Lộc Pagoda that are targeted by the Vietnamese press and Vietnamese academy. In the discourse that surrounds religion, both scholarly works and the frequent reports in the press often distinguish between ‘religion’ as reflective of national culture, and ‘superstition’ as a blight on (imagined) Vietnamese tradition. Thus, ‘they do not attack religious convictions directly, but rather condemn particular superstitions and religious practices, for example fortune-telling, faith-healing, monks seeking alms, bequests to churches or temples, and elaborate funeral ceremonies’ (Marr 1986:130). At a national conference held in Hanoi in March 1998, the Deputy Prime Minister gave a speech saying that the government and the Party ‘always respect religious freedom,

considering it a spiritual demand of the people and, at the same time, part of their democratic right’. However, in the same speech he made it clear that ‘outdated and harmful practices should be abolished’ (Vietnam News, March 19, 1998).

These words are echoed by Đặng Nghiem Văn, the director of the Institute for Religious Studies in the National Center for Social Sciences and the Humanities, and formerly the vice-director of the Institute of Ethnology writes in one recent academic work:

Medium[s]... themselves confess that they have no need of educational qualification and that all they need is self-confidence and deceitfulness to make people believe in ‘the teaching bestowed by the Saint’. All that is required for this business is prudence and craftiness. Soothsayers do not even need much ‘capital’. What a pity! The credulous are numerous and do not even regret the money lost for this purpose; they are always telling themselves that they have to ‘lose a penny to make a pound’. Fortunetellers are beginning to practice again, offering clients soothsaying services, practicing any form of divination wanted in deference to their clients’ desires. This is a step backwards for both practitioners and clients (1998:250-251).

The state has continually denounced superstition, but not in a uniform manner. In the 1930s, intellectuals mocked superstition as non-scientific and anti-rational. After 1945, political factors intruded, as many had become cadres. Before the Renovation, it focused on ‘superstitious’ beliefs and practices as being reactionary or anti-revolutionary. For example, an article in the newspaper The People’s Army (Quan Đội Nhân Dân) stated: ‘We must seek to thoroughly understand all the manifestations of superstition and devise measures to prevent the enemy from using them to their own advantage’ (January 30, 1983:2). The way that the press deals with superstition has since changed in character, now combining mockery with an appeal to economics, stressing the material waste involved in these practices. Through the use of satire, the press highlights what it considers the absurdities of many practices, intending to show how superstition (as opposed to religion) is incompatible with Vietnam’s drive towards modernity.

An example of this kind of mockery appeared in the newspaper Lao Động (Labour) in June 1997, entitled: An Essay on Saints and Spirits. The author relates an overheard conversation between a

54 Thanh Thanh Ky Su.
young woman who wanted to have a petition to the gods written for her and her American husband at Phù Tay Hỏ (one of the most popular temples in Hanoi). The article’s use of humour plays on the similarities of the English name ‘John’ (the name of husband), as it is pronounced in Vietnamese, with the slang word trộn (meaning ‘asshole’). The story starts with a scribe (ông thây) asking what her husband’s family name to write on the petition. This is how the journalist wrote about what transpired:

The young woman replied: ‘Americans don’t have surnames!’ The scribe asked again: ‘What’s his name then?’ The reply: ‘trộn (John)’. The scribe listened, but didn’t know what to do because he didn’t know English, and in the depth of his stomach he thought that ‘trộn’ meant ‘dịf’ [asshole] – how Americans could have a name as ugly as that, he had no idea. If he continued to write like that, with such a lack of respect, he was afraid that he would get in trouble with the gods, so he said: ‘Perhaps I should write the name indirectly, okay?’ The woman was really scared: ‘Oh no, I gave you the name, why don’t you write it? How will the gods know who it is? So why do you have to write it indirectly?’ The scribe explained: ‘But if you offer up a petition to the gods with the name ‘asshole’ (dịf) on it, it isn’t respectful!’ The woman furiously shouted at him: ‘That’s stupid! Why would you write ‘asshole’ on it?’ The scribe angrily said: ‘Because how are ‘dịf’ [‘asshole’] and ‘trộn’ [also ‘asshole’] different?’ (Nguyễn H. 1997) [my translation, see Appendix 1:3.5].

The incident ended in the woman refusing to pay him, leading to a noisy yelling match. Articles with perhaps less bawdy humour but of similar ilk commonly appear in the media in order to make practices regarded as superstitious appear untenable, illogical and irreconcilable with modernity.

Anagnost has written about the discourse on religion in China, in which the state recognises a difference between religion (comprised of the so-called Great Traditions) and superstition, directing its attention to the later. Anagnost divides the media representations of magic as superstition into three levels. The first level is ‘the representation of magical beliefs as a competing belief system, one that is negatively defined against a belief in science and dialectical materialism’ (1987:42). The second sees superstitious beliefs as a side-effect of another problem, usually feudalism. On a third level, which Anagnost sees as probably unintentional, ‘feudal superstition becomes expressive of a subaltern worldview in its ability to focus local sentiment in ways the state may regard as potentially counter-hegemonic’ (1987:43).
In Vietnam, media representations of religion show similarities to the Chinese situation, but are complicated by the ambivalent nature of Vietnamese ‘tradition’ vis-à-vis China. The Vietnamese national narrative depends on religion in a way that makes it indispensable, though dangerous if not controlled properly. The result is a stalemate. Some state actors use the press and the academy in a manner similar to what Anagnost (1987) has illustrated for China, representing religious practices as superstition, in other contexts the same practices are used for asserting Vietnam’s cultural uniqueness. Official presentations of spirit possession rituals (lên dông) reflect these contradictions. The Vietnamese Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi has a display dedicated to spirit possession rituals (lên dông) [Plate 23], and I have seen a state-produced video of traditional singing (quan họ) in which a stylised version of a spirit possession ritual was performed. These presentations are aesthetically pleasing and sanitised, like Vietnamese renditions of ethnic minority dances: it is well choreographed and lacks the ecstatic elements that are present in the real thing. At no time does the spirit speak through the medium. Instead, the video concentrates on the dancing and music. Meanwhile the crowd, all well dressed in traditional clothing, sit quietly watching the performance, rather than yelling out their praise and flattery to the

Plate 23: Display of Lên Đong at the Museum of Ethnology
spirit, which is most usually the case in the actual ritual. What is notable about these emblematic uses of religion, however, is the extent to which they represented an aesthetically pleasing and cleansed version of the real thing. At the same time, the state has in the past suppressed the performance of these rituals and continues to portray them in the press as superstitious, backwards practices that need to be abandoned.

CONCLUSION

The discourses on religion run deep and have counter-currents that are not necessarily in agreement. While religion is tied to discourses of tradition and nationalism, there are also elitist discourses that stem from Confucian condemnations of local practices, and have been strengthened and modified by Marxist ideas of religion which still have a strong following among Party officials.

The two pagodas that I have discussed here, Quán Sử Pagoda and Phúc Lộc Pagoda, can be contrasted to point out how these discourses have influenced the architecture, layout and practices that go on in the respective pagodas. Quán Sử Pagoda, being the headquarters of the VBA, strongly indicates the reformist trends in Buddhism that took place earlier this century. Reform Buddhism has been taken on by the Buddhist institution and backed by the government as being a legitimate religious belief, while grassroots Buddhism has been discredited as superstition. Phúc Lộc Pagoda, on the other hand, in its architecture, statuary and the practices that take place there, more closely adheres to the bèn phát/bèn thành cosmology. It is, however, marginalised. There is only one monastic and she is a nun.

These discourses on religion have a strong effect on how men and women take part in Buddhism differently. As we shall see in the second half of this thesis, men strongly resist participating in activities that can be associated with superstition, whereas women, already marginal in many respects, take part in a greater range of religious activities. Further, where men do take part in Buddhist practices that have the potential for being seen as superstition, they interpret their practice in a way that distances them from practices and interpretations that are attributed to women, superstition, irrationality, and non-modernity.
Plate 24: Buying Offerings at Quán Sứ Pagoda
Research on women's religious activities in Vietnam is very limited. Published material related to Buddhist female monasticism in Vietnam is restricted to a single five page piece in Sakyadhita: Daughters of the Buddha. This article is almost entirely devoted to discussing Buddhist political resistance in Vietnam and the difficulties that face refugees in the United States, mentioning only that there is still 'a rather rigid hierarchy, on the paternalistic model, which places women at the bottom' (Dharma 1988:154). According to Dharma, Chinese influences have been the cause of women's subordination in Vietnamese society:

Vietnamese Buddhism is quite paternalistic - the result of old Chinese customs. There is considerable Confucian influence in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition, not in the doctrine but in the structure...I speak quite frankly to the abbots about adaptations that need to be made in this regard, about eliminating these Confucian elements and upholding Buddhist egalitarianism (Dharma 1988:159).

There are a couple of additional references to nuns in Vietnam. Revertegat notes, 'The rules for women are, in the end, the same as for men, only there are more rules for women, and in certain
instances are more detailed' (1974:22). However, he does not present us with a picture of the lives of nuns, and draws no distinction between differences in the practices of men and women. Thich Thien An (1975:212) also refers to the greater number of rules for nuns than monks, but goes into no detail about how it affects their lives.

The historical changes that have occurred with regard to the gender-based division of religious practice is difficult to ascertain because of the lack of secondary literature on the subject. Nguyen Trieu Dan's family chronicle suggests that the processes I describe have been present since at least the beginning of this century:

The strength of Buddhist faith in our family has fluctuated with the generations. Buddhism has been like a deeply embedded seed which remained dormant in some periods, but developed and blossomed in others. It is interesting to note that development, when it took place, was brought about by the maternal side. Thus, our foremother of the fourth generation was a devout Buddhist whose influence on the family's religious attitude extended to the next generations. The same could be said of our foremother of the ninth generation. In my grandparents' time, Buddhism was to us more of a tradition than a religion. That was during the first half of this century, when Buddhism registered a general decline in Vietnam. My grandmother came from a village with an ancient Buddhist tradition; however, she married into a strict Confucian family and came to live in Kim Bai where most people went to temples only at important festivals. My grandfather was not interested in the religion. I do not recall having seen him in a temple, or reading a Buddhist text (1991:68-69).

Women, then as now, were the principle participants in Buddhist ritual. Marr has pointed out that in the beginning of the century, when Vietnamese society was struggling to modernise itself, women were especially targeted by reformers because, 'women were considered more prone to superstition than men' (1981:345). With the Communist revolution, it was women's religious practices that were especially targeted. Luong writes how after 1945 women's religious practice was treated as a social evil, lumped together with activities such as theft and gambling:

In addition, with popular support, village administration adopted strong measures to eradicate gambling, theft, and 'superstitious' practices. Gamblers were forced to attend funeral processions for their playing cards and to publicly shout 'down with gambling.' Second-time offenders were required to hang

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1 'Les Règles pour les femmes sont, quant au fond, les mêmes que celles des hommes, toutefois un peu plus nombreuses et parfois un peu plus détaillées. Elles subordonnent les religieuses aux religieux' (Revertegat 1974:22) [my translation].
stolen objects (e.g., cucumbers or fruit) from their necks in procession through the village. Shamans had to report at the communal meeting hall, where they were firmly asked to destroy their altars and to abandon their practices (Luong 1992:145).

Religious practice is tied to broader patterns of the reproduction of gender in Vietnamese society. I would have been in error to examine Vietnamese Buddhist practice solely through the exegesis of those who are considered ritual experts, for these experts can only be expected to portray a particular discourse. Reality reflects a cacophony of practices and opinions.

My view of religion in Hanoi came to resemble a ‘system’ less with every day that passed. Although not very helpful if my intention was to end up with a well-structured explanation of an entity called Vietnamese Buddhism, my increasingly muddled view of what Buddhism actually was forced me to focus on practice as the most relevant religious experience for people who call themselves Buddhist.

As I mentioned, there are many possible practices in which people engage. One of the most important factors affecting everyday religious practice is gender, and it is by looking at the different sorts of practice, who engages in them, and how they are viewed that I hope to arrive at an understanding of the connection between gender and Buddhist practice in Vietnam.

In this second part I will introduce you to three kinds of Buddhist practice, each of which forms the core of the discussion in one of the following three chapters. These categories are my own, not ones that people necessarily speak about. They are also not exclusive, but merely represent what I take to be the most dominant forms of religious practice.

The first type of practice is giving offerings and making wishes, which occurs especially on the first and fifteenth of the Lunar month. It is, with a few exceptions, an activity that is performed exclusively by women, and is the public religious activity that engages by far the most individuals. It is also less Buddhist-specific in that essentially the same process of offering and wish-making can be done at non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist altars. It is essentially a devotional activity in that there are few intellectual, ascetic or moralistic practices that must be undertaken in conjunction with it. Many of the actors are not fully convinced that they will benefit or that their wishes will be realised from its performance, but do it anyway ‘just in case’. The benefit of such offerings is felt to be of an immanent nature, bringing
good fortune, wealth, health, success and happiness. Finally, it is performed mostly by women for the benefit of the entire family, although personal wishes are also made.

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**Figure 8: Offerings, Sutras and Studies**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Offerings and Wishes</th>
<th>Chanting Sutras and Ritual</th>
<th>Studies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men/women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devotional</td>
<td>Devotional/philosophical</td>
<td>Philosophical/intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-committed to Buddhist beliefs</td>
<td>Committed to Buddhist beliefs</td>
<td>Ambivalently committed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated by immanent benefit</td>
<td>Motivated by immanent and transcendent benefit</td>
<td>Motivated by transcendent benefit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps individual and family</td>
<td>Helps individual and family</td>
<td>Helps individual only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second type of activity, chanting sutras and ritual, is performed by both men and women, although fewer men attend. The people who attend rituals and sutra recitals are unequivocally devoted to Buddhism. They are not just ‘hedging their bets’ by participation, like many of those who make offerings. While reciting sutras is done by some purely as a devotional act, many feel that there is a philosophical and moral value, and most people who participate say that reciting is therefore not an end in itself. After you leave the pagoda you must actively try to be a better person rather than expecting that participation in recitals alone will have an effect in life. There is a notable division in the benefit that is perceived to come from participation. While there are some (mostly women) who are quick to mention that their participation will ensure a better future for their families (especially their children), most would also say that it is primarily done for moral and spiritual betterment – a view stressed by male participants to the exclusion of perceived immanent benefit. It is

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2 By imminent and transcendent I am drawing a distinction between mundane actions directed towards this world, ranging from wishing for wealth and success in examinations or business to wishing for a son or a cure for an illness for oneself or anyone else, and moralistic, intellectual and soteriological concerns aimed at self-cultivation, enlightenment or nirvana.
thus seen by some as both a practice to benefit one's family, but by others, notably men, for self-cultivation. This latter is seen as purely individual, and those who focus on self-cultivation do not believe that karmic merit is transferable at a supernatural level (though undoubtedly moral improvement is seen as benefiting all).

Finally, the third type of activity, which I have labelled here as 'studies', is almost exclusively a male activity. This reflects the view generally found in wider Vietnamese society that men are more intellectual, rational and philosophical, while women are more emotional and faithful. Rather than being devotional in nature, this kind of practice concentrates on the learning of orthodox Buddhist philosophy, Vietnamese Buddhist history, and learning Chinese as a ritual language (which allows them to recite specific sutras and become ritual specialists). It is an activity that is never perceived as having any immanent benefit, but stresses the intellectual and spiritual improvement of an individual. Although all of the men who attend rituals also participate in these intellectual exercises, there are many who only study and never set foot in the sutra hall. Study, therefore, is done more for the individual's benefit and is not regarded as having any direct, supernatural repercussions for one's family. Most men described their pursuits in individualistic terms of wishing to improve themselves. The argument can be made, of course, that in the Confucian tradition, the self-cultivation of individuals is seen as improving society as a whole. For men the performance of sagacity improves their status in the community and in the extended family, though not necessarily in the nuclear family.

Women commonly phrase their religious practice in terms of the benefit that it will have for the family. In this way, their activities at the pagoda can be seen as tied to their perceived role as the creators of the happy family. They see themselves as being primarily responsible for maintaining the welfare of the family, and this is seen as being done in mundane ways, through cooking, cleaning and promoting the interests of their children; as well as in supernatural ways, by bringing the forces of the spirits or buddhas on to the side of their family. At the same time religious practice, like other forms of social practice, is a way in which men and women negotiate social relationships. Women strengthen their position within the family. Their efforts, at least on an ideal level, are constantly invoked in order to express their expectations of reciprocity for their efforts. For women, religious practice aimed at the creation of symbolic capital
that can be exchanged for benefits outside of the pagoda. For women it is tied to the improvement of their position within the family.

The following chapters are intended to draw out some of the threads of Buddhist practice as they relate to the gender order in Hanoi. I contextualise religious practice into the social practice of the people with whom I watched and spoke during an eighteen-month period in Hanoi. I will outline how men and women live as Buddhists in different ways, participating in different activities. As practices differ for men and women, so do their interpretations. These variations in both activities and interpretation relate to the topics that we looked at in Part I. Gender, religion and discourses of the state can be seen as converging in the Buddhist practice that I will now examine.
The fifteenth day of the lunar month had arrived, the day when offerings are believed to be most efficacious and when most devotees make an effort to visit a pagoda. My wife, Lan, called up from her office and reminded me that she wanted to go to the pagoda that afternoon. On the way we stopped a few times to buy things from some vendors for offerings at the pagoda. Each time, Lan got off the motorcycle and approached them alone while I stayed out of sight. This way she would be able to bargain for a fair price without being influenced by the vendor’s preconceived notions of foreigners’ capacity to pay. By the time we arrived at the front gate of the pagoda, she had accumulated:

9 oranges
1 bunch of bananas
1 wad of spirit money (vàng mạ)¹
1 large bundle of incense sticks (hướng)
3 cones of ộàn ²
5 red roses

¹ Vàng mạ is the symbolic paper money that is immolated at pagodas, temples and homes. It is done especially on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month. It can be bought at the entrance to any pagoda or temple along with incense sticks (hướng).

² Ộàn is made from sweet bean powder that is pressed into truncated cone shapes and then wrapped in coloured cellophane. It is eaten afterwards.
We entered the main shrine, where my eyes started to burn as I peered through the dim light and incense smoke that had been accumulating with the day’s procession of devotees, who had come to pay their respects to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, make offerings, and wish for good fortune, happiness and prosperity for their families. My wife and I arranged the offerings that she had brought on three trays provided by the pagoda. We put the first trays on the main altar and put three sticks of incense in the incense holder, and then went in front of the altar and stood shoulder to shoulder with hands held together. After my wife finished her prayer, made her wish and identified herself to the buddhas, we both shook our hands, still held together, up and down three times, and then repeated the process at the two altars on either side.

Then we waited for the offerings to soak up the grace of the buddhas, after which our offerings would become lôc - gifts from the buddhas that hold supernatural powers, able to bring good luck. While waiting, we went out and joined the old nun in her regular position on a platform close to the entrance. She greeted us and served us tea in small grimy cups that must have met thousands of lips with only a rinse of hot tea between each. They were handed to us and we accepted them with both hands, as a show of politeness. My wife put the cup to her lips in a feigned gesture of a sip, (she is not fond of tea), after which she held the cup in her hands for a few seconds and put it down in front of her. Good etiquette requires the acceptance of the cup rather than the consumption of the tea. The old nun then offered us some fruit to eat. As we sat and talked with her (or rather, as she questioned my wife about me), another woman emerged from the small side-door of the main sanctuary holding a bag of fruit she had offered on the altars, and approached us. She took some of the fruit offerings from her bag and gave them as a gift to the nun. In return, the nun handed her some of the fruit which had been accumulating in front of her all day as gifts from devotees who had come to make their bi-monthly offerings and wishes.

My wife and I then re-entered the main sanctuary and retrieved the trays we had previously set on the altars as offerings, leaving behind the roses. These we had already put into a vase sitting on the main altar. We then took the spirit money (vàng mạ) to the furnace in the courtyard, where I burned it. Meanwhile, my wife talked with another woman who was busy stuffing her vàng mạ bit by bit into the furnace, making sure that it burned entirely (to be fully effective). I heard the woman telling my wife how fortunate she was that I
accompanied her to the pagoda, and that she wished her husband would do the same. Her remark was directed to the unusualness of my presence rather than towards her husband’s absence, which she seemed to accept as normal. My wife replied that I also chanted sutras (although Lan did not mention that I went alone because she found it boring). The woman was impressed and surprised: a young man, and a Westerner. Her next comment reflected her feelings. ‘You must be so happy to be married to a foreign husband who likes to go to pagodas like this. My husband is Vietnamese but he never goes to pagodas. If only my husband would go!’

After the spirit money (vàng mã) was burnt we went back out to the old nun. Following the lead of another woman (Lan was not familiar with pagoda customs), I gave her a portion of our retrieved offerings, now transformed into lộc. She then offered some items from her pile, for which we politely and respectfully thanked her, put them in our bags and walked down the path and out the gate. We paid the motorcycle keeper, climbed on to my wife’s Honda and weaved our way back through the ever-crowded streets of Hanoi to our house, feeling that we had done what we could to protect ourselves against misfortune for the next two weeks. Most of the lộc we took home with us was taken to her parents’ house the next day to share with her family.

In the complex Vietnamese religious landscape, which Cadière has likened to a jungle of intertwining beliefs, there are very few practices or beliefs which tie the seemingly disparate elements together. Though I will not claim that practices associated with lộc is the missing piece which brings coherence and makes Vietnamese religion ‘a system’, it is one of the few practices that crosscuts the different elements. Lộc and its associated practices can be seen at communal houses, temples, pagodas, shrines, and on the ancestral altars in people’s homes. Lộc is given at lễ dồng as well as at the Sâm Nguyễn rituals held four times every month in Buddhist pagodas. At virtually any ritual and almost all ritual spaces, lộc is somehow involved. The people who make these offerings do not distinguish between the religious spaces they are offered in. No one ever claims that lộc from pagodas is more potent than lộc from temples, or communal houses.

3 ‘Em suông thật, lấy chồng người nước ngoài mà có tâm đi chùa như thế này. Chồng chỉ là người Việt Nam mà chẳng bao giờ đến chùa. Già mà chồng chỉ được như chồng em!’ [translation mine].

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The practice of making offerings and then reclaiming them as talismans is done almost exclusively by women of every age group. However, it is a practice that implicates almost all Buddhists, both male and female, for while the offerings are usually made by women, the $lôc$ is also given to men. Further, it is given to (and received by) those who do not claim to believe that $lôc$ holds any supernatural power.

In this chapter I will begin by discussing in more detail the different practices that surround $lôc$ in order to explain what $lôc$ entails, and to illustrate the pervasiveness of the practices associated with it. Then I will look specifically at the core activity, described above, of making offerings and reclaiming the material objects, now

*Plate 25: Preparing Offerings at Tày Hồ Temple*
transformed into talismans – objects with supernatural power. In the final section, I will show how the production and distribution of lộc, as a particular form of religious practice, fits into the larger body of gendered social practice; attending pagodas is an aspect of performance of emphasised femininity, and the structure of cathexis. Lộc is also used by women for building symbolic capital within the family.

MEANINGS AND MANIFESTATIONS OF LỘC

Lộc can be defined in a number of ways, all of which fail to convey the meaning in its entirety. Giran renders lộc as ‘happiness’ (bonheur) (1912:279), but the abstraction of this translation does not acknowledge the connection it has with the intricate and diverse practices that are associated with the objects. Durand translates it into French as talisman (porte-bonheur) (1959:13n), a rendering which stresses its practical use, but again misses nuances, and fails to convey the value of these objects as material signs of supernatural benevolence. Another translation renders it as a ‘present from the gods’ (Bùi Phượng 1993:783), which, though clumsy, may come a little closer in capturing the essence of its meaning in the circumstances most usually associated with lộc, but not in all cases of its usage.

The term lộc is a Sino-Vietnamese word (Hán-Việt – a word that has been borrowed from Chinese).4 The Chinese as well as the Sino-Vietnamese words literally mean ‘the salary of a mandarin’. It is from this literal meaning that the idea of ‘happiness’, Giran’s translation, emerges. Good fortune, luck, material wealth and happiness are regarded as being virtually synonymous in Vietnam. Wealth is a clear sign of supernatural favour. Furthermore, striving for wealth has no negative meaning. Religion is seen as a legitimate avenue for the pursuit of wealth, and it is very often the major reason for going to pagodas; for only with the blessing of the supernatural can this wealth, and by extension, happiness, be obtained. In China, lù (lộc) is a word that is closely associated with the words fǔ (phúc), meaning luck, happiness, or fecundity and shòu (thọ) meaning longevity. This

4 A sizeable portion of the Vietnamese lexicon is made up of derivative Chinese words, especially abstract words like peace (V. an; C. an) and tranquil (V. yên bình; C. an jìng). Often there are both autochthonous Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese words for the same thing. The Vietnamese words in such cases are the ones used in everyday conversation, and the Hán-Việt word is reserved for ritual uses.
A triad of concepts is also present in Vietnam. Pham Van Bich refers to *phúc, lộc, thọ* as meaning (in order): ‘to have (1) many children, (2) a great many gifts and benefits from the gods, and (3) longevity’ (1999:183). They are commonly represented in the form of three men; one with children, one with money and one very old, and together represent success and happiness.\(^5\) The Chinese character for *lộc* can be seen in most pagodas and temples in Hanoi. It is almost always accompanied by the character for *phúc* – blessing or happiness – making the pair ‘happiness’ (*phúc*) and ‘good fortune’ (*lộc*) (*fù* and *lù* in Mandarin Chinese).

*Lộc* is not something easily definable because of the cross-cultural etymology and multiple manifestations of it in practice. *Lộc*, as I use it in this thesis, to a certain extent combines the above translations. However, I believe that it is only through a description of the contexts in which *lộc* is used that the multi-valance of the term can be fully appreciated.

### The First Lộc of the Year

*Lộc* appears in two forms at Tết,\(^6\) both of which involve customs which are part of the celebration. Visiting family and friends on New Year’s Day is one of the most important activities and considerable time is devoted to it. When visiting a close friend or relative, one usually gives a red envelope containing a small amount of money. The intended meaning is as a wish that their wealth will increase (Toan Ánh 1996, vol.2:333). This money, called *mừng tuồi*, literally means ‘happy age’ (roughly equivalent to ‘happy birthday’), because in Vietnam, as in China, age is not reckoned by the date of birth but by the New Year (Trần Ngọc Thêm 1996:149).\(^7\) Thus, ‘for old people it is to improve their chances for longevity, and for young children to congratulate them for being one year closer to adulthood’ (Toan Ánh

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\(^5\) Andrew Kipnis (personal communication) has pointed out that in China *fù, lù, shòu* means these things, but making sense particularly in reference to male contributions to patrilineal ideals. When they are feminised, they take the form of rich, beautiful, and cultured women.

\(^6\) The full term in Vietnamese is Tết Nguyên Đán.

\(^7\) *Mừng tuổi* (i.e., the money given at Tết) is called *li xi* in southern Vietnam (Toan Ánh 1996, vol.2:333), meaning taciturn or silent. It is probably a Chinese dialect, and I am uncertain as to the roots of this word or why it is used.
Plate 26: Phúc and Lộc at a Pagoda’s Mother Goddess Shrine
1997, vol.2:333; Tần Việt 1996: 143). However, I usually observed it being given to children rather than exchanged between adults.

In this sort of lộc there is a strong link between money, luck and happiness. This link can be seen in the way that mùng tuội is thought of as a talisman and is subsequently saved. This association can also be seen in another practice associated with business. In this case money is called mốt hàng, meaning ‘to be the first customer in a shop’ and ‘to start a sale’ (Bùi 1993:863-864), but the literal meaning is to open (mốt) a store (hàng). In this context, it is the money received from the first customer of the new year. This money is also said to be lộc, able to bring good luck for the business for the entire year. Even on a daily basis, the first sale is significant because it is believed to usher in more sales. Thus, quite often sellers are willing to significantly discount prices for the first customer. These two practices are conflated by Toan Anh, but do not reflect the usages I saw in Hanoi:

The money for mùng tuội is also money for mót hàng used to bring luck. When friends meet they also usually exchange mót hàng in order to get good luck. We (Vietnamese) usually put away the mót hàng money in a safe place and rarely spend it except grudgingly (Toan Anh 1997, vol.2:333) [translation mine].

According to my observations, this money is not so carefully saved as Toan Ánh suggests. It is, however, not spent frivolously on everyday purchases. Rather, it is used in order to purchase such things as lottery tickets in the hopes that one may invest luck in order to get a good return. On New Year’s day you can see boys gambling in the streets with the money that has been given to them.

There is another Tét tradition which involves lộc. The word lộc can also mean a new bud, or shoot on a tree. On New Year’s Eve, branches with new leaves at the end are torn off and presented to friends and family members. It is a practice that leads to a frenzied defoliation of trees on the streets of Hanoi by over-enthusiastic youths (in defiance of the law and in the conspicuous absence of the usually ever-present police). In this case the branches are considered lucky, and able to bring fortune in the new year: ‘Lộc will naturally come, the sooner the better, but some house owners take the initiative and

8 ‘Tien mung tuoi con la tien mot hang de lay may. Ban be gap nhau cung thuong mot hang cho nhau de lay may man. Tien mot hang, nguoi ta thuong gui cat di, it khi lay ra tieu dung, tru trong hop bai dac di’ (Toan Anh 1996, vol.2:333) [translation mine].
go to take lộc (only one branch from a communal house [đình], pagoda [chùa], or a majestic location to take back home)’ (Tân Việt 1996: 142).

This practice is involved with a play on the word lộc. It is a form of homonymy, which may be described as a kind of serious punning. If two similar sounding words of different derivation can lend one another certain of their senses, semantic enrichment is effected. Homonymy is exceptionally useful in ritual where, as I have said, relatively few symbols must represent a multiplicity of meaning (Turner 1995 [1969]:64).

It seems reasonable to assume that the word for bud (lộc) takes on the meaning of prosperity (lộc), and is therefore used as a talisman at Têt to bring prosperity. The meaning of lộc as a new shoot is extended so that the shoot itself becomes a physical manifestation of lộc qua happiness, good fortune, or prosperity. At the same time, the freshness of a new branch is used as a metaphor to indicate the start of a new year, and the potential growth that the new year holds. Although it was never explained to me as such, it might also be tied in a metaphoric sense to patrilineage, symbolising the of starting a new lineage branch.

Thus, in the context of Têt, lộc can be seen as having very specific connotations, bringing together luck and happiness. Giran’s translation as bonheur (happiness), and Durand’s as porte-bonheur (talisman) aptly describe the customs of lộc associated with Têt.

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9 'Lộc tự nhiên đến, càng sắm thì càng tốt, nhưng nhiều nhà chử đặng, từ mình đi hải lộc (chỉ là một cảnh non ở đình chùa, ở chốn tôn nghiêm mang về nhà)’ (Tân Việt 1996: 142) [translation mine].

10 In using homonyms in this way, the Vietnamese have, I believe, assumed a pervasive Chinese practice. For example, the letter four (si) is bad luck because it is a homonym for 'die' or 'dead' (sì). At the lunar New Year the character meaning luck (fù, or phúc in Hán-Việt) is hung upside down on front doors. It is put upside down because the Chinese word for upside-down (dao) and arrive (dào) sound the same (though the character is different). So, hanging the character for luck upside-down can be seen to mean 'luck arrives'. In Vietnam this practice is not done: the character is hung by some but never upside down, presumably because the sound is different in Vietnamese, and so this aspect was not adopted. However, there are cases in which Chinese symbols based on homonyms have bee transferred to Vietnam without the sounds from which they derive their meaning. For example, in Chinese the pronunciation for 'luck' (fù) and 'bat' (fù) sound the same. Therefore, the meaning of luck is extended to the nocturnal animal: it becomes a lucky animal and their image is often found adorning temples in China. In temples and pagodas of Vietnam images of bats are also ubiquitous. People told me that they were lucky, but could not tell me why.
However, lýc also has a dimension of sacredness that the these glosses do not convey, and which is not present in the forms of lýc associated with Tết.

Lýc, Pilgrimages and Pleasure Trips

Lýc is invariably involved in pilgrimages (hành hương) and group trips to pagodas outside of Hanoi. These usually take place in the first lunar month. However, before speaking of pilgrimage, it is important to point out that in Vietnam there are a variety of excursions which could be labelled pilgrimages. No pilgrimages are solely for religious purposes. Rather, pleasure was an intrinsic part of the experience, regardless of the relative devotion of the participants. When groups of young people go to these sites for fun (di chơi – literally ‘going to play’), the groups invariably consist of those who undertake the pilgrimage with religious intentions and those who do not. When the trip consists of a bus-load of older women who are fervent Buddhists, the pilgrimage is also often referred to as doing something for entertainment (di chơi), and non-religious scenic locations are often included in the trip agenda.

I went on a multi-day pilgrimage with a monk, a nun and a group of lay women that included a dawn visit to a famous pagoda and a stop by a temple on the way to Yên Tử Pagoda. There, we embarked on a very strenuous eight hour hike up a mountain to reach the shrine at the top. Then we continued to the coast to spend the night. In the morning we visited three more temples, made offerings (which were reclaimed as lýc), and proceeded to hire a boat that took us on a leisurely sightseeing cruise around Halong Bay for an afternoon, eating the lýc from the offerings made earlier and looking at the spectacular scenery.

11 For a brief account of one woman’s pilgrimage, see Soucy (1999b).
12 In Vietnam commitment to a stance of either religious belief or non-belief is not demanded or expected, and most young people tend to talk of whether they believe in the efficacy of religious practices or in the presence of the supernatural in terms of percentages rather than binary oppositions of faith or absence thereof. Even for those who maintain that they do believe, there is still an element of entertainment in going on trips to religious sites.
Such pilgrimages and pleasure trips are a recent phenomenon. Until the late 1990s, sites that are now favoured destinations lay empty. The reasons for their popularity has to do with both greater interest in these traditional and religious sites, and with the increase in the number of people who can afford such trips. For urban youths, it is now very easy for a group of friends to ride to Thây Pagoda on their motorcycles, whereas in the past very few had access to a vehicle. In the south there has also been an eruption of pilgrimage activity (see P. Taylor 1999).

Trinkets are often sold at religious sites that attract Vietnamese tourists and pilgrims. Trinkets that are bought and taken home to be given to friends and family members are called lọc, with a meaning somewhere between ‘talisman’ and ‘souvenir’. Though it is called lọc it is clearly thought of both as a religious artefact as well as a secular one. When Hanoians go on a trip, it is customary to bring back souvenirs to close friends and younger siblings. When the trip is to a religious site rather than an area which is solely for tourism, the small gift that is brought back is most usually religious in nature. However, whether it is a religious item or not, because it was obtained on a trip/pilgrimage to a religiously special place, the item, regardless of what it is, is called lọc.
The souvenir/talisman contains within it the power that is a part of all varieties of lọc. The lọc receives its power as much by the fact of the voyage as by the particular religio-spatial location it was obtained from. This souvenir-lọc will bring good luck to the receiver by its possession, as well as to the giver by the act of its distribution. As a souvenir, this object on the one hand expresses the emotional bond of a relationship (‘I wish you were here’), and on the other is a public declaration of having made a pilgrimage/outing. In this latter intention, photographs are taken and enthusiastically displayed to much the same effect. In either case, lọc should be regarded both as a religiously potent artefact, but also as a gift, used to create emotions of solidarity to bond relationship ties.

These souvenirs are also bought for oneself and kept. Often they come in the form of necklaces, medallions or prayer beads. In these cases, people often wear the lọc during the outing. When they return home, it may be hung up in the house in a conspicuous place, as
much to show people that they have been to the site as to bring luck to the household.

Aside from lộc as a souvenir, there is another form that is perhaps more central to these pilgrimage-outings. Food items are usually taken along as offerings and consumed immediately. As an offering, it becomes a talisman – good fortune to be consumed. The lộc consumed immediately is a particular feature of pilgrimage-trips. Because only ‘sweet’ things (đồ cúng ngọt – usually fruit) are supposed to be offered to buddhas, as opposed to the gods who are offered ‘salty’ things (đồ cúng mặn – things flat, insipid or not sweet enough) such as meat and alcohol, the offerings can consist of biscuits and fruit and therefore become snacks if the destination is a pagoda. If it is a temple, a more substantial meal will be offered and consumed as lộc. The food consumed on these pilgrimages/trips is seen as a gift from the gods/buddhas.

I went on one such pilgrimage-outing just after Têt 1998. We visited Chùa Thầy, a famous pagoda an hour’s motorcycle ride to the west of Hanoi in Hà Tây province. This pagoda is a favourite destination for those who wish to have a day of fun out of Hanoi. It is a historically significant spot, where an important Vietnamese monk of the twelfth century named Tù Đạo Hạnh.

*Plate 29 & 30: A Pilgrimage at Têt*
undertook his training. It is also artistically and iconographically recognised as important for three famous statues that represent the legend of Tù Đạo Hạnh’s three reincarnations as a monk, a king, and a Buddha. One story further attributes it as the location where Vietnamese water puppetry was invented. The architecture and statuary are beautiful examples of Vietnamese artistic ability. Perhaps equally significant is the fact that the pagoda rests up against a small limestone mountain with caves, making it an excellent spot for a picnic and a walk after visiting the pagoda.

On this pilgrimage (Tết 1998) I went with my wife. The group we went with consisted of eight others, equally divided between men and women, most below thirty in age. When we reached the pagoda, the women promptly arranged the bags of edible offerings onto a few of the trays that pagodas always supply for this purpose. The men of the

group took a cursory look around the pagoda while the women went in to make offerings and wishes at the various altars in the pagoda complex. After they made their rounds, enough time had passed for the objects to be filled with the gods’ and buddhas’ blessings, so they were gathered up again and taken out to the men who had been smoking in the courtyard, joking among themselves about people who believe in the efficacy of religious practice, while waiting for the women to finish their supplications. The offerings were put back into the bags after some of the oranges that had been offered were passed out and eaten by the whole group. We then made our way up the mountain, visited one of the biggest caves, and had a picnic where we ate the remainder of the lộc.

In this example of picnic lộc, a number of elements deserve highlighting. In general, women in Vietnam participate and apparently have more faith in the efficacy of most forms of religious practice than men. In the above example, the women made offerings and wishes, and the men maintained a sceptical manner, but were recipients of the material outcome of the women’s religious labour.

The wishes made by two of them were directed towards concerns typical of young women. Miss Hạnh, who had earlier gone with Lan to the ritual for severing ties to a ghost (see Chapter One), wished to find a boyfriend whom she could later marry. Then twenty-nine, she was being pressed by her parents to marry as soon as possible. It is generally believed that after the age of thirty it is more difficult for a woman to find a good husband. Miss Hạnh’s sister and brother-in-law were also among the people in the group. Miss Hạnh’s sister had come for a special purpose: she has a daughter and went on the trip to wish for the next child to be a boy. Thus, within the group, there were two women who had explicit wishes that I was aware of, two who made the rounds to the various altars and offered incense but whose wishes were unknown to me, and one woman who did not make any religious gestures whatsoever. She had gone primarily for the picnic with her friends.

On another occasion, shortly after Tết 1997, I went along with a bus load of older women to visit pagodas. These group tours are very common in the first month of the lunar year. Buses packed with women, mostly over fifty years old, can be seen on all of the highways around Hanoi in great numbers, recognisable by the flag tied to the side-view mirrors of the bus. This occasion was more overtly religious than the first example. Rather than saying that they were going out for entertainment (đi chơi – go for entertainment), the stated purpose of
the trip was religious (đi lễ – go to worship). Nonetheless, they spoke as much of the enjoyment of the trip, which consisted of a succession of visits to various temples and pagodas in the vicinity of Hanoi, as they did of the religious benefit. It was one of the few times every year when these women had the chance to get out of their villages and tour the scenic sights of the area.

The first, and furthest, destination of the day was Đền Bà Chúa Kho. Offerings were made of gió (processed meat), chicken, bánh chưng (a cake made from sticky rice and fatty pork meat), and rice alcohol. Some women made offerings of money, which was later distributed to members of the group. After collecting the lộc we proceeded to the next destination, a temple (đền) dedicated to Lý Thành Tông,14 where the lộc was eaten for lunch before heading on to seven other pagodas in and around Hanoi. The fact that they first went to a temple rather than a pagoda meant that ‘salty’ food could be offered, and then be consumed as the main meal of the day. Once again, the lộc was consumed on the outing, thereby bringing good fortune to all those who were taking part.

Bà Chúa Kho Temple is a non-Buddhist temple that has special implications for lộc, as its popularity is based almost entirely on the potency of its lộc for helping with business. Bà Chúa Kho Temple is dedicated to a queen of one of the Lý kings. After she was married and brought to the palace, she missed her home and begged leave of her husband to return to her village. There she made agricultural reforms and built store houses (kho) to supply the army which was then fighting the Chinese. Her work brought prosperity to the region, and after death she was deified and a temple was built in her honour (Khanh Duyên 1994:19-21). Her name is not known, but she is called Bà Chúa Kho, which literally means Lady/Princess of the Storehouse. Although there is some doubt whether there is any historical truth to the legend (Phan H.D. 1998:7-9), its significance serves to lure devotees, especially at the beginning and end of the lunar year.

It is popular with business people who go there to borrow from the Lady of the Storehouse for their business. The currency is spirit

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14 Lý Thành Tông (1023-1072) was the third son of Lý Thái Tông. During his reign he strongly supported Buddhism, had many temples and stupas built, and was even said to have been a patriarch in the Thao Duong Zen School. At the same time, he promoted Confucian studies, had the ‘Cultural Temple’ (Văn Miếu) built and installed statues of Confucian sages to be worshipped, and institutionalised Confucian court etiquette (Nguyen, T.C. 1997:440-441, n.644; Nguyen K.V. 1993:52-53).
money (vàng mã) and hàng mã. These items represent spiritual capital that will bring good luck to one’s business ventures. At the end of the year, the borrower is supposed to return to the temple in order to repay the debt, with interest. The whole practice and the importance of the temple revolves around iosk. The iosk in this case are paper bricks of gold, coins and paper branches with metallic green leaves representing jade. These iosk objects are taken back and placed on the home or business altar for the year. At the end of the year they are returned to Bà Chúa Kho Temple where they are burned along with the balance of interest accrued. To not return the debt is said to bring very bad luck. The centrality of money to the practices associated with Bà Chúa Kho Temple is underlined by the fact that it has become popular since the late 1980s, when the state started to condone a free-market economy (Marr 1994:15)

Whereas iosk associated with Têt can be seen as a talisman which lacks any association with the spirits or buddhas, association with the supernatural is definitive of the iosk that surrounds pilgrimages. The power of the object is, in this case, attained through the spirits or buddhas receiving the object and then returning it to the supplicant as a ‘gift from the gods’.

I have pointed out three distinctly different types of iosk in connection with pilgrimages. One type is closely associated with the iosk that is generated through making offerings on the first and fifteenth of every month, as in the example at the beginning of the chapter. This iosk is consumed immediately as a symbol of the merit generated though the pilgrimage itself. It is believed that by eating it or possessing it, like any iosk, it will bring good luck to the consumer. What makes it different is the circumstance under which it was acquired. Thus, while it could be said to be a talisman, such a formulation lacks the connotations of sacredness. The kind of iosk associated with pilgrimages takes the form of souvenirs which are brought back and usually given as gifts to close friends and family members. These souvenirs are also talismans, but again, such a

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15 Hàng mã is paper items that represent gold bars, leaves of jade, and similar symbols of wealth.
16 In a discussion with P. Taylor, he told me that in his research in the Mekong region he met with similar explanations about Bà Chúa Xứ Temple, however, upon closer questioning he found that very few actually did return. Often the two trips, one to make the request and one to thank the goddess for granting the request, would be merged into one so that they made the request and thanked the goddess all at one time, thereby saving time and money. I was told that if you did not repay Bà Chúa Kho, you would be punished.
definition ignores the implications of gift-giving as a social act. Finally, the third type is the *lộc* that is acquired from famous places for specific purposes (usually to bring wealth). There are a number of sights in the northern Vietnamese landscape where such *lộc* is obtained, but Bà Chúa Kho Temple is perhaps the most famous, and is the sight which places the greatest importance on practices involving *lộc*.

**Lên Đông – Lộc as the Manifestation of the Spirits’ Benevolence**

*Lên dông* – a form of spirit possession ritual in which the medium (called ông dông if male and bà dông if female) receives a succession of male and female spirits – is seen by some as the quintessential indigenous Vietnamese religious tradition (Ngo D.T. 1996a). While the ritual has been discussed by a number of scholars, discussion almost always misses the intricacies of the complex rituals that are the focal point of the study.17 The hymns for each incarnation are recorded at length. The process of the rituals and the characters of the spirits are examined. But in each case the central aspect of the rituals, the emotion and the religious intent, is neglected. Although the ritual is made unique by the music, the costumes, and the ways in which the spirits’ different characters are displayed, the ritual’s main purpose is to communicate with the spirits and receive their blessings. *Lộc*, which is centrally important as the material manifestation of the spirits’ blessings, is given only passing reference.

The *lộc* in *lên dông* are of two types. The first is the offerings that are prepared on trays and arranged on the altar in front of the medium, and are presented to the spirits when they possess the medium. After it has been offered to the spirit, it is distributed to the devotees. These are paid for by the medium or by the person who is sponsoring the ritual. This *lộc* is more varied than in most other religious practices. *Lộc* in the form of food, such as fruit, cookies, bags of monosodium glutamate, cucumbers, chilli peppers, and drinks like beer, alcohol, tea and soft drinks, is given out along with non-edible *lộc* such as combs and mirrors, notebooks and pens, towels and handkerchiefs, cigarettes and betel (areca) nuts.

17 For example, Đoàn Lâm (1999); Durand (1959); Ngọ Đức Thịnh (1996a, 1999), Nguyễn Minh San et al. (1999); Simon and Simon-Barouh (1973, 1996).
The other offerings come directly from the devotees who sit around the dais, to the back and the sides of the medium. These are offered to particular spirits in a practice called xin lộc, meaning to ask or beg for lộc. Money is the most usual form, and the offerings are usually made with new, crisp bills of small denominations. They are arranged in a fan pattern on a plate and are passed up to the possessing spirit. The spirit then takes the plate and throws two coins (called ấm đường, the Vietnamese for yin and yang) to see whether they are accepted, or not, by the spirit. If it is not accepted, then the plate is passed back to the person who offered. If it is accepted, some of the money from the plate is taken by the spirit and some money that is in a pile on the altar is put back on to the plate and given to the person who made the offering. Thus, there is an exchange of money. The money accepted is transformed into lộc, not only through contact with the spirit, but also from the spirit’s will to bless his or her devotees.

The distribution of lộc (phát lộc) is not uniform in the lエン dòng. Variations occur according to the spirit and the recipient. The people that play the largest role in the lエン dòng receive more than the rest. The four helpers that attend the spirits, and the musicians who provide accompaniment receive the most lộc. The musicians, who entertain the spirits and compliment them through their songs, probably receive the most. The lộc they receive is payment for their performance at the lエン dòng. The music comprises hymns for each of the incarnations. While these are fairly standardised, they include opportunities for improvisation, which focus on flattering the spirit. The improvised statements only last a line or two, after which the singer reverts to the formal hymn which is repeated a few times during the course of that spirit’s incarnation. Some of the spirits, in the body of the medium, sit and listen to the music, swaying back and forth, or breaking out in laughter when the singer is successful.

18 Xin means to 'beg' in most contexts. It is more in the sense of to 'beg your pardon' (xin lỗi), although it can also be used in the sense of to 'beg for food' (xin ăn). However, xin is probably best understood as being on the more polite side of 'to ask', as in 'to ask for permission' (xin phép), to 'look/ask for a job' (xin việc) or 'to ask for leave' (xin nghỉ. Placed at the beginning of a phrase, it becomes more of a polite particle, and it is in this sense that it is put before 'thank you' (xin cảm ơn) when the speaker wishes to stress respect to the listener(s).

19 Simon and Simon-Barouh (1973), Ngô Đức Thịnh (1992, 1996b), and Durand (1959) give examples of some of the hymns, but they appear to vary by region and by performance.
whom I knew well, frequently sits and cries when listening to a sad recounting of the spirit's life. If the musician is successful in pleasing the spirit with flattery, the spirit (through the medium) will give the musicians extra money, sometimes several times in the one performance. However, the musicians, regardless of their success, receive lôc from every incarnation.20

The musicians, helpers and sponsors all receive lôc directly, whereas the crowd of devotees receive lôc (both in the form of money and other objects), as a group, being distributed by a helper rather than given directly from the medium. I was frequently given lôc directly by the medium, more because of my novelty status than for any other reason, I suspect. One medium that I went to frequently told me that lôc given to a person directly from a spirit (through the medium), is special and should not be distributed to others. Regular lôc, she said, could be given out to others, but if one gave away lôc that was directly intended for that person, then they would lose their luck/happiness. There is an immediacy that bridges the gap between the numinous and the supplicants that exists in lôc given by the spirits in a lê̂n dông as opposed to lôc which is produced through offerings at pagodas. For this reason, this kind of lôc is seen as especially potent.

Finally, if the ritual has been sponsored, the sponsor will receive a portion of lôc about equal to the amount given to the helpers and musicians. Rituals are sponsored by people who feel they are having a streak of bad luck. This bad luck is thought to be primarily because of fate. A person who is having inordinately bad luck may be said to be nâng cân, or 'heavy fated' because of events that took place in a past life. Depending on the gravity of their situation, several things may be done. Someone may pay a medium to put an incense bowl in his/her shrine. Others may be charged by the spirits with attending rituals regularly, or as being helpers. Still more serious, the person may be required to perform a ritual called mò phù, which means to open a palace, in which they sponsor the ritual and take the place of the spirit medium in order to incarnate a few of the spirits.21 Mediums are individuals whose fates are so heavy that they have been called by the

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20 The number of incarnations vary by session, but the number is usually between ten and twenty.

21 It is generally thought that it takes practice before people are able to incarnate the spirits. So, someone who is doing it once will be doing little more than going through the motions. This in itself appears to be thought of as beneficial.
spirits to provide for them a vessel for incarnation on a permanent basis.

The other difference in the distribution of lộc in lền dòng is based on the importance of the spirit. The spirits incarnate in order of importance, with the highest in stature arriving first. These highest level spirits are usually mandarins or kings (quán hoàng), and only after they are incarnated does the lền dòng take on a lighter atmosphere. The highest level spirits are more lofty and dignified and the lộc that they give reflects this. They only distribute selectively to the most important players in the lền dòng (the musicians, the helpers, the sponsor, and often me). Furthermore, they only give money in higher denominations. As the ritual continues, the spirits become more frivolous and the general atmosphere of the crowd becomes less serious. By the time of the last incarnation, a child prince (Cậu Bé – literally Young Uncle [mother’s younger brother]), everyone is laughing. The young prince plays with the crowd, dancing, joking and clowning. At one lền dòng the young prince had a drinking contest with one of the helpers. The lộc distributed reflects this gradual change in atmosphere. By the end, the money given is of small denominations, but there is more of it. Frequently the medium will throw the money and the crowd will frantically grab at it as the bills flutter through the air, trying to get as much as they can, laughing and tumbling over one another in their attempts. Cookies and beverages start to be passed out as lộc. One bà dòng threw cucumbers into the air, and though I was able to duck in time, others were not so lucky and were hit by a barrage of flying vegetables.

In lền dòng there are two cross-cutting principles in the distribution of lộc. The first relates to the amount given to individuals. This largely has to do with the level of involvement and status in the ritual. Thus, the helpers, the musicians, and the sponsors received the most, and I, as someone out of the ordinary, was always given much more than the regular devotees in the crowd. The second principle relates to the stature and personality of the spirit that is incarnated. The first, most important figures usually gave lộc to fewer individuals, and frequently gave nothing at all to the crowd. However, what they gave was usually only money, and in larger denominations than the money given out by lesser spirits.

The spirits give gifts of lộc, which represent the reciprocity of devotional attachment to those spirits. The form of the lộc, whether money, fruit, a half finished cigarette or a hand towel, made little difference to the importance it was accorded. Receiving larger
denominations of bills was not seen as better. Quantity, however, was important. When lộc was thrown into the air people would scramble to get as much of it as possible. Because of the association of lộc with luck and happiness, there was a lot of emotion associated with its reception. People did not solemnly accept it. There was always happiness and gratitude on the part of the receiver, though expressed more formally with the more important spirits.

Lộc on the First and Fifteenth of the Lunar Month

The most common form of lộc, as well as the most usual form of religious practice, is associated with the offerings given on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month, which I described at the beginning of this chapter. It is a practice which I have never seen other men perform. It involves the presenting of offerings to the buddhas or gods – depending on whether you are in a pagoda (chùa) or in a temple (đền). These offerings are then reclaimed as ‘gifts from the gods’, or more practically as talismans, being objects that have the ability to bring luck or happiness to the person who possesses or consumes them. Obtaining the spiritually charged object, referred to as lộc, (as in the lộc of lên dông, or the lộc that is offered at any altar – for gods, spirits, buddhas, ghosts or ancestors), seen to be the material manifestation of supernatural support in this world.

The procedure is:

- On the first and fifteenth of the lunar month women go to a pagoda (chùa) or a temple (đền) with offerings of fruit and other edible items, incense sticks, real money and immolative money (vàng mã).
- The offerings are arranged on the trays provided by the pagoda or temple.
- The trays are then put on the main altars: the main altar for the buddhas; the altar for the mother goddess(es) (thánh mâu); and on the altars of various (non-Buddhist) saints/spirits.
- Incense is put in the incense bowls found in the centre of every altar, and prayers are made. These prayers are almost always wishes for worldly benefit to oneself and one’s immediate family: to pass an exam, to have a son, for children to be married, for success in business or a cure for an illness of a loved one.
• After about five minutes, which is supposed to be the time it takes for the supplicant's incense to burn out, the person thanks the buddhas/spirits, and retrieves the money and edible items.

• The spirit money is taken to the furnace and carefully burned, making sure that it is done completely; otherwise it will not be fully efficacious.

It is not until leaving the pagoda with the lộc that the most important part of the practice takes place: the distribution of lộc (phất lộc). This practice often begins at the pagoda. Women share a little bit of their lộc with the old woman by the entrance and in return are given some by her. She has essentially been exchanging lộc all day. The logic of this practice was explained to me as being a way of improving merit through the act of giving.

The concept of lộc is pervasive and crosscuts the different religious expressions that are found in northern Vietnam. All instances of lộc contain the following elements: (1) lộc is something that is given, either from the gods/buddhas to a devotee, from one person to another, or both; (2) attached to lộc is a hope of happiness for the future, through prosperity, good fortune and immanent benefit (i.e. lộc is never regarded as bringing transcendent, spiritual or soteriological benefit); and (3) there is always sentiment attached to the material object, either originating from a supernatural being or from a human giver. Lộc is part of a larger social process of reciprocity and relationship construction, of which the building of emotional linkages is very important – a critical point which will receive more discussion below.

Lộc and the practices associated with it are not easily defined. While 'talisman' in some instances might be the closest translation, there are serious drawbacks to this definition. The effect of lộc is that it always brings happiness in the form of good fortune, most commonly framed in terms of wealth. However, a definition which centres on this function does not address the relationships and feelings intrinsic to the object. The relationship that lộc expresses is in some cases between individuals, for instance between family members, but it can be understood more broadly to include the relationships between the supernatural and the recipient. In all cases
Liệt is spoken of as a gift that binds relations.22 Relationships with the supernatural in Vietnam are considered to involve the same process of reciprocity, emotion and obligation as human relationships. In much the same manner as outlined by A. Wolf for Taiwan (1978), devotion to the supernatural in Vietnam depends highly on the gods' continued ability to fulfil the wishes of their supplicants. In this light, Liệt can be understood as a material representation of the bond between two agents, supernatural or otherwise.

While Liệt can be described as a gift from the gods, such a definition does not take into account the emotional content Liệt holds. Nor does it illustrate how Liệt has the meaning that Durand (1959) gives; as a talisman that people believe will help to tip the balance of luck in their favour and thereby aid them in their daily lives. Finally, none of the descriptions or definitions presented so far uncover the gendered practices that surround Liệt.

THE COSMOGONIC MECHANICS OF LIỆT

World Affirmation

Vietnamese religion, in ways similar to Chinese religion, is at its core world-affirming rather than world-negating. This general supposition applies by extension to Buddhism as it is practised by the majority in Hanoi. Vietnamese see the world and good fortune as things to be embraced instead of essentially bad or corrupt that must be shunned.

Rarely would anyone describe the goal of Buddhism in terms of either Nirvana or of attaining the Pure Land. More often, people would describe the central aim of Buddhism in moral terms, saying that Buddhism was meant to teach us how to act correctly. Some people described it to me as having compassion (cô tâm). However, another dominant theme in explanations of the purpose of Buddhist practice was that of bringing good luck and wealth to the practitioners and their families.

Material wealth, luck, and happiness are seen at one level as virtually synonymous. The Vietnamese world view is diametrically opposed to asceticism or worldly asceticism. Weber (1948 [1930])

employs this term to describe Protestantism, where the individual is to act in the world, but where money, while a sign of being God’s chosen, should not be ostentatious sought or displayed. By contrast, wealth in Vietnam, as in China, is a clear sign of supernatural favour, and striving for wealth has no negative meaning. Gates description of China is equally true for Vietnam:

Westerners encountering Chinese culture for the first time are often struck by Chinese attitudes toward money. In the first stages of culture shock, one concludes that anything can be bought and sold, that money and its manipulation are the prime topics of conversation, and that money is an un tarnished and absolute good... In the recent words of Deng Xiaoping, ‘To get rich is glorious’ (1987:262).

It is a goal that is openly and unabashedly pursued. Wealth is seen as virtually synonymous with happiness. While this world view was disparaged by the Communist Party from the 1950s to the late 1980s, there has been a reversal, and everyone I spoke with (rich and poor, rural and urban) spoke of wealth in this way. Religion is seen as a legitimate avenue for the pursuit of wealth. It is very often the major reason for going to pagodas, for only with the blessing of the buddhas, gods and ancestors can this wealth – and by extension, happiness – be reached. Conversely, good fortune and material wealth are a sign of supernatural blessing, much as Weber describes of the Protestant view towards worldly success being a sign that they are God’s chosen.23

The contrast with doctrinal Buddhism is notable, where everything in the world is illusory and insubstantial, and attachment to it is the cause for the eternal condition of all sentient beings: suffering. However, a transformation that makes Buddhism world affirming rather than world negating is not isolated to Vietnam. In Burma, Spiro (1982) notes that there are different levels of Buddhism, each with specific goals. He identifies four types of Buddhism: Khammatic Buddhism which holds the improvement of one’s future rebirths as the goal of Buddhist practice; Nibbanic Buddhism which seeks escape from the cycle of rebirths, and is closest to doctrinal Buddhist teachings; Apotropaic Buddhism which uses Buddhism as a form of magic; and finally, Esoteric Buddhism, which ‘represents a syncretism of occult beliefs... with an overlay of Buddhist doctrines, with which, in order to legitimize them, they are loosely integrated’

23 Kendall (1996) describes much the same processes in Korea.
(Spiro 1982:162). While the ideal types he uses are too rigid (reminiscent of Geertz’ approach in *The Religion of Java* [1976]), the general message – that there are a number of levels of Buddhist understanding and practice – is well taken. While the goal of world renunciation is maintained as the ideal, worldly success comes in a close second, and is a more appropriate goal for the vast majority of people. The dichotomy of this world/other world can be overemphasised, and it is erroneous to understand Buddhism as being singularly occupied with the later. Tambiah, for example, points out that Buddhist doctrine is concerned with the problem of death and that Buddhist monasticism signifies a withdrawal from this world. However, this is contrasted by the process of merit-making, which is the religious practice of many of his informants in Thailand, and is
aimed at hastening rebirth and to securing the best rebirth possible (Tambiah 1970:55). While focussed on the problem of death, the immediate goals are still aimed at this world.

Faith

A second issue that comes from the discussion of \( l\) is the importance of faith. It is particularly striking that many participants in practices associated with \( l\) were not entirely convinced of their efficacy, but did it 'just in case'. Furthermore, people did not necessarily link the potency of \( l\) with the faith of the practitioner (or consumer of \( l\)). Thus, one woman returned home with the fruits of her offerings (\( l\)) and gave them to her family. When I asked her whether she thought that \( l\) would have a positive (supernatural) effect, even if her family did not believe in its efficacy, she replied that \( l\) itself has supernatural power, and has no relation to whether people believe or not.

Faith is not conceived as a binary opposition of belief and disbelief. Those who embark on pilgrimages and make offerings quite often claim that they do not fully believe that their wishes would come true. Instead, they often explain their motives by stressing the possibility that it may be true. Faith, in these instances, is often explained in terms of percentages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Me</th>
<th>Do you think that making offerings on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month will help you in your life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young Man</td>
<td>I am not sure. I believe fifty percent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Do you go to pagodas to make offerings then?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Man</td>
<td>Sometimes. When I have time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>If you only believe fifty percent, why do you bother to go?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Man</td>
<td>Just to be sure. It can't hurt [translation mine, see Appendix 1:4.1].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than saying that they do, or do not believe, many people tend to prefer saying something like ‘I believe in Buddhism sixty per cent’. Of course there were many who described themselves as fully devoted,
but what is significant for this discussion is that the efficacy of practice does not pivot on faith.

Supernatural help does not pivot on faith but on performance. This means that men whose gender projects are antithetical to religious practice can take part in beneficial religious activity while maintaining the scepticism which is important for their identity. Thus, in the example of the director of a company who paid for offerings twice a month (mentioned in Chapter Three), he mocked the practice but was ‘willing to go along’. One of the vice-directors who had his doubts about the efficacy of the practice made a stronger case to me, saying that it certainly did not hurt to make the offerings, and if it did help, then it is best to make the offerings. Besides, twice a month it offered an excuse to sit around all afternoon and eat fruit.

Although the above discussion may appear somewhat peripheral to the subject of Lọc, this world-view is an essential precondition for the religious practices that surround it. The common belief by the majority of people who participate in the making of offerings and wishes is that benefit will be accrued, regardless of: (1) your faith in the efficacy of this action; and (2) other actions that are done outside of the pagoda, because doing immoral things will not nullify religious efforts and will merely be balanced against one another. As Miss Thao said to me, as long as the balance remains on the positive side, one will not be punished too severely in hell (though there remains some residual debt that must be paid off through punishment in hell regardless of what you do to counter the immoral acts). Lọc, as the focal point of a particular kind of religious practice, manifests the Malinowskian idea that there is a way to reduce the element of chance in life, and that the supernatural can be enlisted to this end.

Transferability of Merit

A fundamental implication of the practices associated with Lọc is that good fortune/happiness is transferable. It is believed that the potency of Lọc is given to another along with the object. The degree to which this transferability is believed to take place changes from person to person. While some say that making the offerings itself will give merit, in most instances people feel that it is the object itself, as a talisman, that has the power to affect one’s life. Lọc that is produced through making offerings is seen as specially designed to pass on to others, but it is usually given to people with whom one shares a close relationship.
Plate 32: Playing the Odds: Lottery Tickets at the Temple
(quan hệ) and about whom one has feelings (tình cảm) – close friends and especially family. Thus, distributing lộc (phát lộc) is felt by many to be an act of self-sacrifice and symbolic of a close relationship.

As I mentioned earlier, there are some instances in which people believe that you can lose your good fortune by indiscriminate distribution of lộc. Thus, if lộc at a lên đồng has been given directly and specifically to you by the spirit, then to give this lộc to someone else means that you will lose your good fortune. Similarly, I was told by one woman that if you give money or lộc to a beggar at a pagoda after you have made your offerings you will lose your good fortune.

Doctrinal Buddhism places a strong emphasis on giving as one of the few actions open to the laity to improve their chances for a good rebirth. In Theravada countries the accumulation of merit through making donations is central to Buddhist lay practice as a way to influence one’s future rebirths. Giving gifts to the Sangha is an important, if not crucial, part of lay Buddhist practice in the Theravada tradition (Spiro 1982:92-113). In the Mahayana tradition merit making through the giving of gifts is not as important, partly due to the less central role of the Sangha. Nonetheless, the act of giving is still regarded as a moral act. By giving lộc to the old woman at the entrance karmic merit is increased.

However, the process is distinctly different in Vietnam than in Theravadin countries. Tambiah describes merit making for Thailand as having eschatological consequences of ‘immunizing the consequences of death and ensuring a prosperous rebirth’, while at the same time having the effect in this life of ‘producing a happy and virtuous state of mind’ (1970:53-54). In Vietnam, it is thought to have

24 Presumably this view is not shared by all, or there would be no beggars at Quán Sư Pagoda and other famous pagodas.

25 Falk has made the case that one of the reasons that the order of Buddhist nuns died out in India was directly related to donations. There is a feeling that the merit you accrue is proportional to the spiritual level of the person to whom you make donations. Therefore, because of a pre-existing gender bias, monks rather than nuns received the greatest portion of donations (Falk 1989:157-158). This belief also leads to contemporary quasi-monastic groups of women living in a constant state of poverty and marginality in Theravada countries of Southeast Asia today; for example, in Thailand see Keyes [1984:229]).

26 Donations to the Sangha (or rather to pagodas) are also made, which in some ways is closer to Theravada practice. In Hanoi, however, it is not stressed as being centrally important. Furthermore, the connection between individual monastics and devotees is distanced because there are donation boxes in which people make contributions, rather than giving directly to a monk. Furthermore, there is no perception that the merit accrued is relative to the status of the person to whom the offering is made. Thus, it is not felt that giving money at a pagoda of nuns is substantially different than giving to a monk’s pagoda.
these effects, but at the same time, it is believed that the merit accrued through making offerings and possessing lộc will influence this life as well. Therefore lộc is removed from the abstraction of rebirth and has a direct effect on relationships and life circumstances on a day-to-day basis.

Among the majority of people with whom I spoke, the effects of karma and merit are seen as being both immediate and carrying over to the next life. There is a belief that we are ultimately responsible for our actions. Thus, if we have done anything immoral, it will lead to a penalty being exacted from us in hell as well as influencing our future rebirth. There is also the belief that doing something immoral or exemplary will have immediate repercussions. For example, it is commonly held that going to a pagoda to make offerings on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month will have a number of good effects. The first is that by performing such a moral act, you will offset some of the bad things that you have done when it comes time to be judged in hell. The second repercussion is that by making offerings there will be an immediate reward. The most common presupposition is that this action will bring one’s family happiness (phúc) and good fortune (lộc). Conversely, the main explanations for misfortune are leading an evil life or failing to take care of one’s ancestors properly.

In Thailand, Tambiah also makes the point that merit is transferable. This point is critical, so I shall quote him at length:

From the doctrinal point of view the quest for salvation is a strictly individualistic pursuit. In the village context, merit-making as the principal religious activity is certainly seen as having consequences for individuals. But the social unit engaging in merit-making need not be individual – it may be a family, a household or a kin grouping, or even the entire village. Individuals then may act as representatives of other individuals or groups, or may make merit on behalf of another person or other persons, although part of the merit accrues to the actors themselves. Thus transfer of merit is not only thought possible, but is also highly institutionalised (1970:54).

The importance of this will be made clearer in the following section.

**PHÁT LỘC AS WOMEN’S PRACTICE**

Only women make offerings and distribute lộc. Old and young women make these offerings in a similar way. What differs between young and old women is that young women will do this to the virtual exclusion of
other practices, whereas for older women it is often only part of a more involved regime. Men never make offerings at pagodas or temples except in the form of incense sticks, where \( \textit{loc} \) is not involved. This simplest of offerings constitutes the absolute minimum requirement when visiting a sacred site and is the foundational practice upon which the other offerings that constitute \( \textit{loc} \) are elaborated.

There is a strong link between religious practice and women’s role as care-givers in the family. Many of my informants explained that one of the principal reasons they go to pagodas is to bring good fortune and happiness to their family. When something goes wrong, women usually try to redress the problem by religious means as well as by more mundane efforts. The next section will look at the connections between women’s involvement in making offerings, and the experience of being a woman in Hanoi. These connections, I suggest, partially explain why women are perceived of as being more religious than men, and secondly, why they participate in religious activity to a greater extent. I offer two explanations. The first is related to an image of femininity and the relation that young women have to this image. It draws heavily on Connell’s (1991 [1987]; 1995) ideas of cathexis – the power that sexual emotion in adult relations plays in exerting pressure for conformity to a gender norm – as being an important structure of gender inequality. The second point centres on women’s roles as creator of the ‘happy family’ and as family care­giver. Thus, the two points could be said to relate to life-cycles: the first to the experiences of women before marriage, and the second to women after marriage. The second category spans the time from when a woman is first married and has children and extends to when they are old and have grandchildren or great-grandchildren. While there may be differences in the amount of power that an old woman has compared to a younger married woman, their function in the family is perceived as remaining largely the same. Older women are still principally concerned with care for the family, but that care extends down to include grandchildren and great grandchildren. They do, however often spend more time away from home, and they often deliberately seek new social outlets when children are grown up. Pagoda activities and an increase in religious practice is one of the most common, and will be discussed further in the next chapter.
Plate 33: A Young Man Accompanies His Girlfriend to Make Offerings
Many young women make offerings; in fact, it is their major form of religious practice and rarely will they take part in sutra recitals. This is partly because most young women do not have the free time to devote to lengthy sessions at the pagoda, but also relates to the perception of certain activities as ‘being for old women’.

Given that young men also have their share of troubles and anxieties, and one need not have complete faith in order to be assured that offerings will be efficacious, why are young men largely not involved in making offerings? Making offerings is a practice that attracts devout young women, but it also attracts many who do not consider themselves Buddhists or religious. One young woman told me, ‘I don’t really believe, but if I go and make offerings on the first and fifteenth, after I feel happy and comfortable and I don’t worry as much’.

In their discussions with me, young men in Hanoi generally equated all religious practice with superstition. Minh, the sceptical young man I introduced at the beginning of Chapter One, reacted to the subject of religion with typical humour. On one occasion I described to him my recent experience with a spirit medium at a séance. The medium had received the spirit of a young boy who giggled and liked to eat candy. I played for Minh a section of a recording in which the medium spoke in ‘baby-talk’. Minh replied with a reference to the state’s prohibition of such activities: ‘and if the police showed up, I bet the ghost would run faster than a motorcycle!’ This sort of humour was a typical reaction among young men who wished to assume a sceptical air. A remark by a young director of a private company echoed Minh’s humour but added a gender dimension: ‘if a man goes to a pagoda to pray, he might as well wear a skirt!’. These expressions were translated into a general avoidance by most men (especially young men) of any religious practice.

Most people identified Buddhist practice with making offerings. For people who did not participate more fully in the ritual life of pagodas, there was little understanding of what Buddhist practice or philosophy entailed. The perception held by many was that the sole reason for going to a pagoda and making offerings was to wish for something. It is exactly this sort of practice that is lampooned in the media in association with anti-superstition discourses. The fact that
young men do not generally make offerings and tend to ridicule religion as superstition can be seen partly as a response to these discourses, which are an intrinsic part of the state diatribes on religion and superstition. It is not simply a matter of men accepting state rhetoric and women not accepting it (though this is true at one level); state discourses of religion cannot be separated from those of gender. It would suggest that there is something about the way that masculinity and femininity are constructed which directs these different practices. Religious practice, in other words, is an expression of femininity.

Many people believe that going to a pagoda for supernatural assistance is an act of weakness (yêu duơï). The common view is that women are weak and need others to rely on. This is commonly phrased in ways that are reminiscent of the Three Submissions, where on a worldly level women rely on fathers, husbands and sons. The fact that it is largely rhetorical, and that many men rely heavily on the income from their wives and on their being taken care of by women, does not diminish the effect that it has on the way femininity and masculinity are phrased. This feeling of weakness and a need to rely on others must be understood as part of the complex of emphasised femininity which does not end in profane social relations, but extends to relationships between themselves and the supernatural. This was often expressed when I asked why women went to pagodas more frequently than men:

Women's Responses:

- Because women wish so many things but don't know how to do anything [else] to carry out those desires (20 year old female student).
- Because women have more time and are weaker than men (52 year old housewife).
- Because they are women, they have to ask for help to give health and wealth to them (81 year old housewife).

Men's Responses:

- They are easily influenced by others and don't believe in themselves (35 year old male driver).
- Women are weak and they don't believe in themselves (50 year old retired man).
• Because their character is to believe in themselves less than men (58 year old male white-collar worker) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:4.2].

While responses referred to women needing to seek external help for their worldly endeavours, there is one substantial difference between the responses of men and women. Women tended to express an impotence in dealing with their responsibilities, stressing the circumstance of being a woman. However, men tended to highlight an essentialising characteristic of women, saying that their weakness caused them to search for the resolution of problems in the supernatural.

Both forms of explanation do not deny the ontological existence of supernatural power. The issue of whether the buddhas actually exist is irrelevant, for whether or not the buddhas can help you, the act of seeking assistance from the supernatural is regarded as an appropriate response for women. This has different ramifications for masculinity than for femininity.

For men, religious practice (broadly conceived of as seeking supernatural assistance) is a sign of weakness; and, by extension, is a feminine activity since masculinity is construed as being self-reliant (tj'l ljy) and self-confident (tj't tjn). Because of these associations, many young men I spoke with connected making offerings with femininity.

On the other hand, women feel that seeking supernatural help is 'natural', since they define themselves as weak, delicate and reliant on others. At an interpersonal level, I never heard men ridicule women for going to pagodas and making wishes. Though they themselves may not believe in it, it is seen as something that women do. Conversely, men sometimes ridicule other men who make offerings at pagodas and display a belief in the supernatural. Taking it a step further, weakness (and therefore femininity) is a quality that is considered attractive; strong women find it difficult to find marriage partners.

The act of religious participation can therefore be seen as an active form of gender performance, and is tied in with processes related to structures of cathexis. As women, they need divine assistance because they are weak, and by doing so, they are showing that they are feminine and therefore more desirable. They are literally
'playing the woman'.

There are few venues appropriate for young women to visit because they are seen as weak and vulnerable. Pagodas are one of the few places considered legitimate destinations, although going alone is still regarded as inappropriate.

Although young women have other causes for anxiety, such as passing exams and getting a good job, marriage and children are priorities with associated anxieties felt more acutely than those from other pressures. One might ask why it is that religiosity is considered to be an appropriate response to this anxiety for women but not for men? To begin with, there is an age imperative for women, but not for men. Young men have other worries, but most would find going out for a beer and getting drunk a more acceptable response to anxiety than going to a pagoda to pray for help. For women, visiting pagodas when they have troubles is seen as an appropriate response. Many told me that they like to go to pagodas when they feel stressed because the surroundings calm them and they feel less worried if they think they will receive help from the buddhas. Furthermore, young women are expected to act in this way. I asked many people the question, 'if you see a young woman in a pagoda praying, what do you think she is wishing for?' The response by almost all, both male and female, was that she was wishing for a boyfriend or marriage.

Gifts, Sentiment and \( L\&c \)

\( L\&c \) is not usually kept, but is passed on to others. In most cases, offerings are brought home and distributed to members of the family. Because it is always women who do this, it is important to look at the distribution of \( L\&c \) in connection with women's perceived roles within the family.

The intent of women's religious practices, especially those concerning \( L\&c \), are often described by both men and women, practising and non-practising, as being family-focused. A young mother once told me that she went to pagodas in order to pass merit to her children. I heard similar explanations from women who had families, who see their religious practice as an extension of their role as family care-givers. Thus, other responses to the question of why women go to pagodas more than men were:

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27 This is in reference to a recent book entitled Playing the Man (Biber, Sear & Trudinger 1999).
• Because women are more concerned about the family than men (16 year old female student).
• Because they care about the family (16 year old female student).
• Because in Vietnam women are the ones who have the main responsibility for devoting themselves to the family, they always want everything good to come to the family (62 year old housewife).
• Because women care and are more concerned, they want to bring about good things for the family (44 year old female accountant).
• Because women like to do charitable work more [than men]. (45 year old female teacher).
• Because in the family women are the ones who worry about the family more than men (25 year old male student) [translation mine, see Appendix 1:4.3].

When I asked Miss Thào, the young woman in Chapter One who describes herself as superstitious, what she wishes for when she makes offerings at a pagoda she said:

[I wish for] a lot of things. Not for money or those kinds of things, but... starting from the top of the list: for my [dead] grandmother, for my parents, then my sister, brother and his child, and finally, for me.

The transferability of merit, along with the notion that one does not have to believe in lộc for the practice to be efficacious, means that women can go to the pagoda for the entire family. It does not depend on whether they themselves believe in the efficacy of lộc. Lộc serves as a symbol of this transfer of women’s production of merit to the family.

Women conceive of this process in terms of their overall role as care-givers. To give lộc means that the giver cares about the receiver and wishes them good fortune. At the heart of this process is the emotional presuppositions that underlie relationships in Vietnam. As such, a discussion of gift giving practices and the reproduction and maintenance of certain relationships through reciprocal obligation is useful for understanding the importance of distributing lộc as a social practice.

The practices associated with lộc can be seen as being part of a larger process by which women create feeling in the family and display the self-sacrifice which they undergo. Vietnamese gift giving is important
to the production of relationships in very much the same way as it is in China, about which Kipnis writes:

Perhaps more directly than any other method, gift giving constituted *guanxi* [relationships, connections]; by giving gifts, villagers managed (created and re-created) relationships. Since *guanxi* were simultaneously matters of material exchange and human feelings, material exchange of gifts directly generated *ganqing* [feelings] and *guanxi* [relationship]. The Chinese term *zuo ge renqing* illustrates this implication. Literally it means ‘to make human feeling,’ but in common use it refers to giving a gift or doing a favor, or more specifically, giving a gift or favor for the purpose of establishing or improving *guanxi*. In gift giving, the relation between *ganqing* and *guanxi* worked as a linking force between past, present, and future. *Ganqing*, the feeling of the present, elicited memories of relationships past and begat *guanxi*, the material obligation for future exchange (Kipnis 1997:58).

The concepts and terminology associated with relationships are essentially the same in Vietnam. *Guanxi* (relationship) is *quan hệ* in Vietnamese and is used in a similar way. Thus, the sentence ‘we have not lived as man and wife for more than ten years,’ would be translated as using the word *quan hệ* to denote relationship (Bui 1993:1101).28 The Vietnamese word for emotion, *tinh cảm*, is etymologically related to the Chinese *ganqing* and its use is identical. *Tinh cảm* (feelings, emotion) is regarded as being the basis of any relationship.29 It ‘denotes a relationship of mutual respect and obligation that attenuates any social asymmetries which exist between parties in the relationship’ (Malarney 1993:187).

Emotions or feelings are understood to be one of the foundations of all relationships, especially between members of a family. While the patrilineal structures are formal, they are crosscut by emotional bonds denoted by the concept of *tinh cảm*. M. Wolf’s description of the Taiwanese uterine family emphasises how emotion is the fundamental principle by which mothers bind their children to them, creating a different sort of family than that denoted by the patriarchy.

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28 ‘chúng tôi không có quan hệ vợ chồng từ hơn mười năm nay’ (Bùi 1993:1101).
29 When my mother came to Vietnam to meet my new wife and her family, I told the custodian at Chua Quan Su. He asked me where she was staying, and I replied that she was staying in a hotel near my house. He then asked me why she was not staying with my in-laws. I answered his question by pointing out that her family lived in Gia Lam—about a twenty-five minute motorcycle ride out of Hanoi and it would be inconvenient. I followed up his question with one of my own: ‘Why should she stay with my in-laws?’ He replied simply: ‘tinh cảm’. The emotion, or feeling that would be generated by my mother staying at my in-laws’ house, would in effect be the basis for a relationship.
The concept of emotion is very important and is brought to the fore when discussing relationships in Vietnam. Thus, when I was questioning the man in Chapter One about his disappointing son, who would rarely visit and almost never eat with the family, he expressed it to me in terms of a lack of emotion. In Vietnam saying someone is unfilial (bất hiếu) is perhaps one of the worst things that can be said, for filial piety (hiếu) and concern for one’s family are fundamental obligations.

A short play at the Hanoi Youth Club clearly expressed the value of sentiment. A wealthy young urban couple were about to get married. The mother and sister of the man, both country bumpkins (nha quê), decided to come to the big city to attend the wedding. Unfortunately there were complications, the first and biggest being that the man had hidden his rural background from his wife by saying that his mother was dead. When his mother turned up pregnant, with dirty country clothes, exhibiting all of the manners and smells of the farm (symbolised by the live chicken his mother and sister brought with them as a wedding gift), the son and bride-to-be were horrified. In a misguided effort to make things right, he tried to pay them off to go back to the country, taking with them all evidence of his rural background, of which he was very ashamed. The reaction of the young urban woman to the whole affair was enlightening. At first she was shocked and more than a little put off by the smell and sight of her future husband’s family. However, as she witnessed her lover’s attempts to get rid of his family she became horrified. Finally, she decided to call off the wedding because she felt that if he could treat his mother and sister in that way (even if they did stink), he might some day do the same thing to her. In the end the situation was rectified and the mother and prospective daughter-in-law joined together in threatening the son/husband that if he made his wife pregnant too often they would chop off his penis. Thus the play had two didactic messages: the traditional message stressing the importance of emotional bonds within the family and a second message grounded in contemporary propaganda concerning family planning.

Although this story was a comedy, it expressed the importance of loyalty to the family in Vietnamese society. For children, this responsibility and attachment to the family is summed up in the concept of hiếu, or filial piety. Children are expected to feel a great

30 'không có tình cảm với gia đình'.
debt to their parents and ancestors. This feeling becomes part of a Vietnamese habitus, reflected most obviously in language. Pronouns and terms of address, dealt with thoroughly by Luong (1990), differentiate the relative positions of individuals in each linguistic interaction. Polite particles placed at the beginning and end of replies to people of higher status do much the same thing. When walking, one should follow older people. When you eat, you should invite your elders to eat before you start. Ties with the natal family, are supposed to override marital ties, especially for men (Pham V.B. 1999:169).

While hiếu is the term for filial piety, it is the concept of ơn that catalyses this virtue. Ơn is a word that is pervasive in the language of relationships in Vietnam, and is roughly equivalent to the English word ‘favour’. It signifies a latent obligation or debt that is created through person X doing a favour for person Y. It is mutually recognised, though perhaps unspoken, that the debt will continue to exist until fulfilled. Làm ơn, literally, ‘to do a favour’, is used the same way as ‘excuse me’ or ‘pardon me’ when approaching a stranger for a request. Another place where Ơn is in common use is in the term biết ơn, which literally means ‘to know ơn’, or be grateful. The common expression for ‘Thank you’ (cảm ơn) literally means to ‘feel ơn’. Most important for the present discussion, however, is the notion of repaying a debt (trả ơn). Fundamentally, Ơn is a concept that denotes obligation, and it is through impending repayment that ties of relationships are maintained (Mauss 1969:31).

The value of Ơn lies in the imbalance that it represents in a relationship, for it is through this imbalance that relationships have ties and a reason to continue. On the other hand, the imbalance must not be too great for relationships that are not structurally fixed. To owe too much is oppressive but to owe a little builds emotion (tinh cảm) between individuals, and this is the cement of relationships (quận hệ). Owing too much Ơn to another person will lead to resentment or avoidance rather than to strengthening the bonds of a relationship:

If a woman is wealthier than her friends, and can afford to buy them gifts which they are unable to reciprocate in kind (though they may ruin themselves trying), she may be able to gain power. But she must be careful, because that power is felt very clearly and keenly, and easily turns to resentment. The artful woman is subtle about the favours and gifts she bestows, always giving just enough more than she receives to keep the balance of Ơn ever so slightly in her favour (O’Harrow 1995:174).
In Hanoi, I was surprised at how much time and effort went into calculating gifts, debts and favours, and how frequently they were invoked when relationships were strained. It is significant that at weddings the typical (and traditional) gift is money put inside an envelope on which is written a simple congratulatory message and the name of the giver. After the wedding is over, the family of the bride or groom record the names and the denominations of each gift so that they are aware of future obligations.

Whereas *dn* is central to most relationships, there is some change in the relationship between children and parents. The debt that a child owes his or her parents is impossible to repay. Even when parents have died, the child’s obligation continues in the form of ancestral worship, and will later be assumed by grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Ideally, the line continues past memory, so that an ancestor altar will hold the tablets of the past few generations, but the offerings that are made can be understood to be directed not only at the most recent in a particular and tangible way, but to all ancestors in the abstract.

Between children and parents, filial piety (*hieu*) can be understood to replace *dn* as the principle that binds the relationship. Nonetheless, though structurally assured by the primacy of filial piety, everyone I spoke with still emphasised the importance of emotion: a family can remain together because of obligation, but only through sentimental attachment will it be a ‘happy family’. Although unspoken by most, obligation still plays an important part in creating that emotion. This is especially the case between mothers and children, where the patriarchal structure is not emphasised in the same way, and therefore emotion becomes the more prominent cohesive force. A great deal of women’s energy is spent cultivating moral debts (*dn*) from their husbands and children. It is these debts which provide security for them. Jamieson writes:

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Family relationships were models for social organization. Both child-rearing practices and formal education emphasized learning to behave properly toward other family members. First and foremost, children were taught filial piety (*hieu*), to obey and respect and honor their parents. Children were made to feel keenly that they owed parents a moral debt (*on*) so immense as to be unpayable. A child was supposed to try to please his or her parents all the time and in every way, to increase their comfort, to accede to all their wishes, to fulfill their aspirations, to lighten their burden of work and of worry, and to comply with their wishes in all matters, great and small. From everyday life and from several thousand years of history, youngsters were bombarded with exemplars of children who ‘knew *hieu.*’ The parent-child relationship was at the very core of Vietnamese culture, dominating everything else (1993:16-17).
One of the ways that women create symbolic capital is by doing things that will create *àn* with their husbands and children. The way that women behave often accentuates this *àn* by being self-effacing to make clear the sacrifices they have made and the care they have given. Often the mother speaks with extreme melodrama and exaggeration of the suffering they have undergone for the child, thereby pointing out the great debt that is owed. This is used, for example, to chastise and instil feelings of shame in a child for his or her misbehaviour. The misbehaviour is turned into a direct affront to the mother and ties in all aspects of their intertwined lives.

A Vietnamese woman’s sense of martyrdom, when applied to daily life, can only be effective if it is played out on a commonly accepted playing-field where everybody understands the rules and signals. This field is the *system of moral debts and balances*, where public shame is the umpire for the game (O’Harrow 1995:173; emphasis in original).

I witnessed a good example of this when a mother scolded her twenty-year-old daughter for ‘doing something stupid’. The mother frequently mixes her l’s and n’s – a common vocalisation among northern rural women. The daughter’s frisky reply caused her mother to take a stance that accentuated the sacrifices she has made for the sake of her children, and by implication, the underlining the debt that the daughter owes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>You are stupid like a pig (nần)!</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>You said it wrong mother. You have to say ‘stupid like a pig (lợn)’ to be correct. Next time if you want to say that, say it softly. If you say it [softly] I can correct you. Saying it loud and wrong, everyone will laugh at you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Yes, I am stupid. I couldn’t go to study because I sacrificed my whole life for [my] husband and children so I don’t have time for friends and no time to go to study [translation mine, see Appendix 1:4.4].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

O’Harrow holds that it is partly through *àn* that women empower themselves within a power structure that subordinates women. As such, this behaviour cannot be understood as resistance, for it is working within the system to gain empowerment, like water on stone.
Though the structures enforce a gender inequality and relegate women to inferior positions, there is room for negotiation. There is in fact so much room that women can often end up in a position where they have a great deal of power within the family. However, it is not from an obstinate confrontation with the structure, but by working on the weak points.

The practice of making offerings and taking home lôc is part of the same process by which women build both emotion and debt in the family. It is meant to strengthen the bond of the mother with her children and the wife to her husband. It is done through a performance which reiterates the role that the woman plays as the family care-giver. At the same time, it underlines notions of an that are a pervasive part of Vietnamese social life. So, while the supernatural effect of lôc may or may not be believed by the recipients (and often there is an ambivalence expressed in percentages), the act of giving builds the emotional bonds of relationships regardless.

CONCLUSION

Because making offerings and more general religious participation is considered to bring luck to the family, the act of making offerings on the part of women is a demonstrative action that shows that they are taking care of their family and are therefore ‘good’ women. The offerings have been transformed by the buddhas or gods into something that brings good luck to those who consume it. The practice of making offerings and distributing the lôc afterwards to members of their families is a material manifestation of women’s spiritual care for their family.

I have asked many men how they feel about lôc. Invariably they respond that they are happy to receive lôc, although none have ever admitted to taking part in the giving of it (phát lôc). The fact that they are happy to receive it is not necessarily because they believe in its efficacy. Rather, they accept lôc gladly because, firstly, it is material evidence that the giver cares about them, and secondly, eating it can do no harm and is of possible spiritual help. Scepticism on the part of the husband towards the efficacy of the wife’s religious efforts does not provoke them to ridicule their wife’s actions, or refuse the lôc. This is because the attitude that most people in Vietnam assume towards religion is that if it isn’t true then it doesn’t matter but if it is
true than a little precaution won’t do any harm. The husband’s masculinity remains un-threatened by the consumption of \( \hat{\text{loc}} \). This view can only be held because of the way ‘faith’ is constructed in Vietnam, which is in turn tied to arguments of whether intent or action are more important; a debate that goes back to the origins of Buddhism and beyond.

\( \hat{\text{loc}} \) is an important part of Vietnamese religious practice. Making offerings is the most crosscutting form of practice within the spectrum of Vietnamese religion. Nonetheless, it is seen as the minimal Buddhist activity. In the next chapters we will look at Buddhist practices that form much more of the core of pagoda life: reciting sutras.
Plate 34: Selling Offerings at Quán Sư Pagoda
In the last chapter I described the activities that surround the objects called 跛. The making of offerings and wishes at pagodas is, as I have said, the main religious practice for many Buddhists. Building on the previous chapter, this one deals with the main Buddhist activity for those who are most devout: the practice of reciting sutras. I will look at some of the reasons why there is such a discrepancy between the number of women and men who take part in sutra recitals, and different gendered approaches to the practice of reciting sutras. I conceive these in ways that are driven by gendered expectations.

The people who recite sutras are typified by a self-conscious commitment – in time they devote to their Buddhist practice and in a firm conviction of the efficacy of these practices – that is not present in those who only engage in practices that surround 跛. It also requires a greater commitment to a specific activity, a specific group of people, and a specifically chosen pagoda. Attending the sutra recitals, which take place several times a month, is an activity for those who are completely devoted (though it does not preclude other religious options to help deal with the problems with which they are confronted).

None of the people I met at these rituals ever expressed scepticism or spoke of their belief in percentile terms, as did the people who make periodic offerings. The people described here are
firmly devoted Buddhists. As such, Buddhism takes up a much larger part of their time and energy and is more central to their identity. While many, or even most, will also make offerings and distribute *liễ* in the manner described in the previous chapter, they will also attend rituals four times every month. Many will also eat vegetarian food on select days, the number of which depends on and is an expression of their faith. Some go so far as to erect elaborate altars and recite sutras daily in their homes in addition to the recitals at the pagoda.

This chapter elaborates on how men and women practice Buddhism, conceive of their practice differently, and how these practices relate to men and women’s broader gender roles in family and society. It also shows the extent to which discourses of religion and superstition are implicated in ideologies of masculinity and femininity. This chapter bridges women’s *liễ*-related practices and men’s preoccupation with study as a form of Buddhist practice, detailed in the next chapter. Thus, it will continue to draw out issues concerned with women’s perceived/attributed weakness and their role as care-givers in the family, but will spend more time looking at how men who take part in sutra recitals reframe their practice to conform with masculine ideals.

I draw a distinction between ‘sutra recital’ (*tòng kinh*) on the one hand, and ‘ritual’ (*liễ científico*) on the other.¹ By sutra recital, I refer mainly to the enterprise of chanting sutras in a group. A distinguishing feature of this practice is its collective nature. Sutra recital, unlike ritual, does not involve practice or training to any great extent; it takes no more than one or two sittings to be able to recite the sutras adequately, following along from the book. In the context of this thesis, sutra recitals refer mainly to the Sâm Nguyễn (*see next section*), which is performed by the laity on the first, eighth, fourteenth and twenty-third days of the lunar month. During this sutra recital, lay men and women chant sections from the *Sutras for Daily Use*,² which includes the Sâm Nguyễn Sutra³ and the Amida

1 The distinction is entirely instrumental for the purposes of my description, for chanting sutras is itself a ritual. The difference I draw for the purpose of this thesis is based on Vietnamese terminology, which describes the two activities differently.

2 *Chu-kính Nhật-Tùng.*

3 *Kinh Sâm Nguyễn.*
In every pagoda there are other sutras that are chanted daily by the monastics, but I am not concerned with these here. Ritual (lễ cúng), as the term was used by my informants, is performed only by specialists, inevitably men or monastics. It requires training and practice, both to read the texts (which are often written in Chinese characters), and to play the percussion accompaniment. Before most sutra recitals the ritual group (ban cúng) at Phúc Lộc Pagoda usually performs a ritual in which a sutra from the Thịnh Phật Khoa is chanted. This chanting is far more elaborate than the regular sutra recital, and requires a great deal of practice and study. While there are occasionally women who may sit behind and count rosary beads during its performance, the majority of women who take part in the Sâm Nguyên do not show up until after the conclusion of this ritual. This ritual group also performs the special rituals that are held throughout the year.

SÁM NGUYỄN – THE BUDDHIST PENITENCE

At most pagodas in Hanoi there is a lay group which gathers in the sutra hall to perform the Sám Nguyên. The Sám Nguyên can be glossed a ‘penitence’ ritual. While some participants believe that the Buddha can absolve the devotee from bad karma, others think of it more as an opportunity to reflect on past actions and as a launching pad for self-improvement in the future. However, it must be noted that in neither case is there an idea of sin in the Christian sense. Karma is thought of, especially by those who hold the later interpretation, as being produced through one’s actions in a causal manner. It is entirely divorced from any relationship with the Buddha,

4 Kinh A-Di Đà.
5 For an explanation of the schedule of Buddhist liturgy see Nguyễn Thuyết Phong (1983) and Revergetat (1974:24-33).
6 This group consists of old men who practice and perform rituals at the pagoda. They will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.
7 This name is not translatable.
8 Sâm Nguyên is the name of the ritual, sám hối is the verb, meaning ‘repent (of), be remorseful (of)’ (Bùi 1993:1174).
9 I chose ‘Penitence’ rather than ‘Confession’ to avoid Christian connotations as much as possible.
according to my informants. Thus, the idea of sinning against the Buddha is totally absent. The full range of interpretations of the Sám Nguyễn discussed below.

During the Sám Nguyễn the group of lay-Buddhists recite sutras in unison. It is always performed and led by the laity, with resident monastics playing no role. At a specific moment near the end, the names of important buddhas and bodhisattvas are repeated ten times. The name of Amida Buddha is repeated one hundred times. Though it is a ritual of penitence, there is no opportunity provided specifically for people to think about their past actions (e.g., in the form of a reflective silence). Nor is there an opportunity for people to pray individually or speak about their specific infractions. It is formally structured and emphasises the group rather than the individual. Although there are other rituals performed throughout the year, and the monastics of a pagoda recite sutras in the sutra hall several times every day, the Sám Nguyễn is the principal one performed regularly by the laity.

The time and day of the Sám Nguyễn always remains constant, and most people who participate do so regularly, allowing the group to have little formal leadership. No one is officially appointed as leader and no rank is given to distinguish people who have achieved ‘levels’. The men who lead it at Phúc Lộc Pagoda generally sit in the reception area until it is time to start, whereas the women sit in the sutra hall. When the time has arrived, the men get up, put on their brown áo đái,11 and enter the sutra hall.

The group that performs the Sám Nguyễn is known by a few different names, but the one that I heard most often was the Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Giáo) or Association of Devotees (Hội Phật Tự). However, these terms are formal and imply an involvement in activity beyond sutra recital. In the literature, it is also commonly called the Elderly Women’s Buddhist Association (Hội Chùa Bà), reflecting the character of most of the participants (Lê T. 1998:82; Luong 1992:58), however, I have never heard the groups referred to by this term in Hanoi.

10 However, Marr claims that he has known believers who felt guilty at missing a vegetarian day, and often felt that the Buddha was watching (personal communication).

11 Áo đái are the long blouses with tight sleeves and slits down both sides worn by women, which have been adopted as a symbol for Vietnam. In the pagoda context it refers to the brown robe worn as a uniform by the laity. They are much looser and are worn by both men as well as women.
These groups differ significantly from the individuals who arrive to make personal offerings on the first and fifteenth of the lunar month. The groups are primarily made up of women above forty years of age. The number of men is usually relatively small and I have often seen these rituals proceed without any men. At Phúc Lộc Pagoda the proportion of men seemed to be higher than most pagodas, making up around twenty-five per cent of the participants. At Quán Sử Pagoda, the proportion of men is less (about five to ten per cent of the participants). There are usually no young people (male or female) who participate in sutra recitals.

Informants told me older people attend because they have more time. The men who take part are inevitably retired. Most men I spoke with told me they did not start getting involved in Buddhist activities until after they stopped working. Women often start participating when their children first attend university or begin work.

Young women do not participate because the group that recites sutras is defined by the age of those who take part. As it is characterised by this age difference, it draws certain people (the elderly) and repels others (youth). Although seemingly tautological, it is nonetheless an important reason for why this activity remains entirely undertaken by elderly. This is how Miss Thào, who described herself as being very religious, explains why she does not go to recite sutras at a pagoda:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Me</th>
<th>Do you take part in any other activities [than making offerings]?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Thào</td>
<td>No. Actually, I don't have time, and most of [the participants] are very old women. I find it very difficult to get the chance for it because I am still young. Mostly they do it when they are retired or have a job in which they are very free. Mostly those kinds of women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Why do only old women and not young women participate? Is it only because of lack of time?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Thào</td>
<td>Maybe [partly] because they don't have time, [but] to join them you have to... They are really difficult to get close to. [They have a] different way of thinking, from a different time, with different concepts. Their level is different. They are very difficult to talk with.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>So, even though you are very religious, you don't...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Miss Thào: No. But I have an older cousin, and she is not married. Now she is over fifty years old and she is a very [devout] woman. She knows very clearly about the procedures, tung kinh [reciting sutras], and other things. Sometimes I go with her to the pagoda and talk with the nhà süt [monastics] and other people as well, but only when she is available and takes me along. If I am alone I am very scared.

Plate 35: Devotees at Quán Sử Pagoda

Approaches to the Sâm Nguyên

Activities and interpretations that are regarded as ‘superstitious’ are, as we saw in Chapter Three, most often those that are associated with women. The practice of chanting sutras is not singled out as superstitious by anyone. It is recognised by all as an important aspect of Buddhist practice. However, interpretations that some people attribute it are considered superstitious by others.
There is tremendous leeway within Buddhism for a variety of understandings, because of an acknowledgement that different beings are at different spiritual levels. This does not mean that all interpretations are considered valid, but people who hold interpretations counter to the doctrinal stance are not necessarily 'corrected'. Knowledge (as connected to gender and social status, see Chapter Six) is, in part, seen as being derived from the karmic results of past lives. To put it another way, men, by virtue of their merit in being male (which is evidently a privileged position), 'perform' knowledge, which in turn signals their level of rebirth. Women's lack of performative capacity is taken as evidence of their lower karmic status. The variety of interpretations of the effects of taking part in the Sám Nguyên are considerable, ranging from a doctrinal understanding of karma as being purely causal and salvation coming through personal effort, to a totally devotional stance of reliance on the buddhas or bodhisattvas for any spiritual gain. These two stances represent what people feel the Sám Nguyên accomplishes. Closely related to these two interpretative stances is the issue of what the practitioner is actually supposed to be doing. In relation to the doctrinal stance, men generally claim that understanding the sutras recited is of utmost importance. However, those who hold the more devotional stance stress the performance and say that understanding the meaning is not crucial.

Men, Understanding and Self-Correction

In the doctrinal view of karma, an individual remains culpable for his or her actions because of the inevitable consequences of cause and effect. Emotional attachment to actions produces karma, which in turn influences future rebirths. All karma, by this definition, is bad in the sense that it propels someone from one rebirth to the next, the formal goal of Buddhism being to escape the cycle of rebirth.
It is recognised as a process that may take many lifetimes, so, through moral cultivation the hope is that in the next life one will be born in a better position to achieve this goal (usually conceived as being in a position to join the Sangha).

This conceptualisation of karma is what most men I spoke with held to in saying that taking part in the Sám Nguyễn would have no effect *per se* on one’s life and future rebirths. It merely provided the opportunity to think about one’s past actions as a catalyst for greater efforts of self-cultivation. The people who held this conceptualisation would condemn as superstitious the view that the performance of the Sám Nguyễn is an end unto itself (i.e., affects karma directly). However individuals were not criticised or corrected.

As a correlate to this, most men who took part insisted that understanding the sutras was of utmost importance. Understanding the sutras requires specialised knowledge because they use a Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary (*Hán-Việt*) which is not accessible without study, despite being written in a Romanised script.

Basically, men stressed comprehension as the essential part of reciting sutras. As one fifty year old, retired man said: ‘In my opinion only by understanding Buddhist sutras and philosophy can you love the Buddha and be a Buddhist according to the Buddha’s teachings [Dharma].’ 15 Ông Hùng, who is considered by all in the Phúc Lộc Pagoda to be an expert, holds a similar opinion:

> The main thing is that understanding the sutras is more important than reciting them... Reciting sutras like a parrot doesn’t do anything. It is essential that you understand the sutras.16

However, Ông Hùng affirmed the usefulness of reciting sutras. However, despite the fact that he was considered to be the expert (something to which I will return in the next chapter), he did not recite sutras himself.

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14 This remains the goal in Theravada Buddhism, though in Mahayana Buddhism the goal of individual escape is replaced by the goal of compassionately remaining behind to help all other sentient beings until such a time that we can all get out of the cycle of rebirth. This goal is regarded as potentially unattainable, which makes the self-sacrifice involved even more significant in terms of the ideal of compassion.

15 ‘Theo tôi phá giá hiểu Kinh và triệt lý nhà Phật thì mới thực sự yêu Phật, theo Phật và là Phật Từ theo lời Phật dạy’ [translation mine].

16 ‘Cái chính nhất là hiểu kinh quan trọng hơn tụng kinh... Tụng như là con vật thì không ra cái gì cả. Hiểu kinh là bước buộc phải làm’ [translation mine].
...and reciting sutras is good, but not important. Like myself reciting sutras, I understand them quite well but I never recite them.

If a person recites sutras but doesn’t understand any of it, does it have any purpose/meaning?

The activity of reciting sutras and understanding them is the most important, but reciting without understanding also has small advantages.

That’s right, there is still an advantage.

The meaning is like this: When I recite sutras My mind doesn’t think of wicked things, my hands don’t do wicked things and my mouth doesn’t say wicked things any more. The idea is that the heart, speech, thought – all of them are virtuous. This is okay, but understanding the sutras is still better [translation mine, see Appendix 1:5.1].

Another old man recognised that most people would not be able to understand the sutras, and that for them, reciting was sufficient: ‘For monastics, it is essential to recite and understand the sutras, but for ordinary people it isn’t important. If they can do it, it is good enough.’

While almost every man would give explanations of the Sâm Nguyên which sounded more erudite, and conformed more closely with doctrinal Buddhist conceptions, the stress on understanding was not exclusively men’s. There were some women who voiced it in similar ways.

Thầy Tâm expressed it this way:

If we recite sutras is it crucial that we understand them?

Yes, it is important that if you recite sutras you understand them, is it possible to recite like a parrot? [Then] you return to doing bad things [translation mine, see Appendix 1:5.2].

¹⁷ ‘Từng hiểu kinh rồi mới đi nhà chùa thì là bắt buộc phải làm, nhưng đối với người bình thường thì không quan trọng nếu làm được thì tốt’ [translation mine].
The importance placed on understanding the sutras, as opposed to reciting them without concern for the meaning, is thus an issue with varied opinions. When I asked participating women whether comprehension was important or not, the answers generally ranged from stressing the physical performance, with no value placed on comprehension, to a feeling that understanding was good but not as important as the actual practice. One forty-four year old female accountant summed up the opinion of most women when she told me, 'If you can understand [the sutras], then it is good, but if you can't then never mind.' Miss Thào stressed the performative aspect above all:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Me</th>
<th>When you recite sutras (tùng kinh), is it important if you understand?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss Thào</td>
<td>Not very. If you don’t, you just follow exactly, but you have to read very carefully, and if you say something wrong – make a mistake – you will be punished [in hell].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>So you have to be very careful when you read it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Thào</td>
<td>But not for people who don’t know that, it is no problem, but for people like me, I know that if I read something wrong I will be punished, so I have to be careful. But for other people who don’t know that, no problem. They will not be punished in the afterlife because they don’t know that, but for people who know that, they have to take care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>So now you told me I better take care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss Thào</td>
<td>No! But you are a foreigner and you cannot read exactly one-hundred per cent right.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not merely whether or not one understands; but the raison d’être of the performance is different for women. Men generally felt that the Sám Nguyễn was only a stepping-stone for self-cultivation. Thầy Tâm claims she has to correct her own behaviour, but she also agrees that the Buddha gives atonement. She made a point of telling me explicitly that atonement is given by Sakyamuni Buddha (Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni Phật):

18 'Nếu hiểu được thì tốt, nếu không hiểu không sao' [translation mine].

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Everyday you are in a bad environment, and it makes you say bad things. When you go to the pagoda, you have to talk to the Buddha (Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni Phật) because the other buddhas are just the followers of the Buddha (đế tước của Phật). Therefore, you need to ask his pardon' [translation mine, see Appendix 1:5.3].

Another woman said:

Penitence is, for example, if today you did something wrong, not right with someone, and you feel uncomfortable... and you repent to the Buddha to get release for you heart, and next time you will do better.19

This woman, along with Thầy Tâm, represents a middle position. Although it is essentially getting at the same point – that actively trying to improve one’s behaviour is a necessary correlate to penitence – the latter opinion differs dramatically from men’s interpretations in that it is phrased in terms of emotion rather than individualist self-cultivation. It is an interpretation that moves away from doctrinal Buddhist formulations of karma towards a view that by taking part in the ritual the participant’s transgressions will be ‘absolved’ to a certain extent by the buddhas (i.e., ‘get release for your heart’). In performing the Sâm Nguyên people will be partly released from their errors and will not suffer as gravely in hell. An example of this interpretation was given to my by a sixty-seven year old woman:

Because in our life everyone is put in the position where they transgress (tội lởi) so you have to repent in order to get the pardon (xả) of the Buddha.20

In some cases, participation in the Sâm Nguyên has been explained as something that will actually bring luck to the participants and their families. In these interpretations, karma is not held to be eradicated so much as turned to one’s favour – a process that Spiro

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19 ‘Sám hối là ví dụ như hôm nay cháu làm điều gì đó sai, không đúng với một người nào đấy và cháu cám thấy không thoải mái và cháu có lỗi với người đấy và cháu sám hối với Phật để cho nó nhẹ bớt tâm của mình đi và lần sau mình sẽ làm tốt hơn’ [translation mine].

20 ‘Vì trong một thời gian ai cũng mắc phải tội lỡ nên phải sám hối để Phật xả cho’ [translation mine]. The words that I have translated as 'transgress' (tội lởi) and 'pardon' (xả) are judicial metaphors. They can mean sin, trespass, crime, offence fault (Bùi 1993:1477) and forgive, amnesty, exempt, free (from obligation) (Bùi Phùng 1993:1666), respectively.
calls Kammatic Buddhism (1982:114-139). In Vietnam, however, the merit accrued from reciting sutras is not so much repaid across lifetimes, but has the immediate effect of causing good or bad luck. The belief that reciting sutras can have this effect is essentially the same belief held with regard to the benefit of making offerings and distributing lộc.

Perhaps the most extreme view I heard expressed, mostly by women, was that they need to go to pagodas because they have a heavier karmic burden. One informant at Quán Sũ Pagoda, a woman in her late forties, explained:

The Buddha taught people how to behave morally, to have manners. In short, women have a heavier fate than men (nâng nghiệp hơn), therefore they have to go to the pagoda to repent (sám hối). Here, fate (nghiệp) means karma. This karma is from the former life, from very long ago, many lives, now [they] have a very heavy fate, now they have to pay [translation mine, see Appendix 1:5.4].

This is an important symbolic construction of gender, which automatically places women on a lower position in cosmological conceptions, but is also a justification for women having less privilege in this world. This same point, of women being karmically disadvantaged, or owing a moral debt as evidenced by their birth, crept into discussions with others as well: ‘Women usually go to pagodas to get rid of bad karma, and men don’t’. When I asked another old woman why there were more women than men, she replied: ‘Because women are the ones in the family who have a heavy fate’. However, this response was not common. A more frequent assertion was that women are born lower than men.

21 ‘Kamma’ is the Pali for ‘karma’.

22 ‘Phu nữ thường đi chùa để giải nghiệp (chúng) còn dân ông thì không’ (from a woman I met at Phúc Lộc Pagoda, age about sixty) [translation mine].

23 ‘Vì phụ nữ trong gia đình nặng cản’ [translation mine].

24 In Montréal this opinion was most often given to me in the context of an apologetic discourse against traditional values, which was used as an explanation of men’s absence: men felt that because they were karmically superior, they need not worry about producing good merit, whereas women do. I was assured by the head nun (a strident feminist) that this was an erroneous belief, and that men were arrogant fools for thinking this (Soucy 1994:75). This reversal was something that never occurred in Hanoi. Where women’s lower status was stressed, it was to show the lack in women rather than in men.
Absolution or Self-Improvement – An Analysis of Interpretation

In examining these wide interpretive variations there are a number of things that must be taken into account. The perceived motivations and processes are divided between the receipt of absolution and transcendental grace, most commonly held by women, and self-cultivation and inner-strength, which is stressed by men’s interpretations. These two symbolic oppositions align with the gendered performative expectations of femininity and masculinity. As with the practices associated with Joc, it is considered to be unmanly to ask for help or to rely on others, both transcendentally and in worldly relations. Women are, as we have seen, both expected and taught to be weak, which is reflected in interpretations of the goals of the Sám Nguyên which stress the Buddha’s absolution.

Because of the way that men are expected to be strong and individualistic, self-reliance rather than devotional dependence is the major interpretive feature in male explanations of the Sám Nguyên. This does not mean that men are stronger, but that men, and their practices, are discursively constructed to emphasise strength and self-reliance. In Theravada and what has been labelled ‘primitive’ or ‘early’ Buddhism, self-reliance is the foundation of doctrinal practice (Kirsch 1982:20). Rahula writes:

One is one’s own refuge, who else could be the refuge?” said the Buddha. He admonished his disciples to ‘be a refuge of themselves’, and never to seek refuge in or help from anybody else. He taught, encouraged and stimulated each person to develop himself and to work out his own emancipation, for man has the power to liberate himself from the bondage through his own personal effort and intelligence. The Buddha says: ‘You should do your work, for the Tathagatas only teach the way.’ If the Buddha is to be called a ‘saviour’ at all, it is only in the sense that he discovered and showed the Path of Liberation, Nirvana. But we must tread the Path ourselves (1974 [1959]:1-2).

Mahayana Buddhism alleviates the stress on the individual to some extent, stressing instead the aid of bodhisattvas. However, this external aid is undone in the Zen school, which uses ‘inescapably masculine’ symbolism of the hero as the religious ideal (Levering 1985:143). The Zen hero, according to a text of the Chinese Lin-chi Zen school:

First of all... has great courage; if in a dangerous situation he hesitates or retreats, he is not a [hero]. He is fearless, and regards any feat of daring anyone
else can accomplish as something he should be able to do also. He does not look up to anyone else, nor is he afraid of anyone else. He is independent, and carves out his own way (Levering 1985:142).

Levering makes the point that this symbolism effectively negates the rhetoric of equality that also surrounds Zen Buddhism. She writes of Zen in China: ‘[i]t remained shaped by men as the primary participants, by their imagination and their language. It never allowed women’s experience and language to have anything like an equal influence on its expressive forms’ (1985:151). This is also the case in Vietnam, but in Vietnam Zen Buddhism has special significance because of the emphasis placed on Zen as the ‘authentic’ tradition.

Zen Buddhism is much more conducive to the gender projects of men because of the stress that it lays on self-cultivation, drawing on similar symbolism as Confucianism. The stress that is laid on a Zen tradition in Vietnam has been reproduced mainly by Buddhist institutions that are controlled by men. However, it is largely a rhetorical device, given that no men that I met actually practice meditation. Nonetheless, it is significant in terms of the discourses of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, Buddhism and superstition.

For men who are practising Buddhists, the language of individualism, inner strength and self-reliance is more often stressed as central. By stressing these they are in conformity with both doctrinal Buddhism and with the state discourse on superstition. It is not so much an indicator of women’s misunderstanding of Buddhist philosophy as it is of the essentially masculine characters of Buddhist and state institutions and of the language and symbols they control. This control of authoritative symbols does not mean that they are accepted or even disputed by women; they just fail to be internalised and they are subordinated in their explanations to interpretation, which bring their practical social situations into the foreground.

There is another essential difference in the interpretation of the Sâm Nguyễn. Whereas men stress self-cultivation, women often speak of performing the Sâm Nguyễn in terms similar to lộc, stressing the service it does for the entire family. In doing so, men are conforming and women diverging from doctrinal Buddhist ideology.

This is what transpired in a conversation with one woman in her early fifties:
Me  After you have confessed you don’t have to worry about going to hell any longer, is that right?

Cô Phương  Of course your fault/mistake is only partly released (dở), and you will still go to hell, but the punishment will be less. If people do good things they will feel very happy and good. And those good things will bring luck (phúc) and virtue to the mother’s children [translation mine, see Appendix1:5.5].

These formulations can be seen as fulfilling largely the same role as the distribution of lộc for the generation of sentiment and the creation of ơn in the family.

The different interpretation stems from distinct social positions. Men’s social relations are based on prestige as measured by individual achievement. Thus, men are judged by their position in society, which depends upon such things as education and occupation. They are measured against yardsticks of knowledge and virtue, and their position in society largely depends on these, and on ‘face’ gained through them.

A women is judged according to entirely different criteria, often not on her own merit but by looking at her family: do they come from a good family; what is her husband like; are her children successful; has she had a son to continue the patrilineage; has she been successful in creating a ‘happy family’ (Gammeltoft 1999:217)? In the Taiwanese rural family described by M. Wolf (1968; 1972), women are largely outside of the patriarchal structure and therefore build a ‘uterine family’ based on the family that they have borne. Wolf attributes many tensions within the family, including household schisms and mother/daughter-in-law relationships, to the uterine family. In Hanoi, women’s lives are directed more towards families and less towards careers, because of the same inducements to form a uterine family. These different foci in the lives of men and women were prominent in my discussions with Vietnamese about the differences between the genders.

Social position is at the root of women’s particular use of the doctrine of karma in relation to their understandings of the performance of the Sâm Nguyên. Most women did not explicitly mention karma in their discussions with me. Instead, they spoke of
bringing good luck to their families. Though karma is not directly referenced it is nonetheless implicit in these conceptualisations. Karma was no longer the consequence of individual action, but had become both collective and transferable. It thus reflects the realities of women's social worlds (relations) much more closely than the authoritative, orthodox individualism. They did not speak to me of apprehensions about retribution in hell, which I had expected to be an important motivation for increased religiosity in older women; instead, they tied their fate to their families. Their expressed motivations for participation were focused on concern for their children and on the hope for family prosperity. They are freed from many of the burdens of housework, but their care and aspirations to create the 'happy family' lead to an increased focus on enlisting the help of the supernatural.

There are multiple ways of viewing the Sâm Nguyễn. The 'experts' – men – align themselves with a more doctrinal understanding of karma, claiming that participation in the ritual is significant only in that it provides the opportunity for change through self-cultivation. Though this is the authoritative stance, it is certainly not the only one. By ignoring the understanding that women have of their practice, the full significance of participation cannot be fully understood. Religious practice can hold very different meanings for different people, and the explanations given fit into larger discourses that arise from the position of the speaker as embroiled in the struggles of life. Thus, while no one would dispute the orthodox stance, many women placed greater emphasis on concerns more immediate to them: their position as women in Vietnam and their roles as caretakers of their families.

Therefore, to accept authoritative explanations, as can only be done if rituals are regarded as symbolic systems, is to ignore the relationship between religious practice and everyday social practice. Women see their religious practice as reverberating throughout their social relationships. In some ways this is a far keener understanding (from the anthropologist's point of view) than the explanation of the doctrinal expert who insists on the individualism of Buddhist practice. Both, however, are understandings that arise from what it means to be a man or a woman in Vietnamese society.
PERFORMANCES OF INCLUSION AND DIFFERENCE

While concern for the family is a stated objective, and ideas concerning femininity and masculinity are reflected in views about the importance of comprehension, these views only explain why they get involved in the first place and the different positions they have in relation to their practice. They do not explain reasons why older men and women become more fully involved with pagoda ritual life. There are two opposing dynamics that take place in reference to the groups of people who take part in sutra recitals. The first stems from the fact that it is done in a group. An important reason for why many individuals participate is the feelings of inclusion that such groups provide. Chanting sutras is not essentially different from the making of offerings for many (especially female) participants. They are both thought of by many women as ways to improve merit and that merit is thought of as being transferable to the family. Where it differs is in the level of commitment that it entails and the fact that it is a group rather than an individual activity. This factor is, I believe, of prime importance for explaining why many women, and some men, become involved. The other dynamic takes place within the group and it is more concerned with status and differentiation within the group. Both of these dynamics centre on the importance that Buddhist practice plays for the self-identity of the individual.

Hierarchy and Egalitarianism: The Communal House and Pagoda

The group that takes part in sutra recitals is cohesive and has a sense of shared purpose. The Sâm Nguyên is seen as more than just a bid for personal salvation, although that is an important aspect. It is very much a part of the ritual life of the pagoda, and is seen as an essential part.

It is relatively egalitarian, or at least there is no formal hierarchy of the order found in the communal house, which was formerly the domain of men and was the centre of village-based politics and ritual. This is expressed in Buddhist philosophy through the idea

25 The material on communal house hierarchies has not been taken from my own ethnographic material, but is useful for its contrastive value.
that there is no permanent self. We are regarded as only a collection of aggregates put together in a way that creates the impression of having independent existence. The classic example of this is of a chariot being neither the wheels, the axles, nor any other single component, but only having existence through its assembly of different parts. In practice this philosophical background is expressed in the relative lack of stratification. The only clear division that is recognised is between the laity and the sangha. However, in Mahayana Buddhism, as practised in East Asia and Vietnam, the importance of this division is hierarchical dramatically diminished compared to Theravada Buddhism. This lack of division stems from the belief that it is possible (though certainly more difficult) to become enlightened while still a member of the laity. Thus, though the Sangha is respected, it is not raised as far above the laity as it is in Theravada countries. Further, no one ever suggested to me that joining, or having a son join, the Sangha will in any way affect karmic merit, a common conception in Theravada Buddhism (see Tambiah 1970:98-103).

When one stands back to observe the Vietnamese religious landscape, there is an obvious and often-noted gendering of religious spaces, mainly between the communal house (dinh) and the Buddhist pagoda (chùa). The division is significant mainly in that it reflects the way gender is constructed and power is apportioned in Vietnam. In Hy Van Luong’s description of Son-Duong around the time of the Revolution, a village in the Red River Delta, this division can be clearly seen:

Villagers of the same socioeconomic standing also formed voluntary associations to meet their various needs. Most notable were two village-wide associations, the exclusively male literati association (hoi van than) and the elderly women’s Buddhist association (hoi chu ba). The former included both Confucian teachers and, as a reflection of colonial transformation, the holders of the Franco-Vietnamese certificat d’études élémentaires (for the successful completion of the third grade examination). It organized the annual worship of Confucius at the literary shrine (van chi). In the colonial period the literati association was still assigned the honored task of delivering formal speeches at communal deity worship rituals at the communal house (dinh). The elderly

26 That is, excluding Tibetan Buddhism, which by some reckonings is classified as Mahayana, and by others as constituting an entirely different category from Mahayana or Theravada, usually called Tantric Buddhism or Vajrayana.

women's Buddhist association, in contrast, met at the village pagoda, constructed around 1810, for the worship of Buddha on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month (Luong 1992:58).

The different activities of men and women, taking place in different religious spaces, reflects the way that masculinity is constructed around education and intellectual superiority. What does not come out in this quote are the social implications that these activities hold. In order to understand these, I will look at the different ways in which the communal house and the pagoda are viewed.

The communal house is exclusively controlled, and until recent years was entirely the domain of men. It was the political centre of the village. Women’s exclusion from the communal house meant that they played no part in community decision-making and were barred from the means of formal village power (Lê V.H. 1998 [1962]:201). Women’s exclusion from the communal house can be seen as both a result and a cause of their lack of social power.

According to Jamieson, participation in the communal house was ‘culturally prescribed’ (1993:36) for all male members of the village: participation was expected and required. Status in the village was tied to participation in the communal house life. Only members of the village were allowed to take part in the activities of the communal house. Women were not, strictly speaking, members of the village (Hickey 1987:5). For men, membership criteria tended to vary, but usually was confined to those who were born and raised there (Jamieson 1986:100).

At the centre of the communal house hierarchy was the Council of Notables (Ban Kỳ Mục), which in turn was divided into three levels: at the top were those who had been awarded titles by the court, had passed the examinations at the national level, or who had held rank in the national civil or military bureaucracy; the second level consisted of men who had rank at the village or canton level, or of men who had been given honorary positions for outstanding generosity or service to the village; and the third level was made up of scholars who had passed lower-level examinations. Beneath the notables were village elders who were ranked according to age. The final level, again ranked by age, were all male members of the village below the age of fifty (Hickey 1987:6).

The hierarchical nature of the communal house organisation and each individual’s place in that hierarchy was conspicuously
represented through a number of devices. Thanh Tùng writes: ‘At the communal house - place for village gatherings, the [mats] for sitting are also distinguished by precedence’ (1998:41). The place of each person was prescribed both for the ritual ceremony as well as for the feast afterwards (Lê V.H. 1998 [1962]:203). In addition to seating order, the way food was apportioned was an important signifier of rank. Pig or ox heads were generally considered the prized portions of a feast, and they were given to the men of highest rank. Rooster heads were also used in some cases (Jamieson 1986:99).

The graphic representation of status within the communal house (and hence the village as a whole), meant that the competition for signifiers of this status was heavy:

Each notable competed with the others to bring home the head of the sacrificial chicken from the ceremony because in the eyes of his wife, children, and neighbors this would be irrefutable proof that he was the most honored man in the village (Nguyễn K.V. 1974:167).

Jamieson has written of status within the village as being based on a prestige economy (1993:30-33). In order to rise in status, one had to be willing and able to spend considerable amounts of money. Aside from the enormous output that would be required for sponsoring feasts in order to rise in rank, there were other expenses. On occasions such as funerals or weddings, the ceremony organised could be either cheap or expensive, but because these were occasions in which one’s claimed status was displayed, those involved would endure that the ceremony was lavish. In addition, there was a moral and intellectual expectation on the part of fellow villagers of the person with status. ‘The price of status, prestige, and respect was constant vigilance, conformity to village norms, and conspicuous generosity. If people did not act in accord with their status pretensions, respect behavior would be withdrawn’ (Jamieson 1993:31).

By contrast, the pagoda has been a religious space attended by mainly by women. The difference in male and female attendance is not solely a feature of Buddhism in northern Vietnam, but seems to be universal among all Vietnamese, both nationals and expatriate. In the south, there is perhaps a higher ratio of men to women than in the north, but the women still far outnumber men.

In contrast to the communal house, attendance at the Buddhist pagoda is optional (Jamieson 1993:36) – there is no expectation to go,
and attendance does not affect status. If someone did not go to the pagoda, they would not be favourably judged. For men, there might even be said to be some stigma in going to pagodas for, in some senses, they are women's space.

That is not to say that there is no status within the pagoda, but it does not affect status on a village level. Within the pagoda, there is a four-part division between monks and nuns, and male and female laity. This is a division that cuts across the lay-Sangha division; the male/female lay division matching that between monk and nun. Unlike the division between the Sangha and the laity, the division between lay men and women is not institutionalised. Rather, it exists at an informal but understood level. At the pagoda there is some competition between individuals, and men are regarded as being higher than women, but this is a carry-over from the lower position of women in wider Vietnamese society rather than having anything to do with pagoda organisation. The lack of status means that seating arrangements and portions of food mean very little when compared to the strict formality and importance placed on seating arrangements in the communal house.

Finally, the pagoda is politically marginal. While a Buddhist monk may have respect within the pagoda, he does not usually have any sway in the village decision making. The absence of status and status markers at the pagoda can largely be understood as a result of its lack of official political power. Thus, from writings about the differences between the pagoda and communal house a table of the two might look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communal house</th>
<th>Pagoda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prescribed</td>
<td>Optional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politically central</td>
<td>Politically marginal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal hierarchy</td>
<td>Egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascribed markers of hierarchy</td>
<td>Few markers of hierarchy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Less competitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

28 In another essay I describe how imperatives that emerged from immigration to Canada affected this division in a Vietnamese Buddhist pagoda (Soucy 1996).
Clubs, Communitas and Solidarity

As mentioned earlier, many join the Hội Phật Giáo (Buddhist association). Joining this group in a formal way is not mandatory for participation in sutra recitals, and many do not bother. Some pagodas hang pictures of the members on the wall in the courtyard. This did not happen at Phúc Lộc Pagoda or Quán Sử Pagoda (in the latter case because the large size of the group would have made it impossible). However, on the wall of the lecture hall at Quán Sử Pagoda there are plaques with the names of dead members.

The people who take part in group sutra recitals are often friends outside of the pagoda as well. At Quán Sử Pagoda, though the number of people made it impossible for everyone to know each other, it was plain that there were small groups of friends that met at these rituals in the same way they would meet at a secular club. As one woman admitted: ‘Of course, I go to Quán Sử Pagoda because I have many friends who also go there’. Most often women could be seen arriving in small groups rather than coming alone.

The sutra participants go to pagodas more frequently because of the importance that Buddhism, and taking part in this group, has for their self-identity. They become part of a group that is dedicated to fully participating in Buddhist activities. In addition to the days when the Sâm Nguyên takes place, many of them go to pagodas on other occasions. At Quán Sử Pagoda there is usually a lecture given every Sunday which is always well attended, and many of these people can be seen there on other days as well. Their commitment also influences living space, and many of the people who take part in sutra recitals erect altars in a room of their house. One woman I knew dedicated one of the two rooms of her house (perhaps thirty per cent of the overall living space) to build a shrine room.

Inclusion in these groups has emotional importance for those who participate, and their participation and commitment to Buddhism comes to be an important part of their identity, and the way that they present themselves to the outside world. The people who take part in these group rituals come to define themselves to a far greater extent as Buddhists than do people who only make offerings. These latter individuals usually come alone or in pairs and do not usually define their activities as a group activity. The people who recite sutras show a high level of involvement. They buy books and magazines, which in

29 'Nhung tôi sang Chùa Quán Sử vì tôi có nhiều bạn cùng sang đây' [translation mine].
many cases are not read, but are nonetheless important for their symbolic value. The book shop at Quán Sứ Pagoda always has a small crowd of people buying the latest issue of the Buddhist magazines, books explaining Buddhist philosophy, sutras and various Buddhist paraphernalia (small statues, Buddhist robes, rosaries, incense, tapes of Buddhist sermons, etc.). These things become symbolic badges of association for the inner circle of devotees. The potency of these symbols was illustrated to me when I asked a woman at Quán Sứ Pagoda what sutra had just been recited. She gave me the name of the sutra and asked a friend who was with her to show me a copy of the sutra. The woman refused, saying that I was not a Buddhist, and therefore was not allowed to see. Although this was the only time that this happened, it indicated that for this woman, feelings of inclusion also entailed boundaries of exclusion.

Clothing is one marker of inclusion/exclusion that is most obviously employed. The people who have the closest relationship with the pagoda will frequently dress in brown shirts that echo Buddhist monastic robes. The woman who ran the book store at Quán Sứ Pagoda was always dressed in this way, as was a woman named Cô Hợp who worked at the Branch of the Institute of Buddhist Studies at Quán Sứ Pagoda. At Phúc Lộc Pagoda, the mother of the resident nun performed daily chores around the pagoda, and dressed similarly. Sometimes a brown woollen hat would heighten the monastic appearance of such people. Some, Cô Hợp for instance, would carry a monastic handbag rather than a purse. Often, women who dressed like this would also cut their hair very short, though they did not shave it completely.

More importantly, there was a kind of uniform worn by recital participants which consisted of a brown robe (đáy dâu) worn over street clothes. The robe was often supplemented by a Buddhist rosary hung around the neck, with the red tassel hanging at the back. Many, however, kept their rosaries in a box and only took them out when the time arrived in the ritual for their use. The uniform was worn during rituals, sutra recitals, pilgrimages and pagoda activities generally. Uniforms erase difference and homogenise the pagoda community.

Just as they stress internal equality, uniforms also serve to delineate those who are part of the community from those who are not. It is perhaps a recognition of this aspect of exclusion which Miss Thảo was pointing out when she said she did not participate in sutra recitals because the people there were difficult to get close to, were difficult to talk to and had different ways of thinking (quoted above).
At Phúc Lộc Pagoda I once tried to sit at the back of the sutra hall during the Sám Nguyễn where I could get a better view. It was one of the first times that I had attended this ritual here, not long after I had wandered off the street and met Thầy Tâm. At this particular pagoda in front of the altar was a raised platform. The men would sit on this platform, which was quite small, perhaps measuring four meters by four meters in surface area. I was urged to go up to the platform by a number of men and women, but one woman spoke up saying that I should not be allowed because I was not wearing the brown áo dài that is worn by all devotees (đề tü). She was the only one who protested, and the eventual consensus was that I should sit up with the men despite my improper dress. The men themselves were happy to have me, and in the end it was their voice that stopped the protests of the woman. It was seen as proper that I would sit closer to the altar with the men rather than back with the old women.30

30 Of course, if a young Vietnamese man came off the street, it is doubtful that he would be given the same treatment. If I was a female researcher, it is also doubtful that I would be asked to join the old men.
Communitas is achieved to some degree within the group that participates in sutra recital through the uniforms and the sense of shared purpose. Communitas stands in opposition to society as structured, differentiated and hierarchical. It is unstructured ‘relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals’ (Turner 1995 [1969]:96). The pagoda space represents, especially when juxtaposed with the communal house, a relatively unstructured space in which community is stressed over hierarchy, ‘anti-structure’ over structure (Turner 1995 [1969]). The uniforms serve the function of erasing hierarchies and asserting equality and communitas to some degree. They are part of the mechanisms by which the pagoda community is drawn together and the group marked off from those who are less devout. It is this sense of community that is part of what compels some people to get involved in pagoda life at this level. It makes them feel part of something that marks them as different from others who are less devout. However, communitas is only one dynamic, and excessive stress should not be placed on this group dynamic to the exclusion of individual motivations and aspirations.

For the people who participate in sutra recitals, their identity as Buddhists becomes a pervasive aspect of their lives. Like people who are fans of a particular football club who watch all the games, wear the team’s jersey and buy memorabilia, their Buddhist identity shows itself through a myriad of small ways: dress, the display of Buddhist calendars, Guan-yin clocks with neon halos, icons from famous pilgrimage sites, in their houses; their diet is transformed.31 Especially in the pagoda or on pilgrimages the devout change their usual speech patterns and make a conscious effort to avoid confrontation. They speak of Buddhism, of past pilgrimages, of the efficacy of particular shrines and spirits for granting wishes. The way that they speak and the subjects they talk about are a part of their Buddhist performance. In short, people who become involved in sutra recital rituals infuse their lives with symbols of their devotion.

31 The food that they eat indicates their devotion, not without considerable effort: vegetarian food is eaten on a few days every month (the number of which increases with commitment and is itself a statement of their level of devotion, and for women, it usually requires that they cook twice – once for their families and once for themselves).
Conspicuous Devotion

While Turner’s ideas of communitas move towards a partial explanation of the dynamics of the sutra recital groups, there are limits to what it can explain. The Buddhist Sangha, especially in the context of early Buddhism, is an example of a liminal community which embodied communitas, and is an example Turner himself uses explicitly (1995 [1969]:196-197). Among the laity in Hanoi today, there are expressions of communitas: the uniforms express an essential egalitarianism. But what of the competitiveness and the statements of individuality which emerge? It is not every devotee who chooses to hang Buddhist decoration in their house or dress in a pseudo-monastic style. What of the performance of being a Buddhist, which seems to do more than express union and solidarity, but instead suggests the achievement of status and recognition is important? Turner’s elucidation of different kinds of communitas where communitas becomes institutionalised over time cannot really explain competitiveness in the pagoda context (Turner 1995 [1969]:132), though it goes a long way to explain the historical processes by which a community founded on liminality and communitas (e.g., early Buddhism) became institutionalised. Elements of communitas remain within the institutional and ideological make-up of Buddhism in Vietnam. There is a feeling of solidarity and communitas that takes place amidst statements of equality. Nonetheless, there are other dynamics at work.

The devout Buddhists made efforts to identify themselves as such to others, both the sceptics but also, and especially, other Buddhists. They made a show of their Buddhism. It was performed. This was not always the case, but for a great many the importance of Buddhism to their identity was such that people's recognition of this aspect of their lives was crucial to their maintenance of this identity.

In doing this, there was often an element of competitiveness in the activities and in the accumulation and presentation of the paraphernalia of their Buddhist life-style and commitment. Pointed statements of faith through the way that people ostentatiously performed, which I call conspicuous devotion, were a notable part of
their religious practice. These practices took on many forms: donation, meticulous attendance, speech, heightened moral behaviour, and so on.32

It was often not the actions themselves that led me to see a person’s devotion as being intentionally conspicuous, but rather the way in which they were done. There was a qualitative aspect that signalled the performance of many of the devout. Praying in front of an altar, for example, is an ordinary activity that all Buddhists do, but it can be done discretely or conspicuously.

Conspicuous devotion has attracted media attention. On television or in music videos faithful women praying are sometimes lampooned. Often it is done in ways reminiscent of the magazine article I mentioned in Chapter Three: the devotee is made to seem ridiculous and their beliefs and practices superstitious and fundamentally antithetical to modernity. Often there are references to rural Vietnamese that are intended to highlight the backward nature of religious practice. In one video I saw a wife praying to the altar in her house in exaggerated gestures while asking the gods to help her win the lottery. Conspicuous devotion was also commented on by many of my non-religious informants who would then point out that it is often the people who are most conspicuous that prove to be the most hypocritical upon leaving the pagoda. Evidence given included market women who were fervently religious, but in their daily lives lied and cheated people, swore, and acted inappropriately. Another frequently given example is of older women who are meticulous in their pagoda attendance but at home treat their daughters-in-law like dirt.

Markers of devotion, such as Buddhist paraphernalia in the homes or pseudo-monastic clothing, are part of the performance of being devout, and comprise what Goffman calls a front. He defines front as ‘the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance’ (1956:13). The front is comprised not only of the physical markers of devotion, but also the setting of the performance, and behavioural aspects such as posture, speech patterns, facial expressions and bodily

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32 I should stress that the examples I give would not be seen as abnormal by most Buddhists in Hanoi, and most probably would find it strange that I would phrase their actions in these terms. Sceptics in Hanoi would most probably agree with my summation, and perhaps regard it as proof of the falsity of religiosity.
gestures (Goffman 1956:15). While there is an element of intention in these performances of devotion, there is also an embodiment of what it means to be Buddhist and to act Buddhist.

Plate 37: A Woman Performing Devotion

A variety of actions displayed the devotion of Buddhist devotees. Some women, but never men, would suck in audibly through their teeth while at prayer in front of an altar. This behaviour was claimed to be a habit by some and a way to show respect or concentration by others. Others prayed in an audible whisper to similar effect, or took out their prayer beads and started counting in what amounted to a public display of devotion. Others were more flamboyant in the way in which they moved their hands, palms pressed together, back and forth three times after praying. People who were not devout commented to
me on these sorts of actions, feeling that these gestures were largely for show.

Clothing, and Buddhist robes in particular, are props for more than defining the group and establishing homogeneity. The robes, meant to be an equaliser of status, are part of what builds the feeling of communitas. In this sense, they are markers of inclusion. However, they also form part of the individual’s front and are statements of distinctiveness. I was told by one woman, wishing to display her knowledge, that most people wore the rosary incorrectly. She insisted that the tassel should not hang down the back, but over the right shoulder. She was unable to give me an explanation as to why it must be done that way. In fact, it appeared to be idiosyncratic, as I never saw anyone wear the rosary the way she prescribed. However, her assertion provides an insight into the connection between the uniform, ritual knowledge, and its importance as an object that displays both inclusion among the inner circle and a statement of personal effort in devotion to the Buddha.

The robes were worn not only during ritual and sutra recitals, but many women would also wear them during any activity that involved an assertion of their religiosity. Thus, on pilgrimage tours, the buses would be packed with women who were both regular participants as well as women who only went to pagodas on occasion. The level of commitment to Buddhism would be indicated by the robes; those who were not fully devoted (e.g., younger women and men), did not wear robes, while the devout would wear their brown robes whenever they entered a pagoda.

Donation was another form of conspicuous devotion. On the first pilgrimage I went on with a bus-load of old women just after Têt 1997, one woman insisted on giving me money (đồng) after visiting Bà Chúa Kho Temple, in order to bring me good luck. She did it with a great show, giving it to me in a loud voice at the front of the bus when all eyes were on her. Such conspicuous donations were actually built into the process of pilgrimage. The conspicuous nature of devotion is evident at major pilgrimage sights. At Bà Chúa Kho Temple, for example, there are stone tablets bearing the names of generous benefactors beside particular shrines. When a donation is made at the donation office of these sites, the donor is issued with a certificate to bear witness to their actions. Frequently, the names of donors and the size of donations are broadcast over a loudspeaker. In 1998 I went to Bà Đá Pagoda to listen to lessons which were being given over a loudspeaker for devout Buddhists. Mostly women came, and quite
often they would come merely to make an offering rather than to sit and listen to the lesson. At the end of each session a list of donations and donors was read out.

Devotion was also performed through displays of heightened piety. On pilgrimages everyone was expected to be on their best behaviour. Pious songs were often sung as the bus travelled towards the destination. Usually it was only those in brown robes who joined in the singing, while the others would chat to their neighbours or look out the window. Complaining or bickering between fellow-travellers sometimes provided the opportunity for someone to preach. In such cases, women would commonly chant out ‘A-Di-Đà Phật’ (Amida Buddha – a common chant used to express devotion) in order to remind people that their mission was religious and they needed to act with tolerance and compassion. On one occasion the bus was absolutely packed and many passengers had no place to sit. One of the women felt that she had paid for a seat and was cheated if she had to stand. Her boisterous complaints were soon stopped by an old woman who told her that because they were on a pilgrimage, suffering would only make the experience more efficacious, and ended the speech with the pious repetition of the phrase ‘A-Di-Đà Phật’.

The home altars also take on aspects of conspicuous devotion. If a person possessed a home altar, they were usually eager to show it to anyone perceived as sympathetic to Buddhism. This happened on a few occasions when I was invited home by older women whose involvement in Buddhism was central to their identity. Within a few minutes of entering their house they brought me to their shrine room in order to show me both the beauty of their altar and the depth of their devotion, asking me whether I thought it beautiful.

‘Statements of distinctiveness’ is one way to describe how people try to outdo each other in their devotion to the Buddha and to Buddhism. As Arthur notes, ‘dress functions as an effective means of non-verbal communication during social interaction; it influences the establishment and projection of identity’ (Arthur 1999:3).

The pagoda can be seen as a particular field, which, though intersecting with other fields (e.g., the family) has its own specific rules. Bourdieu defines a field as:

a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at
stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). Each field presupposes, and generates by it very functioning, the belief in the value of the stakes it offers (Wacquant 1989:39).

All fields have a logic that is irreducible to the logic that operates in other fields. Within the field, however, the participants constantly work to differentiate themselves from their closest rivals. Capital functions in relation to the field by conferring power within and over that field (Wacquant 1989:39). The struggles that take place within the field guide the strategies used by the participants to individually or collectively ‘safeguard their position, and to impose the principle of hierarchization most favourable to their own products’ (Wacquant 1989:40). To bring it back to the discussion of the sutra recital, the participants constitute a field in which struggles take place for capital within the group. Conspicuous devotion is a way to establish capital within the field.

The presence of uniforms, symbols on the walls of houses, and other markers of conspicuous devotion cannot be explained only in terms of communitas. There was a performative aspect to people’s practice that indicated that their individual identity was embroiled in these symbols of inclusion. Further, within the group there was some competitiveness. Status and authority were attained by some through virtuosity. Hierarchies of practice emerged which would place men above women.

MEN, SUTRAS AND STATUS

As stated in Chapter Three, hierarchy is expressed in everyday life through body postures and positions assumed relative to others in a given space (Luong 1992:229). Jamieson has noted that where one sat in relation to others was extremely important for men in southern Vietnam. He argues that the desire to sit above others was strongly held by all men. The seating arrangement was therefore how they reflected social prestige. In northern Vietnam this is also the case. When a large group of people are assembled for a meal, the older men sit on the raised platforms in groups and the women and younger people (again separated) sit on mats laid out on the floor.

The way this is done in pagodas and communal houses differ quite dramatically. The communal house recognises a specific
hierarchy. In fact part of its function in the village is to establish an embodied hierarchy of the village through ritual:

After all important sacrifices a high feast would be organized at the *dinh*. The entire outer *dinh* would be packed with village members. These village feasts were extremely important to villagers, and the seating arrangements and distribution of portions at such feasts were prescribed to the smallest detail in accordance with relative positions in the village status hierarchy [Toan Ánh 1968:275-279].

These affairs were characterized by numerous, highly visible symbols of status level, such as who sat at which table, how many men would share a tray of food, and who received which cut of meat. Villagers were sometimes distinguished as “men of the second table” or “men of the third table” in reference to the table at which they sat during these feasts [Gourou 1975:73-74]. There were numerous fine points of symbolizing status distinctions which varied from locality to locality, following the same general pattern (Jamieson 1986:97-99; emphasis in original).

While the communal house is regarded as the seat of village hierarchy *par excellence*, and by comparison the pagoda is egalitarian and relatively undifferentiated, status still exists. More subtle forms of status and hierarchy are present, though admittedly in a less overt form than in the communal house. That is, they have different logics, but nonetheless there are struggles over the capital that will command access to the profits of that field. The most obvious asymmetry of power and status is between men and women and is manifested most tangibly through seating arrangements: men inevitably sit in front of women. Unlike the seating arrangements in the communal house, or in the Cao Đài rituals held in southern Vietnam, this arrangement is accepted without enforcement and without resistance.

Invariably, when I would go to a pagoda to chant sutras, I was told to go to the front. Once, I came a little late to the Sám Nguyên at Quán Sứ Pagoda. Some women were already sitting on grass mats outside on the balcony, indicating how full it was inside. (Women started coming long before the ritual started in order to get a good seat.) I poked my head in and spotted a place just inside, by the door. I gingerly made my way to that spot and sat down cross-legged on the floor beside an old woman who smiled at me momentarily before resuming her telling of the rosary beads with her left hand. As usual, people had noticed me coming in – foreign anthropologists are not

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33 For more information on the Cao Đài in southern Vietnam, see: Hickey (1964); Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1987); Jamieson (1993); Oliver (1976); Rambo (1982: 428-435); Werner (1976; 1979); and Woodside (1976:182-192).
invisible. As I was reaching into my bag to take out my copy of the sutra book *Sutras for Daily Use*, the woman beside me said that I should go to the front with the men. I pointed out that there was no place for me to sit in the front, though the real reason for staying in the back was so that I could get a better view of who was praying, and who was talking to whom. Seeing that I was content to stay where I was, she left me alone. But after a minute another woman walked over and urged me to go to the front. This time ‘no’ was not an acceptable answer, and I was taken by the arm in a friendly manner, supported by those around. Upon arriving at the front, it proved difficult to find a spot because one old woman refused to move over to make a space for me. Eventually the woman was persuaded, though she was obviously displeased with having to give up her prime spot for which she must have come very early. She moved reluctantly at the instigation of a number of her peers, but only with a lot of muttering. She was urged by those around her to be more pious and not grumble in the pagoda.

Good seats are difficult to get because of the number of people who participate in the ritual at Quán Sư Pagoda. The best seats are close to the main altar at the front and centre and people come as early as possible to obtain these seats. This is not the case at every pagoda because most pagodas are not as crowded. The competitiveness found at Quán Sư Pagoda may relate to space being at a premium, but also since Quán Sư Pagoda has status recognised by the state, competition is a more prevalent aspect of their practice. The stakes are higher because of the authority that Quán Sư commands in the total field.34

Gendered spatial habitus expresses male status. However, in comparison to the strict hierarchical milieu of the communal house, the pagoda is relatively free of formal status differentiation. One of the reasons that men do not often go to pagodas is that hierarchy in the pagoda is not as rigidly defined as in the communal house, which is in conflict with male status expectations in Vietnamese society in general. Thanh Tùng points out that with retirement comes a deprivation of many status markers: salary, honours, privileges and bribes (1998:41). These things are extremely important for

34 For example, Cô Hợp – the woman who worked at the Branch of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, and usually wore pseudo-monastic clothing – had an identification card which she would show when she took me to visit other pagodas.
constructions of the male self, which accentuate strength and self-reliance as part of its rhetoric of masculinity.

Involvement in religion is one way in which some older men maintain their self-esteem. Retirement in urban areas entails a diminution of their usefulness, and there are few activities to occupy them that can provide the acknowledgment of status to which they have become accustomed. Participation in pagoda life provides one arena (among others) in which their former expectations of status may be regained. Men who do go to pagodas, which is a relatively small proportion of retired men, do not simply participate, but generally endeavour to become ritual specialists. It is this that separates their activities from those of women.

Jamieson’s (1993:36) assertions that the pagoda is an egalitarian space is not entirely correct. Through studies, but more importantly by the performance of knowledge through language, men invest in a field in which the capital produced through their performances are recognised and understood as part of the logic. By doing this, men also distinguish and distance themselves from practices that they regard as superstitious, and which are negatively valued, at least for them, as being women’s practice.

CONCLUSION

Reciting sutras can be considered a core activity at the pagoda. Although the vast majority of Buddhists did not recite sutras, it was regarded as essential by all that it be performed. Most feel that it is not the most important activity in terms of their own participation. However, it is regarded by all as necessary for the religious life of the pagoda.

The task of sutra recital is taken care of partly through the resident monastics, whose responsibility it is to perform the daily rituals. On certain days of the lunar month, it is the Buddhist Association (Hội Phật Tích) who perform rituals. On these occasions there are inevitably no monastics present because it is a lay-Buddhist activity. This does not diminish the importance of the ritual, however. All rituals need to be performed in order for it to be a living pagoda, and it is the responsibility of the Lay-Buddhist Association and the monastics to maintain this ritual regime.
Men’s view of the ritual and the practices they undertook differed from those of women. Men tended to hold a more authoritative, doctrinal stance about the meanings of sutra recital. They would describe the ritual far less in terms of the immanent gain that it would have in their lives. For women, this immanence was often central to the reasons they engaged in the activity. Women would tell me that they recited sutras with the group in order to gain benefit in this life and the next for both themselves as well as for their children (the stress being on the latter). For them, the difference between sutra recital and Jōc-related practices was only one of degree.

Although men would not usually deny the worldly effects, they would never say that this was the reason they engaged in this particular religious practice. More central to their explanations for why they participated was self-cultivation, which is a discourse which has roots in normative Buddhism as well as Confucianism.

The labels of orthodoxy and heterodoxy reflect a hegemonic discourse that fuels the reluctance of individuals to express the ways that they conceptualise the symbolic meanings of their practice. By claiming authority, men achieve status vis-à-vis women within the field. However, while there is a differentiation and hierarchisation between men’s and women’s practice as sub-groups within the field, there is also competition within these sub-groups. Especially for women, this competition often takes the form of conspicuous devotion. For men, it is often involved with performing knowledge and self-cultivation – a subject to which we will now turn our attention.
Plate 38: Two Women of the 'Inner Circle' at Quán Su Pagoda
CHAPTER SIX

THE RITUAL SPECIALISTS: PERFORMANCES OF KNOWLEDGE

While I was doing research at Quán Sứ Pagoda, I was struck by the spatial division that seemed to coincide with modes of practice: the sutra hall, the Research Institute, the lecture hall and the library. I found that as I made my way around the premises, there were certain people I only met in specific places: Ông Đức was only to be found in the library. Many women I knew only by face appeared only in the sutra hall during the Sâm Nguyên. Others spent all their time in the Research Institute.

On one occasion I made my way up to the office in Quán Sứ Pagoda that was in charge of publications. Out of this office emerged the quarterly magazine on Buddhism, *The Research Journal of Buddhist Studies* ¹ — one of two Buddhist magazines published in Vietnam (the other a weekly, published in Saigon). Inside was a long table that ran the length of the room. Against the far wall were three desks, for the man in charge of publications and two women who worked as part-time assistants.

There were often men who would visit, many of whom submitted articles regularly to the magazine. One man that I occasionally saw there was a former army colonel. When we first met, he presented me

¹ Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Phát Học.
with a name card printed in English on one side and Vietnamese on
the other. The English side reads:

Tam-Tich
COLONEL (RETIRED)
-Senior Editor Editorial Board of
VN ENCYCLOPEDIA
-Journalist (since 1945)
-Researcher on Buddhism

Colonel Tich always made his way straight from the gate to the
Research Institute, where he would have a cup of tea and talk with the
people there. I never met him in any other location or at any other
activity; he did not recite sutras, he did not go to the Sunday sermons
and he did not make offerings. He was a proud man who was always
cheerful, smiling and joking with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. He
would speak to me in French and English as well as Chinese, and he
made a point of showing me that he had written articles in the
Buddhist magazine. The conversations we had were usually a mix of
Vietnamese and Buddhist history.

His religious practice was focused on research and writing about
Buddhism, and was situated in the Research Institute rather than the
sutra hall. While he agreed that rituals need to be held in the pagoda,
he made vague excuses for why he did not take part in them. One
time he said that, on a personal level, it was more important to study
and behave morally than it was to perform rituals or chant sutras. As
with the men who took part in the ritual group at Phúc Lộc Pagoda,
Colonel Tich enjoyed going to this particular location, where he met
with friends who held similar interests. If the ritual group could be
said to be a club, so could the community of people who contributed
articles to the Buddhist magazine.

A theme I return to throughout this thesis is the dramatic shift in the
way that Buddhism (and religion in general) is regarded differently
with the approach of old age (see Soucy 1999a). Young men often
deride religion, and do not differentiate between various aspects and
practices, labelling all religious practice as superstition. One young man who had come from a village to Hanoi in order to get a job in construction summed it up when he said that all of it was superstition (tất cả là mê tín). There is, as mentioned in Chapter Two, a marked tendency for Confucian scholars to disregard ‘folk’ religious practice as being frivolous, wasteful and based on superstition. The Marxist view of religion in Vietnam continues to express itself in much the same terms as had hitherto been associated with Confucianism: one of the main rhetorical approaches to the criticism of religious practice was concerned with the waste of resources. This rhetoric continues today, but is supplemented in the media by images that lampoon the faithful. Men’s views tended to reflect these approaches.

While there continue to be old men who denigrate certain practices considered superstitious – even amongst those who take part in Buddhist activities – the discrimination between religious and superstitious practice becomes more subtle as men age, and some older men take up Buddhist practice. One fifty-four year old man, for example, told me that while he did not really believe in Buddhism, he found himself attracted to the Buddhist monastic lifestyle. No longer are all forms of religious practice discarded as superstition. Malarney (1998:5) suggests that even ten years ago this situation was different, and men, both young and old, were much more careful about appearing sympathetic or attaching an importance for Vietnamese culture to religion and Buddhism.

Religious practice is now often linked to a general concern for Vietnamese culture. Older people expressed to me their concern that Vietnamese tradition and culture were in danger of being lost. The youth are perceived as the weak point in the defences of Vietnamese tradition, because they are losing values such as filial piety (hiếu), resulting in a conflict between the old and the young: ‘The young find the old “obstacles” to them whereas the old mock the inexperience of the young’ (Thanh Tùng 1998:41-42). Most older men, even those who have never been religious and continue to maintain a lifestyle removed from religious spaces, would speak favourably of the connection between religion and Vietnamese tradition. I knew a man about to retire who expressed a similar view to the one above about Buddhist monasticism. He was thoughtful and quiet in manner. He had never been religious, although his wife was very active and one of his daughters would regularly go to pagodas, especially to wish for success in exams. (He was not entirely pleased with this, particularly if
it replaced study as a means of achievement). He once defined superstition *(mê tín)* as being different from religion *(tôn giáo)* because the latter contained a moral element. He often said that he would like to live in a monastery when he grew older because it would give him peace. When he said this, he contrasted the monastic life with his active life in the world, where he was plagued by worries about his family and finances. However, his interest in living in a pagoda was not due to feelings of devotion to the figure of the Buddha. He was attracted to the peacefulness of a contemplative life associated with Buddhist monasticism. It is an ideal commonly associated with old age for men, and comes back to the asceticism that is embodied in the symbolism of Hồ Chí Minh’s life, which we shall look at later. Older men, especially, are seen as and expected to be wise. Part of the performance of wisdom comes through asceticism and self-cultivation.2

This chapter examines how men’s practices are performed and described in ways very different from women’s. Whereas women’s Buddhist practices are emphasised as being devotional and emotional, men’s practices are described as being intellectual, philosophical, and emotionally detached. This essential distinction, which leads men to separate themselves from women, is part of a general discourse of masculine practice. Thus, it is part of a hegemonic process by which men, as a group, gain ascendency over women. This is not to say that the pagoda is a primary site for the reproduction of a particular vision of masculinity, or that the pagoda is a critical site for the subordination of women. Rather, the pagoda, and religious practice more generally, is one field in which we can see the processes and reproduction of gender-based power relations. Within this field men attain cultural capital through particular performances of male-based knowledge. At the same time, this cultural capital is in some ways

2 When I write of ‘self-cultivation’, I am not using it in the inclusive sense that Thien Đô uses it: ‘The meaning of the word *tu* has a long involved conflation of the Confucian trajectory of *tu thân* (“self-correction”, “perfectibility”), or *tu tâm* (“cultivate the heart/mind”) with Daoist *tu luyện* (“training” -- as in various meditative arts including alchemy) and Buddhist *tu niệm* (“perfecting thought and imagination”), among other approaches to enlightenment. It has been well argued that, while the Confucian approach to self-perfection, being the reserve of scholarly élite, is divorced from supernaturalism, Daoism and Buddhism lend themselves more readily to popular beliefs in spiritual powers obtainable through self-cultivation’ (Đô 1995:196-197). The men I am speaking about here mainly emulating a form of self-cultivation along Confucian lines, based in mental perfectibility. I am therefore using the term to distinguish knowledge-based forms of practice from more devotional exercises, aimed at receiving the Buddha’s blessing.
convertible across different fields. However, this latter point should not be over-stressed, or understood to mean that a man who studies Buddhist philosophy will have more power over his wife. Rather, while men as a whole benefit from being regarded as more intellectual, rational and in control of their emotions, and while Buddhist practice may contribute to the production and naturalisation of this belief (at both an individual and a general level), the symbolic capital gained in the pagoda has the most power within the boundaries of that field. These dynamics will be made clearer in this chapter.

MASCUINITIES

Religious practice in Hanoi has played out and been described in gender-specific ways. In Chapter Two I discussed the gender structure of Hanoi in broad terms. Here I will discuss masculinity more specifically in order to draw out some of the gender implications of the male performances of knowledge as a distinct Buddhist practice. The discourse on Zen being the tradition of Vietnam draws on a masculine framing of religious practice that accents (male) self-cultivation rather than acknowledging that very few people engage in meditation. More devotional expressions of religion, which are often associated with women, are not recognised as being the form of Buddhism that most people practice.

Within Buddhism, there is presently, and perhaps has always been, a differential valuing of practice along gendered lines. However, it is often at a rhetorical level where men’s and women’s practices are most starkly delineated. Virtually all noted Buddhist figures in Vietnam are as male Zen masters. In Thich Thanh Tù’s (1992) book, Zen Masters of Vietnam, four of the one-hundred and forty-one entries are of female monastics. Thich Đồng Bồn (1995) has edited a work, entitled Biography of Vietnamese Monks of the 20th Century, Volume 1, which excludes nuns completely and, as far as I know, there are no books devoted solely to the biographies of nuns. The written record therefore tends to stress elite, male, orthodox practice, while ignoring

3 Thiền Sư Việt Nam.

4 Interestingly, all of the four nuns (Ni Sư Diệu Nhãn, Ni Sư Tuệ Thông, Ni Cô Họ Lệ, and Ni Cô Họ Tống) came from rich and/or noble families. They are often described as being virtuous, pious, filial and beautiful, and two had been widowed before they became nuns.

5 Tủ Danh Tạng Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XX, Tập 1.
the fact that the vast majority of regular devotees who sustain the monastic institution are, and appear to have been, at least from the last (Nguyễn) dynasty, women. During this dynasty, it was often queens who sponsored the constructions of pagodas in the Huế area. For example, Bào Quốc Pagoda which was restored in 1808 by Emperor Gia Long’s mother and Quốc Ân Pagoda in 1805 by Gia Long’s sister (Trần D.V. et al. 1993:154, 164).

While some men in later life choose to engage in religious practice, they describe their practice in different terms to women, even when the activities they engage in are virtually identical in the final instance. In Chapter Four, this could be seen in the division of interpretations that surrounded the Sâm Nguyễn. Beyond interpretation, men who describe themselves as practising Buddhists will often engage in different sets of activities which have greater resonance with particular ideals of masculinity. At this point, it is important to switch the discussion over to a more theoretical examination of how masculinity is constructed in Vietnam.

To begin with, masculinity is not a singular category. There are, in a sense, multiple masculinities, though not in the sense in which one might speak of, for example, a rural masculinity or an urban masculinity. The historical transformations of masculinities (Connell 1995:70-71) make such a typology misleading. For example, getting rich in business is an important part of urban constructions of masculinity today; such a vision of masculinity would have been anathema thirty, twenty, or even ten years ago. Further, many urban men would not conform to such a model.

Instead, masculinity should be thought of as being created through processes of interaction and in relationship to gendered circumstances:

“Masculinity”, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (Connell 1995:71).

This relational approach underlines the fact that gender is constructed in a process. Connell’s term *gender projects* brings out the importance of regarding gender as being configured through time while simultaneously transforming the starting-point of gender structures (1995:72). However, while gender practice is creative and inventive, it
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nonetheless 'responds to particular situations and is generated within definite structures of social relations' (Connell 1995:72). Precisely because masculinity is dynamically defined through relations (as is femininity), it engages with and is positioned in, a number of structures of relationship simultaneously. This creates tendencies towards internal contradiction and historical disruption (Connell 1995:73). These contradictions, however, are often ignored, or are not noticed, by those engaged in the processes. This, it seems, is a necessary precondition for a common-sense view of gender that takes the structures as being meaningful and substantive.

While there are multiple masculinities, hegemonic masculinity is generally more coherent.6 It is the form of masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, and is phrased in opposition to femininity and to other, subordinate masculinities (e.g., gay masculinity, or in the Vietnamese case, rural masculinity). It is the form of masculinity that embodies the solution to the continued legitimacy of patriarchy at a given time, and continues the dominance of men over women and of some men over most others. Hegemonic masculinity, being framed in relation to the other, is always contestable, and therefore changes form. The switch in dress of Communist Party members signifies recent changes in hegemonic masculinity in Vietnam. Pre-Renovation, the standard dress was Maoist, and accentuated the Marxist stress on the primacy of the worker-peasant. Colours were drab and style was simple. Western-style power-suits have replaced the uniform of the past, creating a more pronounced difference between the urban elite and the rural peasant (who still mostly wear army-surplus clothing for its affordability and durability). To draw out the contrast further, most women who have positions in the state apparatus wear the 'traditional' áo dài or their minority costumes when attending official meetings.

6 I follow Connell's explanation of hegemony: 'In the concept of hegemonic masculinity, "hegemony" means... a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes. Ascendancy of one group of men over another achieved at the point of a gun, or by the threat of unemployment, is not hegemony. Ascendancy which is embedded in religious doctrine and practice, mass media content, wage structures, the design of housing, welfare/taxation policies and so forth, is' (Connell 1991 [1987]: 184).
The hegemonic position of men in Vietnam can be clearly seen in the way that men dominate in business and in all high positions in government. The changes in gender dynamics in recent years have widened the gap between masculinity and femininity. Pre-Renovation ideology expressed equality between men and women, seeing the domination of women as a feudal remnant. However, since the late 1980s, femininity has increasingly been emphasised, with fashion – especially urban-middle class fashion – following Western styles:

...fashion spreads in 1970s and 80s magazines were imbued with "an aesthetic of socialist androgyny which prized simplicity, labour, and frugality" (Leshkowich 1999:11). Most if not all women wore trousers, especially in the north... and most people, male and female, dressed in soldierly colours of dark green or blue... The Western style [portrayed in magazines today], by contrast, are highly feminine. They disseminate a non-socialist aesthetic of the feminine: decorative, colourful, often quite revealing, playful, cute, girlish (styles that Western audiences would associate with teenagers), and above all not associated with work (Drummond 1999:112).

While clothing choice may be a signifier, the real effect of this switch from socialist androgyny has been concurrent with a decrease in the number of women who hold positions within the government (Fahey 1998:237), as the statistics on female participation in leadership showed in Chapter One.

Although hegemonic masculinity embodies an accepted strategy, at a given time, it does not mean that all men conform to this hegemonic ideal. As I mention above, hegemonic masculinity subordinates other forms of masculinity and is made legitimate partially in relation to these other subordinated masculinities. For example, with the post-Renovation stress on business and the free-market, rural masculinity that stresses a peasant background has lost ascendancy. While the founding members of the Vietnamese government were often from villages in the north, today there is an increasing number who are urban, and have received extensive tertiary education. In Hanoi, I often heard the former party secretary, Đỗ Mười, being disparaged because he was a 'country bumpkin' (nha quê) with little education. Consequently, one of the reasons why so many village men choose to go to the big cities is the recognition that it is the urban rather than rural lifestyle that is now dominant.7

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7 Most works on migrant workers (e.g., Nguyen V.C. 1997; Li 1996) have looked mainly at the economic factors for migration to cities. While this is important, I think that the
number of these young bachelors told me that they would stay in the city after they got married, if they could, but it was very difficult to do so. They only grudgingly accepted that their time in the city was temporary. These young men largely sought companionship after work with young men of the same age and from the same village. While village solidarity and chain migration was one cause of these men not circulating more widely, as Li Tana (1996:20-21) points out, it was also important that they did not fit in to the city life. I once asked Minh, the sceptical young man introduced in Chapter One, about this:

| Me | How come you don’t have any friends from the city? The people you spend your time with are all from your own village. |
| Minh | City men think they are so much better than us villagers. They have nice clothes and drive Dream II motorcycles [a variety that is more expensive and less reliable than the ones preferred by rural people]. I can’t talk to them. We have nothing in common. I feel more comfortable with friends from my own village. They don’t look down on me the way that city men do. |

Although Minh preferred being in Hanoi (he always complained how boring the village was), he expected that he would get married and settle in his village. It was not only logistically hard for him to support a family in Hanoi, but he never felt comfortable with Hanoians.

A major part of the problem was that he felt he lacked the linguistic capital necessary to aspire to an urban lifestyle. At one time, when his boss was giving him a lot of trouble at the backpacker hotel where he worked, I took him to meet a friend of my wife Lan who worked at a job centre. When we went to meet her at the centre, his behaviour changed dramatically from his normal, self-confident manner. He spoke with rigid politeness and with obvious discomfort, and his responses to her questions were accented by rigid, polite particles and were as brief as possible. Though usually men are in a position of dominance in relation to women, in this case the woman had social and linguistic capital which he lacked:

importance of the increased valorisation of the urban lifestyle cannot be discounted.
No one can completely ignore the linguistic or cultural law. Every time they enter into an exchange with the holders of the legitimate competence, and especially when they find themselves in a formal situation, dominated individuals are condemned to a practical, corporeal recognition of the laws of price formation which are the least favourable to their linguistic productions and which condemns them to a more or less desperate attempt to be correct, or to silence (Bourdieu 1991:97; emphasis in original).

When I later questioned him about the encounter, he admitted to feeling extremely uncomfortable because his Vietnamese ‘was not good enough’ and because the encounter left him with a feeling of powerlessness. Language is an important part in the way that hegemonic masculinity is constructed. Lan’s friend found him a better job as a receptionist at medium-level hotel, but he decided not to take it, instead putting up with the harassment of his former boss (who would regularly dock a month’s pay for a minor infraction of her rules). He said that he lacked the linguistic competence for such a job and that he did not know how to use a computer (presuming that a hotel of that calibre would have computers, which was not necessarily the case). While Minh resented the fact that Hanoi men looked down on rural men, he nonetheless felt that the urban lifestyle and urban men were superior.

EDUCATION, SELF-CULTIVATION AND THE MASCULINITY OF OLD MEN

The ideal of masculinity which currently has ascendancy is urban-based and valorises education and success in business, politics or academia. In this respect there has been a return to a form of hegemonic masculinity that existed previous to the Revolution, where Confucian literati, and then those with ties to the French colonial government (and French education), were dominant:

In the communal life of Son Duong, both the role of educated men and socioeconomic differences were ritualized through communal house feasts from which women and the very poor (bach dinh) were excluded and at which any violation of the codified seating order and food distribution arrangements could lead to litigation. At the lowest level sat honorary occupants of general village positions (xa tien) who purchased their titles from the colonial government for half of a laborer’s annual income and who could provide a celebration feast for villagers in accordance with a long-existing tradition. At the next level were former holders of lower-level village offices and honorary...
deputy mayors who obtained their titles for the equivalent of a landless laborer’s full annual income. On the first-class mats were all the current and other former village occupants, holders of at least the honorary mayor title, and, as a reflection of a well-entrenched Confucian emphasis on scholarship, the members of the literati association (hoï van than), which included both Confucian scholars and holders of the Franco-Vietnamese certificat d’études élémentaires (Luong 1992:71).

Education and the idea that men (in relation to women) have superior intellectual ability is an important part of how women as a group are subjugated to men. The stress on education and knowledge being particularly masculine has its roots in Confucian biases. It was not until the start of this century that views about women’s capacity to study began to change (Luong 1992:73; Marr 1981:199-206). One of the Four Virtues – labour – expressed that women were expected to learn skills involved with the maintenance of the house (cooking and sewing, for example), but did not include intellectual or literate activities (Marr 1981:192).

Although reformers urged the education of women from the beginning of the twentieth century, this education remained firmly rooted in what women were thought capable of – in their ‘natural’ disposition. Thus, Marr (1981:201-205) notes that Phạm Quỳnh – a notable proponent of education for women – outlined a curriculum of education for upper-class women which emphasised a selection of the new quốc ngữ literature, which he considered ‘appropriate to women’s nature’: natural sciences, hygiene, geography and history, and if they were particularly intelligent, ‘students could study a little Chinese, and maybe even some French literature’ (Marr 1981:202). For middle-class women he stressed ‘practical’ subjects such as ‘sewing, weaving, and embroidery, plus arithmetic, to meet the presumed middle-class [female] preoccupation with buying and selling and maintaining accurate ledgers’ (Marr 1981:202). Such a curriculum naturalises expectations of women as having a lower intellectual capacity, while at the same time stressing women’s concerns as rooted in mundane aspects of everyday life. Women in Vietnam, mainly because of Confucian biases, have not been considered suitable for study, especially subjects that do not tie in with expectations of women’s role in society. This century there have been changes in the ideas about women studying (Luong 1992:73; Marr 1981:190-251), but in many ways this difference remains.

Women continue to be streamed into subjects that are considered
appropriate to their temperament. Most young women study education, nursing, natural sciences (to become lab technicians), accounting and business in Hanoi universities today. There are also a large number of young women who, along with young men, are studying foreign languages. However, the character of these studies does not diverge from the perceived usefulness for middle-class women of knowing arithmetic at the beginning of the century. It remains entirely a practical enterprise to help in business rather than for literary ends. I met one sixteen-year-old girl who wanted to study chemistry, but her father considered it inappropriate for women, and was exerting pressure for her to go into economics. Certainly, the figures show that higher education (especially post-graduate studies), remains the domain of men.

Figure 10: 1995 Statistics on the Population Age 16 and Above, by Qualification and Education Degree and Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degrees</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Post-graduate Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Doctorate</td>
<td>526</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Candidates for doctorate</td>
<td>7986</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>87.7[sic]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Professors</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>96.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Associate professors</td>
<td>2801</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>95.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tertiary education (1989 data)</td>
<td>678,100</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Professional, vocational education</td>
<td>1,190,100</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Technicians</td>
<td>978,500</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Tran Tran Thi Van Anh & Le Ngoc Hung (1997:139)

In conversations I had with a number of people, I asked whether they thought that men were more rational and therefore ought to make the most important decisions in the family. All men agreed that this was the case, and more than three-quarters of the women agreed or were not sure. When I asked one young woman why so many women chose to get degrees in accounting instead of sciences, she explained:
Women are naturally good with money, but they aren't as intelligent as men when it comes to abstract thinking. That is why most men are scientists. It is the same for subjects like history or philosophy. Women are just better at practical things.

Luong has made the point that even given names reflect the bias that study is an ideal for sons but not daughters: men typically having names related to studying (the most typical male middle name – Văn – means literature), and women names which reflect the importance placed on beauty (e.g., Perfume – Hương; Orchid – Lan; Jade – Ngọc; or Water – Thụy) (Luong 1990:92-93). The belief that men are more suited to study leads to differential expectations for sons and daughters, where sons are supposed to succeed in their careers and daughters become mothers (Nguyen V.C. 1997:5-6).

A higher education for women also affects their eligibility for marriage. As one man said, he did not want his wife to have higher education, because it would only cause problems within the family. It is commonly believed in Hanoi that women with higher education will be disadvantaged when it comes to finding a suitable marriage partner. One young woman who held a job in a joint-venture company said to me:

If I have a daughter, I don’t think I would want her to get a higher education. She should get a practical degree, but after she graduates she should find a job. If she studies to a higher level, she would have trouble finding a husband and it will be harder for their relationship to succeed. If a woman has education to the same level they won’t be able to follow their husband because they will feel too equal. Women with high education are more stubborn, and that will cause trouble in her family.

The happy family, as the prime goal set for women, therefore, has the effect of also limiting women’s opportunity for education. It detracts from the main purpose for women: care and teaching of the children. Thus, I knew one couple who were well off, and the wife had a great deal of autonomy as an independent business woman. They decided that their son should go to China to study medicine. For the younger daughter, however, they felt that she ought not to study to a high level.
Hồ Chí Minh

The importance of education, knowledge and self-cultivation has perhaps never been very far under the surface for Vietnamese ideals of masculinity – even during revolutionary times – but it has certainly seen a resurgence. Hồ Chí Minh is a symbol of how this aspect of hegemonic masculinity was never completely abandoned, but was instead placed alongside other aspects that emerged in the context of the Revolution. For our purposes, the connection between the masculinity he embodied and the political (male) power that he represents is particularly important. The elements of hegemonic masculinity that existed from Revolution to Renovation are not surprisingly reflected in Lacouture’s (1968) chapter headings in his political biography of Hồ Chí Minh: The peasant, the militant, the unifier, the prisoner, the liberator, the guerrilla leader, the victor. However, he has also always been portrayed as having close ties to Confucian visions of the self-cultivated man: ‘Ho Chí Minh was a man who lived a life which consistently aimed for lofty ideals set from the start and was a man of ideals and these ideals materialised in him’ (Pham V.D. 1990:64). This representational value is heightened by the hagiographic flavour of his biographies that raise his life up as an example to the Vietnamese people, and to men in particular. In one booklet there is a chapter entitled ‘President Ho-Chi-Minh’s Moral Greatness – His Style of Work’, which clearly draws on the image of Hồ Chí Minh as being an intellectual, dedicated to the noble pursuit of self-cultivation as a way to aid his people:

A foreign writer used the following words to depict him: *intelligence, humanity, courage*. He symbolizes to the highest degree the communist virtues in Vietnam and is an epitome of the best qualities of our people. He has developed the traditional virtues of the East: intelligence, humanity and courage on a completely new basis (Trương-Chinh 1966:60; emphasis in original).

Masculinity is embodied in Hồ Chí Minh, a way which reconciles revolutionary masculinity and Confucian masculinity comes right at the beginning of many accounts of his life: ‘President Hồ Chí Minh was born into the family of a poor, patriotic intellectual family with peasant background’ [sic] (Trương-Chinh 1981:7); ‘His father was a
laureate of the competitive examination for the doctorate degree. However, he was from a peasant family’ (Tran D.T. 1995:3). Another example:

He was born in 1890 into a poor peasant scholar's family of Kimlien hamlet, Namlien village, Namdan district, Nghean province, a place with long-standing revolutionary traditions. His father was a Pho Bang [Doctor of classical humanities], who out of patriotism had refused to collaborate with the French colonialists and Nguyen feudalists and lived in poverty (Trương-Chinh 1966:9).

The biographies then immediately embark on a description of his formative voyage out of the fatherland to the West. In a similar vein, in the story of the Buddha's early life, he left the palace that had sheltered him and realised the truth of the human condition being suffering, sickness and death, but also recognised that renunciation and a personal striving to become enlightened can bring escape. Hồ Chí Minh’s trip to the West is described as bringing this realisation:

He visited many countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and America, living among working people of various races. Everywhere in colonial countries, he noted that the people were subjected to the same suffering and humiliation as his own countrymen. Everywhere, they were oppressed and exploited by the same enemy - imperialism - applying the same cruel colonialist policy. In developed capitalist countries, President Hồ Chí Minh noted the existence of two categories of men at two opposing poles of society: On the one hand, the oppressed and exploited working class and labouring people living in dire poverty, and on the other hand, the moneyed, wealthy and powerful bourgeoisie and land-owners living in affluence and luxury. From this he reached important conclusions: All colonial people have a common enemy – imperialism: the enemy of the colonial peoples is also the enemy of the working class and labouring people in “mother countries”, to overthrow the common enemy, the oppressed nations and the working class and labouring people of all countries must unite; but to gain independence and freedom, each oppressed nation must rely in the first place on its own forces. It must liberate itself through its own efforts (Trương-Chinh 1966:60; emphasis in original).

Hồ Chí Minh’s vision, then, stressed striving at a national level for the good of all.
Plate 39 & 40: Hồ Chí Minh in His Garden
Plate 41 & 42: Hồ Chí Minh as Literati
At a personal level, asceticism and self-cultivation as revolutionary cum monastic form the core of his represented persona. He never married, and he did not, at least officially, indulge in sex. He continues to be portrayed as celibate, like a Buddhist monk. His asceticism extended into almost all areas of his personal life, and in this description has particular resemblances to Buddhist monastic life:

Whether at home or abroad, Ho Chi Minh never took holidays. Every day he kept a strict timetable... Spartan meals so many people could not imagine them [sic]. However, what impressed me was that during meals, he told up to eat up dish [sic] and leave an untouched one. I recall this in order to demonstrate his kind heart, his respect for those who prepared the meal and furthermore for those who prepared the ingredients of the meal (Pham V.D. 1990:64).

He did, however, smoke cigarettes, which in the Vietnamese context is a particularly potent symbol of masculinity. He wore simple clothes. He denied himself the comfort of the presidential palace, choosing instead to live in a small, wooden stilt house on the palace grounds. The house, it should be noted, continues to draw crowds of Vietnamese visitors who are paraded single file around the grounds and through the house, where his simple lifestyle is illustrated and underlined for all. He is represented as being ascetic, scholarly and having immense self-control.

Uncle Hồ’s persona also drew on imagery of the family through the use of Vietnamese kinship terms which carved out a very specific social location:

this use of the word ‘uncle’ must also be related to the particular climate of Vietnamese society and traced back to its roots in Confucianism. Bác, or uncle, is what a man calls his father’s elder brother, a member of the family who outshines even the father in dignity and prestige. The concept of old age is very important in traditional Vietnamese society. No hint of irony or disrespect has ever been aimed at the old. The old man remains, as he has always been, the key figure in a social structure based on the soil, the village and the home – this home being centered around the ancestral altar. The revolution has scarcely impinged at all on such ideas (Lacouture 1968:208).

8 There are rumours that the Comintern assigned him women and that he had lovers while abroad, but the fact that these stories are Party secrets only underlines how deeply Hồ Chí Minh’s celibacy holds deep symbolic value.
Jamieson points out that beyond being a term which denotes reverence, **bác** holds a particular place in Vietnamese society.⁹ 'Father's older brother' is a position that entails power, yet at the same time a disconnectedness with the conflicts of everyday life. He is above it all, and remains unmarred by daily scuffles. There is again resonance with the monastic elements of Uncle Hồ's ascetic lifestyle in that he somehow transcends aspects of everyday life. At the same time he is represented as being close to children. In fact his love of children is still celebrated by the tour guides that show you around his house. In the centre of Hanoi, beside Hồ Hoàng Điền Lake there was a billboard portraying Uncle Hồ with children on his lap in 1997.

*Plate 42: The Uncle*

So, Hồ Chí Minh was powerful, ascetic, but intimate with his national family. Nurturing perhaps. More importantly, he was educated and scholarly. In his stilt house there is a bookshelf with

⁹ In his speeches he ranged across various pronouns according to circumstance, but **bác** remains the most prominent, and the one that everyone knows and still refers to him by.
some of his favourite foreign books. Beyond a consumer of books, he was a writer and a poet. His great learning could not be better symbolised than by the fact that while in prison in China he wrote poems, in Chinese, according to one pamphlet I read in Hanoi to be the equal of those produced during the Chinese T’ang Dynasty. While the production of his image may be the result of political compromises, it nonetheless draws on cultural capital in fashioning his legitimated power.

*Plate 43: The God*

Thus, Hồ Chí Minh’s image is a compromise between old, Confucian masculinity (which is seeing a resurgence), and revolutionary masculinity. The way that Hồ Chí Minh embodies Confucian self-cultivation combined with revolutionary activism is made transparent by Nguyen Khac Vien:
The most vivid example of a Confucian scholar who changed from one philosophy to the other is surely President Ho Chi Minh. His change was not easy or simple, the result of reading a couple of books or of solitary reflection... His transition to Marxism stemmed from revolutionary practice, not from reading books. He reconstructed his entire thinking (1974:51).

Hồ Chí Minh represents a form of masculinity that has particular resonances for older men in Hanoi today. A semi-ascetic self-cultivation forms the core of the way that old men practice Buddhism. Such an image of masculinity has some striking resemblances with the way that men in Java are described as gaining access to power through ascetic practice and the control of one's passions (Anderson 1972, 1990:23-26; Brenner 1995:28-31). The main difference is that self-cultivation and the control of passions is more directly associated with social power and prestige without intermediation of spiritual power.¹⁰

OLD MEN, MASCULINITY AND LIFE-CHANGES

After the World Cup final match finished at four o'clock in the morning in the early summer of 1998, young people who had been watching the telecast raced around the small lake in the centre of Hanoi on their motorcycles. In the early morning, as the sun started to come up, they retreated, giving way to the old people who flooded out onto the sidewalk that surround Hồán Kiêm Lake. The air was still, warm, and, as usual, so humid that mould grows on anything inert. But at least it was not yet hot, and the sun was yet to press desperate people into the shade or into their houses for long afternoon naps. Some mist hung on the still green water of the lake.

This particular morning the old people looked a little more sleepy than usual; many had stayed up late watching the same game that sent the youth into a frenzy the night before - a lust for football is perhaps one of the few interests that young and old share. They could be seen stretching, running, playing badminton and doing Tai Chi under the trees. The music and the slow-count that drives the Tai Chi groups can be heard remotely throughout Hanoi. The elderly's participation in early-morning exercises is so common that it has been

¹⁰ Đô (1995), however, convincingly argues that self-cultivation in the popular sense in southern Vietnam is implicated to a much greater extent with obtaining spiritual power.
called a ‘mass movement among the old’, which ‘not only allows a good intellectual, physical and social activity [sic], but also remedies or relieves many infections: asthma, high blood pressure, nervous breakdown, chronic colitis, rheumatism, etc.’ (Nguyễn K.V. 1998:94). Fitness is something that is yet to become popular with young people, though the signs in 1998 were that it was poised to do so.

Tai Chi is thought of by most in medical terms, more of an exercise than a martial art or a form of meditation. For many it is an amusement as well as an exercise. There are few things to occupy old people in Hanoi. Whereas in rural areas there is always something that can be done by old men – taking out the cow or feeding the chickens – in urban areas the economic usefulness of old men ends at retirement in a way that it does not for women (rural or urban), who continue to have responsibilities for their households and families. Some old men spend their time playing chess with friends; others just sit at home or help their wives tend small shops or cigarette stands. Some may spend time watching their grandchildren, maybe teaching them something along the way. Of course the poor never stop working until they drop dead. Old men will sit beside the road from morning until night with bicycle pumps ready to stir from their half-sleep if a bicycle needs some air. For those who have the luxury of retirement, days are spent idle, and there is often little to do to fill the hours. Exercise is one thing that many do. Becoming involved in religion is another.

Plate 44: Tai Chi
In the Tai Chi group at Phúc Lộc Pagoda there is an old man named Ông Hùng, who was regarded as particularly remarkable by many in the pagoda. He was a seventy-nine year old retired director of a state owned enterprise who came to the pagoda every morning in order to practice Tai Chi with the group. Whereas most participants in the group described their activities only as exercise (tập), Ông Hùng would point out the metaphysical meaning behind the practice, the achievement of balance of yin and yang within his body. He was in excellent shape for his age, for which he was justifiably proud (on occasion demonstrating this by flexing a muscle), but it was his knowledge that had earned him high status among not only the Tai Chi Group, but also with the pagoda community. He always enjoyed speaking about his interests and concerns, and rarely did I need to ask more than one question for him to go into a long monologue. He would pause only occasionally to take a sip of tea or light a cigarette, which usually burned itself out from neglect while he was absorbed in his lectures. Often I didn’t need to ask anything at all. He would simply take it upon himself to broaden my knowledge of Vietnamese culture, tradition, history, philosophy or religion. In short, he could be described as a perfect key informant.

He had high status within the pagoda community because of his phenomenal memory and his ability to speak authoritatively about Buddhism. He spoke French quite well and when explaining something, would often pepper his speech with French words or even entire sentences. He would do this with me, knowing that I spoke French, but sometimes it would happen even if the person he was speaking to did not understand French. When speaking to me about Buddhism he also often used Sanskrit terminology. Even more important for his prestige was his knowledge of Chinese characters. The first time we met, someone sitting around him pointed out his virtuosity to me by making reference to his ability to read Chinese. As if taking that as a cue, he started to explain the meaning of the inscription on the pillar behind me. This first speech was to be only my introduction to him, and henceforth I would wander by the pagoda early most mornings so that I could sit and listen to him in between sessions of Tai Chi.

The men in the group would stop and listen intently to what he was saying. If more than one woman was present, they would usually go off to the side and have their own discussion. No one would disturb him or interject; he was left alone to speak at length on
whatever subject he thought would benefit me. He would respond to this attention by directing his lectures not only to me but also to everyone in the group. He was not an informant feeding information to the anthropologist; he was a performer displaying his knowledge to the whole group. When he would utter something in French to me (which he did frequently), he would always follow it up in the next sentence with the Vietnamese translation for the sake of the others.

Ông Hùng was respected as the authority by everyone in the pagoda. People would often respond to my questions by directing me to see Ông Hùng. This happened to the point where it became something of an impediment. The old woman in the Tai Chi group would bring the snacks insisted virtually every time I met her that I should go to his house and speak with him. People would even provide me with questions to ask him which they thought might be relevant to my research. On one occasion I entered the pagoda early in the morning and found a ritual taking place that I had never seen before. I went to the nun, Thầy Tâm, and asked her the name of the ritual. In response she said: ‘It is a ritual for Bhaichadyaguru Buddha (Đức Sự Phật).\(^{11}\) You should go and ask Ông Hùng about its meaning.’\(^{12}\)

Thầy Tâm was neither authoritative, nor a particularly knowledgeable woman, although she was a charming person and got on well with everyone. She studied Chinese characters in order to be able to recite sutras (a requirement of office), but she was more intent on learning the pronunciations for the practical purpose of performing the required rituals than for translation or comprehension. Even though she was the only monastic at the pagoda, she would refer me to Ông Hùng to find out the meaning behind certain rituals, or to elucidate points of Vietnamese cosmology.

The first time this happened was after I had been to a funeral and was interested in finding out the meaning behind some of the things that I had seen, and to try and get a sense of Vietnamese eschatology. She tried to explain to me the schedule of the different rituals to be performed. However, when I asked what the purpose of each of the rituals was, she immediately suggested that I go and ask Ông Hùng. At this point he happened to walk by and she persuaded him to sit and explain funerals to me.

\(^{11}\) This Buddha is known for healing sickness.

\(^{12}\) ‘Đây là lễ cho Đức Sự Phật. Chầu đi hỏi cụ Hùng y nghĩa là gì dĩ’ [translation mine].
On another occasion I was trying to conduct a questionnaire, in which I was asking, among other things, the purpose and importance of specific Buddhist practices. She started to fill in the questionnaire, but stopped when Ông Hưng walked by, telling me that I should give him one to fill out. The nun then read out the questions to Ông Hưng and filled in his answers on the sheet. Ông Hưng gave definitive answers as to which practices were important and which were not, then left. The nun then wrote her name on the top of Ông Hưng’s questionnaire and handed it back to me, refusing to return the questionnaire that she had already half-completed on her own.

Ông Hưng’s status is based on his knowledge rather than any role as a ritual specialist; he does not himself take part in ritual at all:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thày Tầm</th>
<th>Alec asks why you often come to the pagoda and give lectures about the Buddha’s sutras but never recite sutras. Is that right? Alec just said that you said you don’t recite sutras but you study them and understand them, and that is better than people who recite them but don’t understand anything.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ông Hưng</td>
<td>The first thing is that I follow the Buddhist teachings. It isn’t only when I became old that I started to pay attention [to the Buddha’s teachings]. All of my life I haven’t done anything wicked, I haven’t done anything ugly, double-faced or dishonest. That is, following the Buddha. I followed the Buddha from the time that I had my first thought. So then, reciting sutras is repeating over and over with respect. And, and what is a sutra but the summary of [the Buddha’s] speeches... It is done this way to enable women to understand and remember [translation mine, see Appendix 1:6.1].</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**MEN AND BUDDHIST PRACTICE**

The differences in male and female religious practice are bound to the discourse on religion and superstition, giving the former an elevated status at the cost of the latter. The religious objective of older men is seen in opposition to the practices of women, being aimed more towards mundane and immanent rather than transcendental or
soteriological goals. Thus, women's practice is invested in broader issues of femininity being expressed through care of the family, yet on the whole is negatively valued as superstition. However, it is seen as natural for women to be concerned with the family and with mundane matters and not in self-cultivation. For men, being concerned with the family is considered a virtue, but it is expected to be in a more detached manner, as a patriarch. Men are ideally not supposed to get involved in the messy, everyday workings of the family, but to transcend them and guide family members in an enlightened manner. While women are expected to be emotional (as it is intrinsic to their presumed nature), to cry in sadness and scream in anger – men are supposed to rise above emotion, to have self-control and inner discipline.

The Ritual Group

In addition to having a different understanding of what the Sâm Nguyên accomplished, men who take part in sutra recital rituals approach the activity itself quite differently from women. Male participation in ritual stresses hierarchy. The status deriving from virtuosity is important for men, and especially for older men. Therefore, there is a tendency for some men to try to become dominant within the group that performs rituals. However, all men are \textit{a priori} dominant in relation to women by virtue of being male. This habitus of male dominance is expressed in the sutra recital through physical placement before, and often above, women.

Men are accustomed to operating in terms of differential status and status competition, and continue to behave in these ways, even in a space claimed to be egalitarian. Philosophically, Buddhism is ambivalent about inequality: whereas it assumes that hierarchies of being exist by virtue of the processes of karma and rebirth, it also suggests that such categories – which are in the end all impermanent – are lacking in reality (\textit{sunyata}). Nonetheless, within Vietnamese society status distinctions matter and linguistic exchanges dictate an immediate placement in a hierarchy relative to the other person in the exchange. As a consequence of these habitual modes, men who participate in pagoda life tend towards activities that are accorded more prestige than others, and away from those which are denigrated, especially those seen as superstitious by the state and by the religious
elite. In some ways then, men and women constitute different sub-sectors within the field, and their respective practices reflect their positions within the field qua dominant/dominated, orthodox/heretic, legitimate/illegitimate, or Buddhism/superstition.

Men who go to pagodas are drawn by the sense of community that group inclusion entails, men form an internal sub-group. The men that meet each other regularly at pagodas also meet each other outside of the pagoda. It was not unusual for me to see them walking down the street and talking together.

At Phúc Lộc Pagoda all of the men who participated in pagoda ritual did not do so passively, joining the crowd and following along. Without exception, the men that chanted sutras joined a group, which I mentioned earlier, called the ban cung or ‘ritual group’. The group gathered at least twice a week to practice rituals. They were the men who attended the pagoda regularly and were important for the lay ritual life in the pagoda – perhaps more so than the resident nun.

Before most rituals at Phúc Lộc Pagoda there was a performance by a ritual group. The ritual starts with a section of percussion music that lasts about five minutes, and is followed by a sutra recital that is interspersed with more percussion music. During the ritual about eight men play instruments and a few others chant. Certain sections are chanted by one of three leaders: the one in the middle played the bow-I-gong and wooden fish, the one on the left played the big drum and the one on the right played the small drum. Some sections are chanted by one of two sections of the group, and sometimes by the entire group. The phrases of the sutra are timed in relation to the percussion accompaniment, involving concentration and counting out the beat in order to phrase correctly. Each section had a leader, who would alternately perform solos, making the recital even more complex. To further complicate the ritual, the nun led the entire ritual, sitting front and centre. She would count the beat with the wooden fish and signal transitions with the bowl-gong.

On certain occasions Thày Tâm was not always able to lead the ritual, for example if she was not present on that day for a special reason, or if she was menstruating and therefore forbidden to enter

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13 The percussion instruments include a large drum and a small drum, and two sets of cymbals. There was a wooden fish and a bowl-bell, and a number of small plates made of brass that would make a clanging sound when hit with the drumstick.

14 For more information on the instruments used in Buddhist liturgy, see Nguyen Thuyet Phong (1985; 1986).
the main sanctuary of the pagoda. In those cases, one of the leaders would take her place. The men who sat in the front and played the big and small drums had the highest status in the group by virtue of their superior knowledge and mastery of both the sutra and their virtuosity in performing the percussion accompaniment. It was these leaders that acted as instructors for the whole group at the twice-weekly rehearsals.

There were two rehearsals every week to train for the ritual performance. They started at eight o’clock in the morning and lasted until ten-thirty. They then resumed in the afternoon at two o’clock and continued until around four o’clock. This time was spent partly on rehearsing the rhythms with the percussion instruments, partly on rehearsing the timing and pronunciation of the sutra, and partly on drinking tea and talking.

At Quán Sứ Pagoda I never encountered anything like the ritual group at Phúc Lộc Pagoda. However, the men who participated in the Sảm Nguyễn at Quán Sứ Pagoda also sat up front. Men led the chanting, and the petition, written in Chinese characters, was always read out by two old men at the end.

Participation in the ritual group was only for men. Exclusion of women was not so much prescribed as it was tacitly understood. No women ever complained about the fact that it was only men in the group. Nor were there any opportunities for men to feel obliged to refuse women’s participation. When I asked about this, people responded that women were not excluded, but that it was not really their place. Thus, one man said that it was because women are too busy taking care of the house, which was more an expression of stereotype than a statement about this specific practice. Others stated that it was simply something that only old men did. Part of the reason for the exclusion of women was the notion that women were not fit to study the required procedures. It was not for reasons of pollution, but simply an attributed ‘naturalness’ to the way that things were. I asked Thầy Tằm about this:
Teacher, how come yesterday there were only men practicing the drums, not women?

That is called the ‘ritual group’ (ban cúng), of course, it is mainly men who do rituals (cúng) seldom do women do it.

Why don’t women also perform ritual?

Women usually don’t learn about ritual.

Women don’t study? But if they study, can they do it?

If they studied they could also do it, but they don’t study.

Why don’t they study?

It’s not our way (kiều).

What do you mean?

It isn’t an activity (viec) for women.

Then why do you still study (and you are a woman)?

Because monastics have to study. For example, at the many rituals, if there isn’t anyone else, I have to perform the ritual, but if there are monks present, then we (nuns) don’t have to do it.

What activities (viec) are for women?

Nuns only prepare (offerings) for feasts (làm cỗ), and recite sutras (tòng kinh), that’s all. Rituals are for the monks. Nuns don’t perform rituals.

But reciting sutras is also for men, right?

Reciting sutras is for everyone, performing rituals is something separate [translation mine, see Appendix 1:6.2].

The positions of leadership in this group are achieved by virtue of the individual’s superior ability and knowledge. However, the hierarchy was not rigid, but was a recognition of authority and virtuosity. There were no formal ranks or insignia. They were simply recognised as being better than the others and therefore assumed
leadership. Not surprisingly, they had participated longer than most others, but there were some men in the group who had virtually no sense of rhythm, and would never be able to achieve a high status in the group because of their lack of ability. These people, too, were tolerated and accepted in the group.

By joining this group, the old men were transformed into ritual specialists. Regardless of the level of competence, all men who took part in sutra recitals also took part in rituals and were members of the ritual group. They sat at the front and most were given instruments to play. If there were too many, they took part in reciting without an instrument.

Nonetheless, relative to women, they had all gained status by inclusion in this group. The ritual had higher standing in the pagoda because it was seen as being essential to the ritual life of the pagoda rather than for the benefit of the individual, as the Sâm Nguyễn is believed to be. Thus, they had become essential for the pagoda, whereas women were never essential in this way. Further, they were participating in study and through that produced cultural capital that gave them authority within the pagoda. When they took part in regular sutra recitals (e.g., Sâm Nguyễn), they were the ones who sat closest to the front and led the service.

Men’s transformation into ritual specialists is accomplished through amassing symbolic capital in the form of knowledge and language. For this reason, study becomes extremely important for most men who practice Buddhism. Within the pagoda context (or field), men hold dominance over women – even nuns to some extent. However, this capital also serves to heighten prestige outside of the pagoda (in other fields).

Study is a form of religious practice, and can be viewed as a legitimate interaction with Buddhist symbols, whether or not it is directly related to ritual. It can encompass the study of sutras or ritual performance (including the musical aspects); it may be the study of Chinese characters (which also relates to ritual performance), or it may be the study of Buddhist philosophy (the purpose not relating at all to ritual). Like Colonel Tỉnh, many men call themselves Buddhist, read books about Buddhism, but never attend sutra recitals or rituals.

Study is part of a total performance of masculinity. The performance builds symbolic capital by its relation to the dominant

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15 I never saw a power struggle take place, but presumably it could happen (and perhaps has happened).
ideal of self-cultivation. The men who do not take part in ritual often have status within the pagoda through displays of their knowledge. In many ways this is the ideal practice for the creation of symbolic capital because it makes reference to doctrinal understandings of Buddhism, while avoiding the ambiguous position of many practices which have in the past been associated with superstition.

In terms of hierarchies within the pagoda community, the performance of knowledge increases status, as the case of Ọng Hụng has shown us. Knowledge and ignorance are the criteria by which religious practice is broken into religion and superstition. People who are engaged in ‘superstitious activities’ are regarded as ignorant, and criticism is most often aimed at women. However, the definition of what is superstition is itself an aspect of hegemony. Thus, acting in this way is part of performative aspects of emphasised femininity, but it is negatively valued. Put bluntly, to be a woman is to be irrational. While negatively valued, it is excepted that when women are like that. However, it remains inappropriate for men. Although it may be a hegemonic, masculine (Marxist-Confucian) discourse, it is taken in and assumed by both men and women. The dominated subjects incorporate the ideologies and power structures which subordinate them as ‘natural’.

At the core of the discourse on religion and superstition is the production of symbolic capital that raises men’s status within the pagoda. There are two factors that should be noted. The first is that the performance of knowledge by individual men at the pagoda provides them with cultural capital. The second is that this capital extends into wider social relationships because it adds to the image of being intellectual and self-cultivated. This conversion of capital across fields, however, is not necessarily direct. (One could say that the exchange rate fluctuates). As mentioned above, just because Ọng Hụng is well respected in the pagoda for his knowledge, and that gives him authority in that field, does not mean that he ipso facto has more control over his wife and children. However, his general performance of knowledge contributes to the assumption that men are more intelligent and have a greater degree of self-control, which in turn helps maintain the overall dominance of men over women. At a personal level, Ọng Hụng’s knowledge made him respected in the wider community, and even the local Party cadre regarded him with respect. This certainly gave him power outside of the pagoda. The performance reproduces (or contributes to) a broader understanding
of what gender entails (what I have been calling hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity). Thus, the performance of knowledge by men (and of emotion by women) is tacit proof that the assumptions of gender difference are indeed true, in their eyes.

LANGUAGE AND STATUS

Language is essential to the performance of knowledge in the pagoda. It is an important means by which men gain status both within and outside of the pagoda. Language creates cultural capital that establishes and maintains positions of dominance and subordination:

...although it is legitimate to treat social relations – even relations of domination – as symbolic interactions, that is, as relations of communication implying cognition and recognition, one must not forget that the relations of communication par excellence – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power in which the symbolic power relations between speakers of their respective groups are actualized (Bourdieu 1991:37).

In this section I want to look specifically how language is used as a way to convey knowledge and create (and wield) cultural capital within the pagoda.

Ritual language

Foreign languages are used by men, as markers of education and intelligence to build cultural capital in the religious field. Chinese is the ritual language for all of the Vietnamese religious expressions (Buddhist, Taoist/Confucian, Đạo Mẫu, communal house rituals, etc.). Chinese characters still play an important part, both in the architecture of religious sites as well as in actual ritual. For example, at every sutra recital and ritual performance there is a petition (sô) to the buddhas that is read out loud and then burned. It contains the names of the individuals in the group that performed it, and the location of the performance. Although this petition can be written in the Romanised script currently used in Vietnam (quốc ngữ), it is believed to be more efficacious in Chinese. In Hanoi, charms for such things as bringing good luck when writing examinations, or in an effort to smooth out domestic problems which have supernatural causes, are
always written in Chinese. At important religious sites, there are usually old men who write both petitions as well as charms in Chinese as an occupation, and all ritual specialists (thầy cúng) are able to write Chinese. When petitions are read it is done in Sino-Vietnamese (Hán-Việt) – the Vietnamese pronunciation of Chinese characters. The sutras that are recited are also in Sino-Vietnamese, but are written in the Romanised Vietnamese script. Thus, even when they can be read, the meanings of the sutras are not comprehensible to most people. In spirit possession rituals (lên đồng), the medium (bà/ông đồng), when possessed by a mandarin, sometimes parodies the actions of writing Chinese characters though what ends up on the page usually has no meaning in Chinese and is merely a mimic of Chinese characters. In these rituals, writing Chinese is portrayed as one action that is particularly masculine. Chinese language in ritual takes on a value that is beyond its communicative use, and becomes fetishised in such a way as to be thought of as having superior efficacy.

Ritual experts are needed because of the exclusivity of Chinese as a ritual language. Consequently, there is an opportunity for some to gain considerable capital by the study of Chinese. Because study such as this is generally thought better suited to men than women, these avenues of status become, in practice, shut to women.

The role of Chinese language cannot be understood separately from the general relationship between Vietnam and China. There is an ambivalent relationship: while on the one side China is feared and hated as the invading foreigner par excellence, Chinese language and culture is also admired. The Chinese are seen as being very clever, particularly in such things as traditional medicine, numerology, fortune telling, feng shui and astrology. In Vietnam, having your fortune read is a popular and important activity for both men and women. Funerals, weddings, moving house and opening businesses usually are dictated through consultation with a fortune-teller. However, there are many ways to read fortunes: cards, numerology, palmistry, or examining betel nuts and areca leaves, to name a few. The methods most respected by my informants were those which are perceived as deriving from China, with astrology the most highly valued form. Astrology takes many years of study, so it is almost exclusively done by men. The specialists I spoke with always report they had learned it from Chinese texts. The female fortune-tellers I

16 Though, if an individual was regarded as having an extraordinary ability, the method they used became less important.
Plates 45 & 46: Medium Possessed by Mandarin, Mimicking the Actions of Writing
spoke with, by contrast, often said that they were called by the spirits, describing their powers as intuitive or supernaturally-derived rather than cultivated through study.

In religious situations as well as in Vietnamese society in general, Chinese language and the ability to read Chinese is something regarded with awe. In imperial times, Chinese was the primary language in court. In the pre-French period Chinese was regarded as the language of the learned, and it was only through knowledge of Chinese that one was able to participate in the mandarin examinations that were the only real avenue to power (Luong 1990:92-93, 1992:228; Woodside 1988:169-233).

With the exception of its continued importance in ritual settings, the importance of Chinese language has diminished considerably due to the state policies of this century, which used language for the assertion of national identity (Marr 1981:136-189). Nonetheless, Chinese continues to have a mystique in Vietnam, which is both reproduced and represented by its continued use as a ritual language. The symbolic power of Chinese language is reflected in the way that Hồ Chí Minh was claimed to have been a master of it.

At Phúc Lộc Pagoda sutra recitals are held four times every month and are always led by men, which is the case in all pagodas where there are male laity. Further, when there are special rituals at Phúc Lộc Pagoda, men also play a role beside the monastic. For example, I went to a ritual called the Ritual For the Opening of Summer (Lễ Vào Hè), that was sponsored by a woman for her family. It is a seasonal ritual performed to ensure, that the summer is cool and brings good fortune. For the woman who sponsored the ritual, it was also meant to ensure a successful financial summer for her family's business. Most of the ritual was carried out by a male ritual expert (thày cúng), and when Thầy Tâm had to recite a particular part, the ritual expert sat beside her and cued her when she stumbled upon certain unfamiliar Chinese characters in the sutra. Thầy Tâm says that she only performs it because she is the sole monastic in the pagoda. Nuns, she asserted on a number of occasions, only perform rituals if there are no monks present.

The ritual group (ban cúng), made up entirely of male laity, performs a special ritual before the main sutra recital sessions mentioned above. The ritual is, as I described, essentially a sutra recital done with an accompaniment of percussion instruments. It differs primarily because of its intricacy, which means that the men
who perform it have to rehearse frequently. The ritual group used a sutra book that was written in large Chinese characters. However, beside each of the character was the Romanised pronunciation (quốc ngữ). The importance of the characters is largely symbolic as most of the men read from the Romanised script, but it was nonetheless important for the association that is made with specialists. The book that was used for the sutra recitals attended by women as well as men was written entirely without Chinese characters.

French and the Non-Ritual Use of Language for Prestige

French has been another important foreign language. It supplanted Chinese as the language of the educated and therefore represented social mobility during the French colonial period. It became a new avenue of power. At the end of the last century, ‘most educated Vietnamese assumed that Chinese or French or both, were essential modes of “higher communication”’ (Marr 1981:137). French, to a certain degree replaced the prestige of Chinese as the symbol of the ‘modern man’. At the village level, French became an alternate avenue to local power.

When I was in Hanoi, many older men used French or English words in their speech, as part of a performance of knowledge that, no doubt, responded to my presence. When Òng Hùng used French, English, Chinese or Sanskrit vocabulary when speaking, it meant little whether these foreign languages were understood by his audience. The use of foreign words in Vietnamese speech is a way of expressing greater knowledge.

The continued power of French as a language of the learned was displayed at a small communal house festival I attended in a village just outside of Hanoi in 1998. My wife and I, along with a German researcher, arrived just before the ritual was supposed to commence. When we walked through the gates, we were ushered over to a gentleman of sixty or seventy. After giving us a seat he stood up in front of the three of us and pulled a neatly folded piece of paper out of his jacket pocket. He unfolded it, cleared his throat, and proceeded to read a welcome speech in French. It was as though he was prepared for the event of foreigners coming to see the festival. Perhaps the paper was brought to the ritual every year. Regardless, he was pleased to have the opportunity to show off his language ability not
only to foreigners, but also to the small crowd of Vietnamese who had gathered around to witness the event. After, there were a number of other old men who approached us with a smattering of half-forgotten French greetings.

Back at Phúc Lộc Pagoda, Ông Hùng has a great deal of status within the pagoda because of his reputation as knowledgable about Buddhist philosophy and Vietnamese tradition. The most important day on the pagoda's ritual calendar is Lễ Giỗ Tổ, the death anniversary feast for the previous monastics, or ancestors of the pagoda. On this occasion he was the one who acted as representative for the pagoda at the table with the local party officials who came for the feast. When I was seated at the table with them, he formally introduced me, and then broke into one of his erudite speeches about the importance of Buddhism to Vietnamese culture, inserting the usual bits of French into his speech.

His authority comes specifically through his knowledge of the ritual meanings rather than from any ability to perform the ritual. The robe of that knowledge is the language he uses, and the subjects about which he chooses to speak. Thầy Tâm once said to me:

When you have the time you should come here or go to Ông Hùng's house. He also does research about the same thing as you and he is really excellent. He has a lot of very interesting books which he reads and remembers very well. He remembers everything that the books say from any passage. He is really clever - he even speaks French! [translation mine, see Appendix 1:6.3].

Ông Đức, the librarian at Quan Sử Pagoda, like Ông Hùng, concentrates on study and is a proponent of doctrinal Buddhism, while neglecting the ritual aspects of Buddhism. He is, despite his unwillingness to take part in ritual, a strong follower of Buddhism and was always happy to discuss Buddhism with me. He was passionate when he spoke to me about how to live a Buddhist life.

He followed doctrinal interpretations when explaining Buddhist philosophy to me – perhaps more than any other person that I met in Hanoi. Notably, virtually all discussions were concerned with early Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, rather than discussing more Mahayanist concepts. He was also very firm in his view of superstition and what one ought to do in order to be a Buddhist. Buddhist practice for him centred on moral and intellectual cultivation.
Ông Đức also never attended sutra recital rituals. He preferred to stay with his books. For him, understanding the teachings of the Buddha was the central form of his practice. He tended to look down on many who went to sutra recitals, not for the act of reciting sutras. Where he saw the act of reciting sutras as a positive thing, he was critical of the false conception he felt many people held about its purpose and what it accomplished. He said:

| Ông Đức | After you recite sutras you will feel joyful, you will promise to follow the Buddha forever. But there are some people who understand incorrectly. They hope that when they recite sutras like this the Buddha will grant them good health and success in business. This way of thinking is wrong. |
| Me | Do you think that that most people do it correctly or not? |
| Ông Đức | That depends on the level of enlightenment of each person. If their level of education is high, for instance they have finished high school, then they are ‘cultured’ (có văn hóa) and will be able to understand that you have to rely on yourself to gain enlightenment (tu mình tu lấy mình). And those who have only studied a little in the village think that reciting the sutras alone is enough to bring happiness [translation mine, see Appendix 1:6.4]. |

Like Ông Hùng, he would lecture me in Vietnamese about Buddhism, and like Ông Hùng, he would frequently use French, English and Sanskrit words in his explanations. The use of foreign languages was an important part of how he performed knowledge.

It was exclusively men that I saw using foreign words in their speech. Often it meant little whether these foreign languages were understood as they were usually repeated in Vietnamese. Their use had a strong performative element that contributed to the user’s knowledge-based authority:

...utterances are not only (save in exceptional circumstances) signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also signs of wealth, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and signs of authority intended to be believed and obeyed (Bourdieu 1991:66)
There were other ways in which language became a way of building symbolic capital. Knowledge of Chinese also has symbolic value, as we saw from the way that Hồ Chí Minh's intellectual authority was displayed through claims of his being able to write Chinese poems that rivalled those written in the T'ang Dynasty. The importance of Chinese can be seen in the way that it remains the language of ritual.

This is not to say that men are more knowledgeable. Rather, the linguistic and behavioural habitus of Vietnamese men and women reproduces the appearance of men being wiser and smarter than women. Power is performed in a way that naturalises ideas of men being more rational and intellectual than women.

A crucial point follows from this: it is not the actual possession of knowledge, but the illusion of it, or the allusion to it, that is important for producing the symbolic capital that sustains men's higher status. Most of the men in the ritual group knew no more Chinese than women who participated in sutra recitals, but the sutras they used were written with Chinese characters and one could never tell whether they were reading from the characters or from the accompanying transliterations. Further, they became specialists by sheer virtue of the fact of inclusion in the ritual group. There is a performative aspect to status differences in which language is key, of which both men and women participate in their reproduction; men through the uses of ritual and foreign languages, and women in the acceptance of the dominance of those with linguistic competence. One need not know a foreign language in order to gain respect. The important thing is the appearance of men knowing foreign languages in order to build cultural capital. Men who perhaps even knew only one foreign word would parade it out for me, and others present, to hear.

CONCLUSION

Most men who spend time at pagodas are retired. Without an occupation to keep them busy, and with few children at home (for increasingly children are choosing to live separately in Hanoi after marriage), older men are no longer formally committed to an activity during the day, and there is little to occupy them. Early morning exercise is practised by a large number of older Vietnamese in Hanoi, but this does not occupy the entire day. For some, the solution is an increase in religious participation. Such an activity would appear
antithetical to masculinity as phrased by young men, which stresses self-sufficiency and strength. Religious practice is phrased differently for older men. It is no longer described as an act of weakness, but as an enterprise of self-cultivation and moral perfection which draws heavily on Confucian ideas of masculinity as embodied in the scholar/literati.

There is a strong tendency for men who take part in sutra recitals and such core ritual activities, to undertake additional activities that elevate their practice above the level of women’s. While men do recite sutras, they often take the leadership roles. They spatially define their difference by sitting in front, and women acknowledge this difference by accepting the arrangement. Many men learn Chinese characters because they have more ritual power, and the ability to read them carries more prestige than the transliterated Romanised (quốc ngữ) form of the Sino-Vietnamese. Men at Phúc Lộc Pagoda will often have discussions about the pronunciation and meaning of Chinese characters, whereas no women that I have met, other than nuns, engage in the study of Chinese characters. A man who has a knowledge of characters will receive a great deal of respect within the pagoda. As I have shown here, language is symbolic capital used to maintain asymmetrical ritual authority, but at the same time is intrinsic to the masculine ideal of self-cultivation, which extends power beyond the pagoda walls.

Knowledge, or the appearance of knowledge, gives status to men in the pagoda community. Dichotomies of knowledge/ignorance and ascetic/world-oriented practices are the differences by which religion is distinguished from superstition by the religious elite. Those practices which are regarded as superstitious are the ones that do not conform with the doctrinal views held by those who have the greatest amount of symbolic capital. The discursive construction of this division usually focuses on women and their motivations for Buddhist involvement. These differences in practice are usually explained by presumptions of gender differences that highlight men’s intelligence and women’s emotions.

Symbolic capital may be accumulated by women through practices that are negatively defined as superstitious by hegemonic discourses. There is a tension rooted in the appropriate performance of femininity, which encourages women’s engagement in religious practices, but are on the whole negatively valued. Though the adolescent children and husband may lightly deride the practices of
the mother, they are nonetheless seen as constitutive of what being a mother is about. It gives her power in that she is properly taking care of her family, but at the same time contributes to the view of women as being irrational and superstitious.

The reverse side of this is the more valued orthodox practices in which men are engaged. Status and hierarchy are structural attributes of pagoda practice, created in the pagoda through authoritative performances of virtuosity. Thus, men join ritual groups in order to become the ritual specialists. They engage in forms of study rather than following Buddhist ritual not necessarily condemning it, but maintaining an unwillingness to engage in it.

In an ‘egalitarian’ space, there is considerable status to be achieved. Through studies, but more importantly by the performance of knowledge in the use of language, men create a hierarchical space in which they feel more comfortable and in which status can be achieved and recognised within the religious field. By doing this, men also distinguish and distance themselves from practices that they regard as superstitious, and which are negatively valued, at least for them, as being women’s practice. At the same time, it reproduces a gendered expectation of men’s intellectual superiority, which is one basis for male dominance in Vietnam. Ong Hung is credible and authoritative because of his age, gender and the way that he presents himself. However, the weight of his authority made it difficult to elicit responses from those who were not seen as being experts, who lack the cultural capital needed to speak authoritatively.
The people introduced in this thesis express a range of possibilities for what it means to be Buddhist. Miss Thào, the young woman who considers herself to be a fervent Buddhist, neither meditates, creates sutras at the pagoda, nor reads extensively about Buddhist philosophy. Her primary Buddhist activity is making offerings on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month, claiming them as hoa, and distributing them to her family. Mrs Phượng is also assiduous in making offerings on these days, but she also takes part in sutra recitals four times every month, goes on pilgrimages at New Year, hangs Buddhist calendars on the walls of her house, buys cassettes of Buddhist sermons and the magazines published at Quan Su Pagoda (although these are mostly left unread). The sum of these activities marks her as a lay-devout. Ông Hưng, an elderly man, takes no part in sutra recitals and makes no offerings to the Buddhas. Nonetheless, he is regarded, and thinks of himself, as an exemplary Buddhist because of the knowledge that he has of Buddhist philosophy.

In addition to these Buddhist practices, all of these people also involve themselves in other religious activities. Ông Hưng's religious involvement is limited to ancestor worship at home, though he has a comprehensive understanding of the religious landscape of Vietnam. Miss Thào and Mrs Phượng, however, often make offerings at non-Buddhist shrines and temples, and express a belief in every aspect of the Vietnamese religious landscape, from fortune-telling, to seances and spirit possession rituals. Miss Thào even self-consciously claims that she believes in all 'superstitions', including omens of bad luck, charms, and ghosts.

The way that these women involve themselves in a wide range of religious activities has led some earlier scholars to state that the Vietnamese are not Buddhist at all. Instead, Cadière claimed that the Vietnamese were animist and that very few people practised Buddhism, even the monastics. This notion still holds some currency among some Vietnamese scholars:
Except for a number of monks, priests and a few of the faithful who declare that they embrace only one religion, such as Buddhism or one of the traditional religious doctrines, the majority of Hanoi believers, although setting up Buddhist altars at home, still go to pagodas for worship, attend medium services, worship their ancestors, consult diviners, and, simply, put faith in something friendly whispered in their ear. Since they have faith in a variety of religions, most of them keep up worship practices but few of them are fully committed. In reality, they could be seen as credulous people seeking satisfaction for a momentary spiritual need (Đặng N.V. 1998:246).

At the root of this dismissal of people’s claims to be Buddhist is an academic understanding of Buddhism which follows doctrinal, elite orthodox discourses. Among Vietnamese scholars this discourse is further strengthened by state-sponsored discourses of religion deriving from Marxism.

However, to dismiss people’s assertions of faith and belonging in such a manner leads to a cul de sac for understanding the positions from which these claims are made. All it offers is the possibility of classifying what is Buddhist and what is not, what is Confucian and what is not – a tedious task with little merit. There are labels in Vietnamese for different aspects of the Vietnamese religious landscape, but the delineations are not universally held. For this reason, I have found it advantageous to begin from and acceptance that whoever identifies as Buddhist and takes part in activities which are commonly understood to be Buddhist, is indeed Buddhist.

The common phrasing of the landscape as bèn phát/bèn thánh given by many of my informants offers a more holistic understanding. The distinctions made between buddhas and spirits does not mean the exclusion of one or the other. Rather, they are seen as the two sides that together are complete. It recognises the common belief that it is insufficient to simply practice Buddhist rituals to the exclusion of other forms of religious practice, just as it is insufficient to offer bribes to Party officials while ignoring the local police. However, while this is a useful tool for understanding how many people participate in a variety of religious activities, it is itself subject to criticism as part of a total discourse on religion in Vietnam.

An important aspect of the approach to the study of gender and Buddhism in this thesis is the focus on practice, where most other studies have tried to focus on the position of women in Buddhism through static textual imagery. The approach I have taken explores how gender informs the way that Buddhist practice is approached. In terms of the feminist literature, especially as it relates to Vietnam, it draws out some of the complexities that gendered performances
entail. As such, women cannot be essentialised as either empowered or disempowered. Rather, men and women engaged in embodied relationships of which their religious practice was an essential component. While authoritative discourses make claims about orthodoxy, they need to be framed as discourses rather than statements of fact.

Taking claims to be Buddhist at face value as my starting point, I have found it impossible to describe Buddhist practice in Hanoi as a religious ‘system’ – an approach which has continued to be influential in studies of religion. Such an approach to religion must inevitably lead to privileging some explanations over others for there to be any coherence whatsoever to the system. The interpretations of religious specialists/key informants are inevitably the ones that are given primacy (even where differences are acknowledged) for the coherence of their explanations. There is no doubt that such explanations are valid, but they are most usually the hegemonic discourses. To regard them as more than one among many (albeit the dominant discourse) would ignore the dynamics of the majority of people’s practice. Taking the explanations of specialists as discourses rather than as fact is crucial to understanding the differences between men’s and women’s religious practice. In addition, specialists are usually men, and the practice of offering coherent explanations is part of a male disposition.

Women’s inarticulateness does not mean that they do not understand what they are doing. Rather, women have not been conditioned to be articulate. It could even be said that expectations of women’s intellectual incapacity and the way that they are attached to sexual desire condition women to be unable to articulate their cosmological understandings (Gal 1991:176). Despite an often-met unwillingness among women to articulate their broader cosmological understandings, they nonetheless conceive of their practices and related them back to their daily lives. Their explanations were no less articulate than Ơng Hưỡng’s or Ơng Đức’s doctrinally based interpretations of Buddhism.

A reliance on ritual specialists to outline the symbolic structure of ritual is an inherently limited way of studying religion. It suggests that either everyone is in concurrence or else that most people are ignorant of the reasons why they engage in particular religious practices. To accept the explanations of ritual specialists to the exclusion of other possible interpretations is to ignore the fact that the very explanation given to the anthropologist is part of the process of
production of symbolic capital by which (usually male) ritual specialists maintain their positions of authority.

The dynamics of power and authority effectively mute alternate interpretations which do not derive from those in a position of authority. People nonetheless frame their religious practice within the circumstances of their lives, and by privileging the interpretations of specialists, important dynamics of religious practice may go unnoticed. The most obvious example is the different understandings that men and women have of their practices, but other differences could be given as well (age and class differences, for example, or rural versus urban differences in practice and interpretation). Through dealing with Buddhism as practice, the multiple differences between men and women in their religious engagement becomes apparent. By ignoring self-effacing denials of ritual knowledge and patiently working one's way through seemingly incoherent or inaccurate explanations, we can release alternate interpretations relevant to a more dynamic understanding of religious practice.

The fact that men and women approach Buddhism in significantly different ways has been suggested by Keyes (1984) who writes on Thailand. However, rather than trying to ascertain how femininity is constructed in relation to Buddhist texts (which might be less important in Vietnam than in Thailand), I am concerned with how Buddhist practice is situated within people's lives. Religious practice is part of people's total life experience, so questions of whether religious practice influences secular lives, or vice versa, are misplaced. I take Buddhist practice as part of a project in which people position themselves in the world, constructing and transforming their life situations (Kapferer 1997:xii).

This thesis represents the only English language ethnographic account of Buddhist practice in Vietnam. It is also the only research that has been done on Buddhist practice in the urban environment of Hanoi. At the centre of my analysis has been the assertion that the way that people see themselves in the world is fundamentally informed by ideas of gender constructs. The approach that men and women have towards religious practice differs dramatically. Understanding religious practice, therefore, has taken us into a number of critical arenas of gender formation. In Chapter One, I point out how the state, as a masculine institution, influences ideas of gender. Pham Van Bich (1999) has richly illustrated how state discourses of gender have changed this century; enduring from an ideal largely (but not entirely)
informed by Confucianism. Since the 1945 revolution, normative gender roles and ideals of the family has largely been influenced by Marxist discourses which state that gender inequality is a feudal remnant. However, since the Renovation in the late 1980s, there has been another shift in state ideology which has included a turning away from socialist androgyny and towards an emphasised femininity, which accentuates sexual receptivity and passivity for young women and the creation of the ‘happy family’ for older women. The primacy now placed on the happy family, in particular, has increased the embodied moral expectation for self-sacrifice among women that does not exist for men. For men, the shift in hegemonic masculinity towards an urban engagement in global economics has laid greater stress on success in careers. However, there are elements of Confucian-based masculinities that are still deeply ingrained and come to light specifically in the value placed on education for men but not for women. In old age, the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation in the style of the literati (and symbolised by Hồ Chí Minh) becomes an important source for male patriarchal authority.

These trends in the way that gender is constructed have been central to my examination of gendered religious practice. Gender, as an embodied mode of being, dictates different ways through which people view their lives, relationships and place in society. Gender is a basic position, the perspectives of which inform the ways that men and women engage differently in Buddhist activities. They practice Buddhism through gendered dispositions that are tied to discourses of masculinity and femininity in Hanoi.

Thus, many young men entirely avoid participation in religious activities and often criticise all religious practice as superstition, irrational or wasteful. Their view stems largely from the perception that to rely on the supernatural (much less believe in it) is an admission of a personal weakness antithetical to the construction of masculinity, which has as its basis the idea that women are attracted by strength. Young women, on the other hand, are more ambiguous in their views of religion. Many of them express a fervent belief in the efficacy of making offerings and wishes to the spirits or the buddhas, while others make offerings only half believing that doing so will have any effect whatsoever. They make the offerings ‘just in case’. Few young women, however, dismiss these practices entirely. For them, religious practice is tied to the construction of emphasised femininity that is, as with young men, driven by expectations of sexual desirability. Many older women, from around the age of forty, become
even more devout, and participate in Buddhist practice to a much greater extent than young women. They often explained their practice as being concerned with the welfare of their family, tying it to social expectations of women's concern and self-sacrifice for the sake of their children. Old men seldom dismissed religion out of hand, as do young men. Rather than being concerned with reproducing an image of outer strength that women will find desirable, they are more often concerned with demonstrating inner-strength through ascetic form of self-cultivation.

I have looked at three specific forms of Buddhist practice: making offerings, chanting sutras, and studying. They are not exclusive categories of Buddhist practice, but represent major themes in the way that people practice Buddhism in Hanoi. At the same time, these categories of practice clearly demonstrate the way in which gender and age differentiates practitioners, and the manner in which religious practice expresses gender differences.

The first practice that I discussed in Part Two involved making offerings and wishes at the altars of the buddhas and/or spirits, and then reclaiming these offerings, called *lợ c*. It is a practice that is done almost exclusively by women, both young and old. Although some men will offer incense and make wishes to the supernatural (primarily businessmen), they never offer items that can be reclaimed as *lợ c*. *Lợ c*, being a gift from the spirits/buddhas or a talisman, is seen as spiritually charged by the supernatural and able to bring good luck to the bearer. Its subsequent distribution, usually to family members, therefore can be seen as part of the fulfilment of expectations for women to be primarily concerned with the family. For younger women, making offerings and wishes contributes to the construction of a femininity which focuses on receptivity and dependence, while at the same time indicating future orientations towards the creation and care of a happy family.

The group that recites sutras is mixed in terms of gender, but more exclusive in terms of age. However, the majority of members are women. The penitence ritual (Sám Nguyên) provides an opportunity to see the different approaches and understandings of men and women to common activities. Many women expressed the same motivation for taking part as younger women did for making offerings. They stress the benefits their fervent Buddhist practice (through taking part in the penitence ritual) would have for their families. At a personal level, they described the ritual as seeking absolution from the
Buddha. Men usually denied that taking part in the recital had any direct effect on their karma – an interpretation that was doctrinally sanctioned. Men also said that participation was intended to draw one’s attention to past errors in conduct, with the aim of self-correction in the future. Further, men would generally augment this practice by studies of specialised rituals or the study of Chinese characters. At Phúc Lộc Pagoda especially, all of the men who attended the penitence ritual would also take part in the ritual group, effectively transforming all men into ritual specialists of varying degrees in their view raising their practice above the level of women’s.

The sutra recitals were performed by a cohesive group. For the men and women who took part it offered the possibility of inclusion and a shared sense of purpose that was transforming their whole life. Usually, participation in these rituals starts in later age, after retirement, when children have grown up. Thus, an intensification in pagoda ritual activity comes at a time when masculinity and femininity have to be personally redefined. For women, direct care of their children is no longer as time-consuming, and while many old women spend a great deal of time taking care of grandchildren, their responsibilities are lessened. An intensification of pagoda activity, as a way to enlist the help of the supernatural, can be seen as a transference of this caring role to a different level. For older men, participation in pagoda life takes place after retirement. Because the masculinity of youth draws heavily on the centrality of the career, retirement can be an emasculating experience. This is especially the case for men who had good positions with some authority. By becoming ritual specialists, men re-establish their authority within a different field.

While inclusion is an important dynamic, internally there is often competition. I have used the term conspicuous devotion to describe how women, especially, try to display the fervency of their belief. Their level of devotion is often ostentatiously displayed through clothing styles, donations, or overt forms of performative behaviour. Within the field, such displays serve to create a hierarchy of belief and dominance. Men, by virtue of the capital they already hold by being male in Vietnam, are in a position of dominance over women. However, there is further differentiation and assertions of authority made by performances of linguistic and ritual competence, or of philosophical knowledge. Such observations of the way that status is established within the pagoda serves to counter the claims of some
scholars (e.g., Jamieson 1993) that the pagoda is essentially a feminine, egalitarian space.

Study is an important aspect for most of the men who become engaged with pagoda life. For many, the performance of knowledge is more important ritual participation. Ông Hữu has a dominant position at Phúc Lộc Pagoda because he displays a high level of competence in Buddhist philosophy and an understanding of the meaning of ritual, rather than actual participation in the ritual itself. While such performances of knowledge establish dominance within the Buddhist field, study and knowledge are also central to the construction of masculinity. This construction in many ways draws on Confucian images of the literati, and more recently on the figure of Hồ Chí Minh himself. While today the hegemonic masculine ideal is urban and stresses success in business and/or politics, for older men the ideal of self-cultivation and wisdom maintains currency and is a valid alternative to the younger hegemonic masculinity. The effect of performances of knowledge help maintain an overall dominance of men over women, as they normalise the ideal that women are intellectually inferior to men, emotional rather than rational, and generally unfit for high positions.

Viewing Buddhism as a symbolic ‘system’ with a coherent internal logic is an approach to religious studies that is prone to discounting or ignoring the importance that it has in the lives of the people who claim to be Buddhist and participate in Buddhist activities. There are multiple forms of engagement with Buddhism which defy explanation using such an approach. Rather, I have focussed on Buddhist practice as being inextricably entangled in social life. As such, Buddhist practice affects and is affected by gender practice. In Hanoi, engagement with religion, whether it be gender specific forms of participation or derision, is an aspect of the manner in which gender is constructed. By linking gender and Buddhist practice in this way, we can see the importance of taking people’s individual experience of what it means to be Buddhist seriously. Buddhist practice was a crucial way by which people engaged with the world.
APPENDIX 1

VIETNAMESE TRANSCRIPTS

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Judge’s Speech

Cô hãy nghĩ kỹ, những lúc này có là người can cho anh ấy, có thể cứu vớt anh ấy khỏi con bệnh. Nếu cô trốn chạy có nghĩa là rất có thể sẽ đẩy anh ấy vào con đường phạm tội. Cô biết không, 85% thanh thiếu niên hư, phạm tội là nạn nhân của những cuộc tình dang đở đáng! Cô nghĩ gì khi những đứa đứa con thơ đại kia có mẹ mà không có cha? Chúng phải hứng những hằng hkubectl cuộc đời. Vì tương lai những đứa con, vì cứu một người làm lỗi lại là chứng minh, cô hãy can đảm trở về với anh ấy xây dãy lại hạnh phúc cho mình! (Trần T.H. 1997:26).

1.2 Minh’s View on Religion

Tối: Em nghĩ sau khi chết có gì?
Minh: Chết là hết.
CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Buddhas and Mother Goddesses


2.2 Leopard Cadière on Buddhism in Vietnam

Le Bouddhisme est une philosophie, une conception de la vie humaine et du monde; or, le nombre de Annamites qui entendent quelque chose à cette philosophie est tout à fait minime. Le Bouddhisme est une source de vie religieuse, il excite des sentiments de crainte, d’espoir, de confiance, peut-être d’amour; mais les Annamites qui s’abreuvent à cette source ne le font pour la plupart qu’en passant, et les actes qu’ils accomplissent ne sont qu’un accessoire dans leurs vie religieuse. Il n’y a chez les Annamites de vraiment bouddhistes que les bonzes - et encore pas tous, car beaucoup font de leur situation un métier - et surtout quelques nobles âmes, éprises d’idéal, qui, sans entrer dans une bonzerie, cherchent à s’évader des misères de ce monde, en prenant l’habit de bonze et en conformant leur vie aux préceptes et aux croyances du Bouddhisme. En dehors de ces exceptions, on peut dire que les neuf dixièmes des Annamites en Annam - un peu moins au Tonkin où de nombreuses pagodes attirent les dévots - les dixièmes des Annamites vivent et
meurent sans avoir fait le moindre acte religieux inspiré par la religion bouddhique (Cadière 1958:5-6).

2.3 Paul Giran on Buddhism in Vietnam

Or, le bouddhisme n’a eu qu’une influence assez resteinte en Annam où on n’a guère commencé à le pratiquer que vers le xᵉ siècle de notre ère; d’autre part, il y a été dès son introduction, considérablement déformé; la doctrine du renoncement au monde, était, en effet, trop en désaccord avec l’esprit positif populaire. Le seul élément bouddhique qui paraisse à peu près intact est la morale; celle-ci a pénétré quelques unes des doctrines religieuses annamites; et encore, toutefois, n’est-il pas permis de penser que cet élément moral aurait tout aussi bien pu apparaître spontanément, sans le secours du bouddhisme? (Giran 1912: 220).

2.4


2.5

Cùng có. Văn theo Phật văn theo mẫu. Đầu tiên là Phật cao nhất, sau đó đến các cỡ thì là phướng dưới. Tục là về đạo thì trời trước xong đến Phật xong đến các thành phần như thế chủ không phải là Phật
CHAPTER THREE

3.1 The Popularity of Chùa Quán Sứ

Me

Tại sao có đi đến Chùa Quán Sứ, xa quá. Tại sao có không đi chua ở gần đây?

Cô Phương

Tại vì có thích Chùa Quán Sứ, tại vì Chùa Quán Sứ có tin tưởng hơn.

Me

Những Chùa Quán Sứ không đẹp.

Cô Phương

Chùa Quán Sứ không đẹp nhưng ở đây có các nhà sư có trình độ Phật Giáo. Còn các chúa khác là do các nhà sư được phân về ở đây trong cơ chúa.

Me

Lý do là vì nhà sư ở Chùa Quán Sứ tốt hơn... thì có luôn luôn nói chuyện với nhà sư ở đây không? Cô gặp ở đâu?

Cô Phương

Bình thường nếu có điều kiện sang đây. Vì dự đi vào phòng của Hòa thượng, cũng gặp được những nơi chuyện ít thôi. Không nói được nhiều...

Me

Có một sự đặc biệt đó có nói chuyện hay là sự nào cũng được?

Cô Phương

Nếu gặp các nhà sư cũng được, không cười một nhà sư. Trong Chùa Quán Sứ có một sư gọi là Hòa Thường Thích Tâm Tích là già nhất và cũng là tốt nhất ở đây. Đại Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Kỷ Tự vừa rồi thì ông trưởng Giáo Chùa Phật Giáo. Nắm nay ông 88 tuổi.

Me

Thì, có nói chuyện với ông ấy rồi, đúng không?

Cô Phương

Cùng vào chú yêu là chức sức khỏe ông và nặng ông dần dần ở một ít cấu vì ông cũng không có thời gian tiếp.
3.2 Ông Đức on Hell and Superstition

Ông Đức


Me

Nưng theo ông thì phần lớn người mà chỉ biết là địa ngục không thật, hoặc thấy là địa ngục thật?

Ông Đức


Me

Đột mà không làm gì a?

Ông Đức

Không làm gì. Đời với chủ nghĩa hiện thực và chủ nghĩa khoa học hiện đại bây giờ, và cả Đạo Phật chúng mình làm thế không đúng. Đức Phật Thích Ca Mâu Ni chỉ công nhận rằng mình tu tâm của mình thôi. Con người của mình rèn luyện, tự tập là chính để vuốt lên cái tốt là chính chủ. Không phải là Lê bài là chính; Lê bài chỉ là tổ lòng trang nghiêm, sự tôn trọng của mình thôi.
3.3 Freedom of Religion in Vietnam

Tout individu qui se met sous le couvert de la religion pour saboter la paix, l’unité, l’indépendance et la démocratie, pour saboter l’union du peuple, pour empêcher les fidèles d’accomplir leurs devoirs de citoyen, pour porter atteinte à la liberté d’opinion d’autrui ou pour commettre des actes contraires à la loi, sera puni (République Démocratique du Viet-Nam 1955:15).

3.4 The International Connections of Quán Sứ Pagoda


3.5 An Essay on Saints and Spirits (Thánh Thần Kỳ Sự)

4.1 Percentages of Belief

Me: Em có nghĩ là đi lễ vào ngày mồng một và ngất rằm mỗi tháng thì sẽ giúp cho em trong đời sống không?
Young Man: Không chắc. Em chỉ tin năm mươi phần trăm.
Me: Vậy anh có đi chưa phát không?
Young Man: Thỉnh thoảng. Khi nào có thời gian.
Me: Nếu chỉ tin năm mươi phần trăm vậy thì đi làm gì?
Young Man: Cho chắc ăn. Không mất mất gì đâu.

4.2 Women’s Weakness as Reason for Why They Go to Pagodas

Women:

- Vội phụ nữ mong ước nhiều điều nhưng không biết làm gì để thực hiện những mong ước đó (20 year old female student).
- Vội phụ nữ có nhiều thời gian và yêu duội hơn đàn ông (52 year old housewife).
- Do là đàn bà thì phải đi cầu cứu cho sức khỏe và tiền bạc của mình (81 year old housewife).

Men:

- Hờ là những người để bị tác động (thiếu lòng tin) (35 year old male driver).
- Vội phụ nữ yêu duội và thiếu lòng tin vào bàn thần (50 year old retired man).
- Vội tinh tự tin ở bàn thần ít hơn nam giới (58 year old male white-collar worker).
4.3 Women’s Care of the Family for Reason for Why They Go to Pagodas

- Vì phụ nữ quan tâm đến gia đình nhiều hơn nam giới (16 year old female student).
- Vì họ quan tâm đến gia đình (16 year old student).
- Vì ở Việt Nam phụ nữ là người có trách nhiệm chính trong việc chăm lo vun vén cho gia đình nên họ luôn mong muốn mọi điều tốt đẹp đến với gia đình họ (62 year old housewife).
- Vì phụ nữ quan tâm và lo lắng muốn dem lại điều tốt lành cho gia đình (44 year old female accountant).
- Vì phụ nữ thích làm việc thiện hơn (45 year old female teacher).
- Vì phụ nữ trong gia đình là người lo lắng cho gia đình nhiều hơn nam giới (về mặt tinh thần) (25 year old male student).

4.4 A Daughter’s Scolding

Mẹ mắng con

Ngủ như nên!

Con

Mẹ nói sao rồi, phải nói là ‘Ngủ như lớn’ mới đúng. Lần sau nếu mẹ muốn nói như thế thì nhỏ thôi. Nếu có nói những con c同 sửa cho. Nói to sai thì mọi người cười cho.

Mẹ

Vâng, tôi ngủ. Tôi không có học vì tôi hy sinh cả cuộc đời cho chồng và con nên không có thời gian cho bàn thân và không có thời gian để đi học.
5.1 Ông Hùng on Understanding Sutras

Ông Hùng
Còn từng kinh thi tốt những không quan trọng, như tôi có từng kinh bao giờ đâu, nhưng mà nói về kinh thi tôi tướng đối là hiểu những tôi không từng kinh.

Me
Nếu có một người từng kinh nhưng không hiểu thì từng kinh có nghĩa không?

Ông Hùng
Việc từng kinh và hiểu kinh là tôi quan trọng còn việc từng mà không hiểu cũng có một lý lợi ích.

Thầy Tâm
Vâng, có lợi ích.

Ông Hùng
Có nghĩa là lúc tôi từng kinh ý nghĩ của tôi không nghĩ ac, tay tôi không làm ac và mồm tôi không nói ac nữa.

Nghĩa là tâm, khẩu, ý đều thiện, thì cũng được những mà hiểu kinh vẫn là hay hơn.

5.2 Thầy Tâm on Understanding Sutras

Me
Nếu từng kinh thì có phải hiểu kinh không?

Thầy Tâm
Có, quan trọng mình từng kinh thì phải hiểu kinh, chẳng lẽ từng vết à! Minh về mình lại làm điều không tốt.

5.3 Asking the Buddha's Pardon

Hàng ngày chúng ta sống trong mọi trường xáu và điều đó làm chúng ta nói điều ac. Khi chúng ta đi chua, chúng ta niêm Phật (Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni) tại vì các vị Phật khác chúng qua cũng là đề tử của Phật. Vì vậy chúng ta phải cầu được Phật tha thứ.
5.4 Women as 'heavy fated'

Phật tự bị đay cho con người những điều ăn đao đức, có phong cách. Nói tóm lại là dân bà là nặng nghiệp hơn dân ông cho nên phải đến chúa để sám hối ... Nghiệp ở đây có nghĩa là nghiệp báo, nghiệp báo này từ những kiếp trước rất xa xỉa, lâu đời, bây giờ rất nặng nghiệp bây giờ phải báo (opinion of a forty-year old woman).

5.5 Luck and the Buddha's pardon

Me

Sau khi sám hối là xong và mình không cần lo nghĩ xuống địa ngục nữa, đúng không?

Cô Phương

Tất nhiên là nó có đỏ đi phần nào thời còn xuống địa ngục van bị chủ. Còn những điều tốt đây mình làm thì sau để lại cái phục, cái đức cho các con mẹ.

CHAPTER SIX

6.1 Ông Hùng on Reciting Sutras

Thầy Tâm


Ông Hùng

6.2 Thay Tam on Ritual and Gender

Me
Thầy ơi, tại sao hôm qua chỉ có dân ông tập trồng? Tại sao không có phụ nữ làm?

Thay Tam
Day goi là ban cùng. Cung thị chút yêu là con trai cùng chủ, con gái thì ít khi.

Me
Còn gái không cùng được tại sao?

Thay Tam
Còn gái ai người ta học cái này.

Me
Còn gái không học ạ? Nhưng nếu học thì là được không?

Thay Tam
Học cùng làm được, nhưng không học.

Me
Tại sao không học?

Thay Tam
Nó không phải kiểu của mình.

Me
‘kiểu’ là gì?

Thay Tam
Nó không phải là việc của phụ nữ.

Me
Tại sao Thày là phụ nữ nhưng Thầy vẫn học?

Thay Tam
Vì về nhà chưa các thầy phải học. Vì đồ, như những lúc cùng bài không có người thì mình làm, còn nếu có tangible thì bên ní cũng không phải làm.

Me
Việc của phụ nữ là gì?

Thay Tam

Me
Từng kinh cũng là việc của dân ông đúng không?

Thay Tam
Từng kinh thì ai từng cùng được, cùng thì phân biệt.

6.3 Thay Tam Recommends Ông Hùng

Khi nào cháu có thời gian cháu nên đi đến nhà của Ông Hùng. Ông ấy cũng nghiên cứu về điều giống cháu, và ông ấy siêu làm. Ông ấy đọc rất nhiều sách hay và nhỏ tốt làm. Ông ấy nhớ tất cả trong sách này. Thông minh lắm. Ông ấy cũng nói được bằng tiếng Pháp!
6.4 Ông Đức on Misconceptions of Reciting Sutras

Ông Đức

Sau khi anh đọc kinh xong anh sẽ thấy con người vui vẻ, anh nguyện sẽ đi theo Phật luôn luôn và mãi mãi. Còn một số người có sai làm thì mong rằng tung kinh như thế này là để cầu Đức Phật cho được mạnh khỏe, cầu cho Đức Phật làm cho tôi buôn bán được nhiều tiền; ý nghĩ đó là không đúng.

Me

Theo ông, phần lớn là mọi người làm đúng hay là không đúng?

Ông Đức

Còn tùy trình độ giấc mơ của từng người, khi trình độ văn hóa cao, ví dụ như học hết phổ thông trung học thì có văn hóa rồi thì hiểu Đạo Phật là tự mình tự lấy mình. Còn người ít học ở quê thì cho rằng cứ đọc kinh thì sẽ được sung suốt.
VIETNAM

Section I. Freedom of Religion

Both the Constitution and government decrees provide for freedom of worship; however, the Government continued to restrict significantly those organized activities of religious groups that it defined as being at variance with state laws and policies. The Government generally

1 This document should not be considered or objective. There is as much rhetorical purpose in such a report as there are claims by the Vietnamese government that religious repression does not happen. For that reason, this document provides an interesting, perhaps useful counterpoint.
allowed persons to practice individual worship in the religion of their choice, and participation in religious activities throughout the country continued to grow significantly. However, government regulations control religious hierarchies and organized religious activities, in part because the Vietnamese Communist Party fears that organized religion may weaken its authority and influence by serving as political, social, and spiritual alternatives to the authority of the central Government.

The Government requires religious groups to be registered and uses this process to control and monitor church organizations. Officially recognized religious organizations are able to operate openly, and they must consult with the Government about their religious operations, although not about their religious tenets of faith. In general religious organizations are confined to dealing specifically with spiritual and organizational matters. The Government holds conferences to discuss and publicize its religion decrees.

Religious organizations must obtain government permission to hold training seminars, conventions, and celebrations outside the regular religious calendar, to build or remodel places of worship, to engage in charitable activities or operate religious schools, and to train, ordain, promote, or transfer clergy. Many of these restrictive powers lie principally with provincial or city people's committees, and local treatment of religious persons varied widely. In some areas such as Ho Chi Minh City, local officials allowed religious persons wide latitude in practicing their faith, including allowing some educational and humanitarian activities. However, in other areas such as the northwest provinces, local officials allowed believers little discretion in the practice of their faith. In general religious groups faced difficulty in obtaining teaching materials, expanding training facilities, publishing religious materials, and expanding the clergy in training in response to increased demand from congregations.

The Government officially recognizes Buddhist, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and Muslim religious organizations. However, some Buddhists, Protestants, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao believers do not recognize or participate in the government-approved associations and thus are not considered legal by the authorities.

Among the country's religious communities, Buddhism is the
dominant religious belief. Many believers practice an amalgam of Mahayana Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucian traditions that sometimes is called Vietnam's "Triple Religion." Three-fourths of the population of approximately 80 million persons are at least nominally Buddhist, visit pagodas on festival days, and have a worldview that is shaped in part by Buddhism. One prominent Buddhist official estimated that 30 percent of Buddhists are devout and practice their faith regularly. The Government's Office of Religious Affairs uses a much lower estimate of 7 million practicing Buddhists. Mahayana Buddhists, most of whom are part of the ethnic Kinh majority, are found throughout the country, especially in the populous areas of the northern and southern delta regions. There are proportionately fewer Buddhists in certain highlands and central lowlands areas, although migration of Kinh to highland areas is changing the distribution somewhat.

A Khmer minority in the south practices Theravada Buddhism. Numbering from perhaps 700,000 to 1 million persons, they live almost exclusively in the Mekong delta.

The Government requires all Buddhist monks to work under a party-controlled umbrella organization, the Central Buddhist Church of Vietnam. The Government opposed efforts by the non-government-sanctioned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) to operate independently, and tension between the Government and the UBCV continued. Several prominent UBCV monks, including Thich Quang Do, were released in wide-ranging government amnesties in September and October 1998. The UBCV's leader, Thich Huyen Quang, remains in administrative detention in an isolated pagoda in Quang Ngai province and has not been allowed to visit his home pagoda in Hue for many years. In March 1999, Thich Quang Do traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to Quang Ngai to meet with Thich Huyen Quang; after 3 days, police detained the monks for questioning. Thich Quang Do was escorted back to his pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City where he continues to practice his religion. Thich Huyen Quang still is residing in Quang Ngai. There are no confirmed reports of a 1998-99 detention of UBCV monks.

There are an estimated 6 to 7 million Roman Catholics in the country (about 8 percent of the population). The largest concentrations are in
southern provinces around Ho Chi Minh City, with other large groups in the northern and central coastal lowlands. In 1998 the Government eased its efforts to control the Roman Catholic hierarchy by relaxing the requirements that all clergy belong to the government-controlled Catholic Patriotic Association. Few clergy actually belong to this association.

Authorities allowed the Vatican’s ordination of a new archbishop in Ho Chi Minh City in 1998, as well as the ordination of five bishops in other dioceses in 1998 and 1999. A high-level Vatican envoy visited the country in March 1998 and again in March 1999. The Government approved plans for a September 1999 visit by a delegation from the American Council of Bishops. A number of bishops traveled to Rome for a synod of Asian bishops. Up to 100,000 Catholics gathered in August 1998 at an annual Marian celebration in La Vang in the central part of the country and celebrated their faith freely there.

The local Catholic Church hierarchy remained frustrated by the Government's restrictions but has learned to accommodate itself to them for many years. During 1998 and the first half of 1999, a number of clergy reported a modest easing of government control over church activities in certain dioceses. The Government relaxed its outright prohibition on the Catholic Church’s involvement in religious education and charitable activities but still restricted such activity.

The degree of government control of church activities varied greatly among localities. In some areas, especially in the south, churches and religious groups operated kindergartens and engaged in a variety of humanitarian projects. At least six priests belonging to the Congregation of the Mother Co-redemptrix reportedly remain imprisoned. The Government allowed many bishops and priests to travel freely within their dioceses and allowed greater, but still restricted, freedom for travel outside these areas, particularly in many ethnic areas. The Government discourages priests from entering Son La and Lai Chau provinces. Upon return from international travel in 1998, priests and nuns officially were required to surrender their passports; this law reportedly no longer is enforced. Seminaries throughout the country have approximately 500 students enrolled. The Government limits the Church to operating 6 major seminaries and to recruit new seminarians only every 2 years. All students must be
approved by the Government, both upon entering the seminary and prior to their ordination as priests. The Church believes that the number of graduating students is insufficient to support the growing Catholic population.

There are approximately 600,000 Protestants in the country (less than 1 percent of the population), with more than half these persons belonging to a large number of unregistered evangelical "house churches" that operate in members' homes or in rural villages, many of them in ethnic minority areas. Perhaps 150,000 of the followers of house churches are Pentecostals, who celebrate "gifts of the spirit" through charismatic and ecstatic rites of worship.

The network of Tin Lanh (Good News) churches, originally founded by the Christian and Missionary Alliance early in the 20th century, generally operated with greater freedom than did the house churches. The roughly 300 Tin Lanh churches in the country are concentrated in the major cities, including Ho Chi Minh City, Danang, Hanoi, and in lowland areas. Some 15 Tin Lanh churches in the northern provinces are the only officially recognized Protestant churches. Reports from believers indicated that Protestant church attendance grew substantially, especially among the house churches, despite continued government restrictions on proselytizing activities. The Government restricts Protestant congregations from cooperating on joint religious observances or other activities, although in some localities there was greater freedom to do so. There is some ecumenical networking among Protestants, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City.

Based on believers' estimates, two-thirds of Protestants are members of ethnic minorities, including ethnic Hmong (some 120,000 followers) in the northwest provinces and some 200,000 members of ethnic minority groups of the central highlands (Ede, Jarai, Bahnar, and Koho, among others). The house churches in ethnic minority areas have been growing rapidly in recent years, sparked in part by radio broadcasts in ethnic minority languages from the Philippines. This growth has led to tensions with local officials in some provinces. There have been crackdowns on leaders of these churches, particularly among the Hmong in the northwest. The secretive nature of the house churches, particularly among ethnic minorities, has contributed to greater repression against these groups. Provincial officials in certain
northwest provinces do not allow churches or pagodas to operate and have arrested and imprisoned believers for practicing their faith nonviolently in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution.

The authorities in the northwest provinces severely restrict the religious freedom of evangelical Protestants, including ethnic Hmong and ethnic Tai. Credible reports indicate that more than a dozen Hmong Protestants were imprisoned from January 1998 through June 1999 for participation in religious services and for proselytizing activities. According to credible reports, more than 15 Hmong Christians were imprisoned as of mid-1999 in Lai Chau province, although the exact number cannot be confirmed.

The Government's Office of Religious Affairs estimates that there are 1.1 million Cao Dai followers (just over 1 percent of the population). Some nongovernmental organization (NGO) sources estimate that there may be from 2 to 3 million followers. Cao Dai groups are most active in Tay Ninh province, where the Cao Dai holy see is located, and in Ho Chi Minh City, the Mekong delta, and Hanoi. There are separate sects within the Cao Dai religion, which is syncretistic, combining elements of many faiths. Its basic belief system is influenced strongly by Mahayana Buddhism, although it recognizes a diverse array of persons who have conveyed divine revelation, including Siddhartha, Jesus, Lao-Tse, Confucius, and Moses.

A government-controlled management committee has been established with full powers to control the affairs of the Cao Dai faith, thereby managing the church's operations, its hierarchy, and its clergy. Independent church officials oppose the edicts of this committee as not being faithful to Cao Dai principles and traditions. Despite the Government's statement in 1997 that it had recognized the Cao Dai church legally and encouraged Cao Dai believers to expand their groups and practice their faith, many top-level clerical positions remain vacant, and some believers were detained arbitrarily. In October 1998, the authorities detained two Cao Dai provincial leaders in Kien Giang province, Le Kim Bien and Pham Cong Hien, who sought to meet with U.N. Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance Abdelfattah Amor. They still were being held in June 1999.
Hoa Hao, considered by its followers to be a "reform" branch of Buddhism, was founded in the southern part of the country in 1939. Hoa Hao is a privatistic faith that does not have a priesthood and rejects many of the ceremonial aspects of mainstream Buddhism. Hoa Hao followers are concentrated in the Mekong delta, particularly in provinces such as An Giang, where the Hoa Hao were dominant as a political and religious force before 1975. According to the Office on Religious Affairs, there are 1.3 million Hoa Hao believers; church-affiliated expatriate groups suggest that there may be 2 million. A group of 160 Hoa Hao delegates held a congress in May 1999 in An Giang with government approval. However, some Hoa Hao followers do not recognize the validity of this congress, since they see it as subject to government control and oversight.

The Hoa Hao have faced restrictions on their religious and political activities since 1975 because of their previous armed opposition to the Communist forces. Since 1975 all administrative offices, places of worship, and social and cultural institutions connected to the faith have been closed, thereby limiting public religious festivals. Believers continue to practice their religion at home. The lack of access to public gathering places has contributed to the Hoa Hao community's isolation and fragmentation. At least one religious gathering of Hoa Hao in An Giang province was allowed in late 1998. The authorities also prohibit the distribution of the sacred scriptures of the Hoa Hao, and believers say that a number of church leaders continue to be detained. One prominent Hoa Hao activist, Tran Huu Duyen, was released in the September 1998 amnesty.

Mosques serving the country's small Muslim population, estimated at 100,000 persons, operating in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and several provinces in the southern part of the country. The Muslim community comprises ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Cham in the southern coastal provinces, and migrants originally from Malaysia, Indonesia, and India. Most practice Sunni Islam.

The Muslim Association of Vietnam was banned in 1975 but authorized again in 1992. It is the only official Muslim organization. Association leaders say that they are able to practice their faith, including daily prayer, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Government no longer has a
policy of restricting exit permits to prevent Muslims from making the Hajj. About 1 dozen Muslims made the Hajj to Mecca during 1998.

There are a variety of smaller religious communities. An estimated 8,000 Hindus are concentrated in the south. There are reports that some ethnic Chams on the south central coast also practice Hinduism. There are several hundred members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) who are spread throughout the country, primarily in the Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi areas. The prominent position of Buddhism does not affect religious freedom for others adversely, including those who wish not to practice a religion. The secular government does not favor a particular religion. Of the country's 80 million citizens, 14 million or more reportedly do not appear to practice any organized religion. Some sources define strictly those considered to be practicing Buddhists, excluding those whose activities are limited to visiting pagodas on ceremonial holidays; using this definition, the number of nonreligious persons would be much higher—perhaps up to 50 million persons.

The status of respect for religious freedom was mixed during the period covered by this report. In some respects, conditions for religious freedom improved. In many areas, Buddhists, Catholics, and Protestants reported an increase in religious activity and observance. However, at the same time, government restrictions remained, and worshipers in several Buddhist, Catholic, and Cao Dai centers of worship reported that they believed that undercover government observers attended worship services and monitored the activities of the congregation and the clergy.

The release of at least eight prominent religious prisoners as part of a wide-ranging prisoner amnesty in autumn 1998 was a positive development. Among these were five UBCV monks, including two of the most senior-ranking, Thich Quang Do and Thich Tue Sy; Catholic priests Dinh Viet Hieu and Nguyen Chau Dat; and Hoa Hao Buddhist Tran Huu Duye. However, operational and organizational restrictions on the hierarchies and clergy of most religious groups remain in place. While there were releases of religious prisoners, including others in addition to the eight prominent ones, detention and imprisonment of other persons for practicing religion illegally continued. The arrest and harassment of several dozen ethnic minority Protestants since January
1998, especially Hmong Christians in the northwest, came to light during the past year. Many of these abuses, which have been going on for several years, were committed by provincial leaders. Members of other religious communities also reported being harassed by the authorities, for example, the two Cao Dai leaders in Kien Giang province who have been detained by police since October 1998.

In April 1999, the Government issued a new decree on religion that prescribes the rights and responsibilities of religious believers. Similar to the Government's 1991 decree on religion, the decree also states for the first time that no religious organization can reclaim lands or properties taken over by the State following the end of the 1954 war against French rule and the 1975 Communist victory in the south. The decree also states that persons formerly detained or imprisoned must obtain special permission from the authorities before they may resume religious activities.

There were credible reports that Hmong Protestant Christians in several northwestern villages were forced to recant their faith and to drink blood from sacrificed chickens mixed with rice wine. Hmong church leaders told a North American church official that one Hmong Christian, Lu Seo Dieu, died in prison in Lao Cai province from mistreatment and lack of medical care. This report could not be confirmed. Prison conditions are poor in remote regions, and prison conditions, in general, are harsh.

Police authorities routinely question persons who hold dissident religious or political views. In May 1999, two prominent pastors of the unsanctioned Assemblies of God, pastors Tran Dinh "Paul" Ai and Lo Van Hen, were detained and questioned by police after a Bible study session that they were conducting in Hanoi was raided by local police. Ai was questioned daily for more than 2 weeks regarding his religious activities, and Lo Van Hen, a member of the Black Tai ethnic minority, was returned to Dien Bien Phu for further questioning by police. Both were released before the end of May 1999 and allowed to return home. There were numerous reports that police arbitrarily detained persons based on their religious beliefs and practice. A 1997 directive on administrative detention gives security officials broad powers to monitor citizens and control where they live and work for up to 2 years if they are believed to be threatening "national security." In their
implementation of administrative detention, authorities held some
persons under conditions resembling house arrest.

The Penal Code, as amended in May 1997, established penalties for
offenses that are only vaguely defined, including "attempting to
undermine national unity" by promoting "division between religious
believers and nonbelievers." In some cases, particularly involving
Hmong Protestants, when authorities charge persons with practicing
religion illegally they do so using provisions of the Penal Code that
allow for jail terms up to 3 years for "abusing freedom of speech, press,
or religion." There were reports that officials fabricate evidence, and
some of the provisions of the law used to convict religious prisoners
contradict international covenants such as the Universal Declaration
on Human Rights.

There are no precise estimates available of the number of religious
detainees and religious prisoners. There reportedly are at least 10
religious detainees, held without arrest or charge; however, the
number may be greater. These persons include Le Kim Bien and Pham
Cong Hien, the two Cao Dai leaders in Kien Giang province; Le Minh
Triet (Tu Triet), a Hoa Hao leader detained at a government house in
the south; and a number of Hmong and other ethnic minority
Protestant detainees. The authorities use administrative detention as a
means of controlling persons whom they believe hold dissident
opinions. Anecdotal reports indicate that small groups of Protestants
are detained briefly--sometimes for only a few days, at other times for
weeks or months. Some persons are subject to prolonged detention
without charge. Bien and Hien reportedly have been detained in Kien
Giang province since October 1998 without being charged with a
crime.

According to rough estimates, there are from 30 to 50 religious
prisoners. This number is difficult to verify with any precision because
of the secrecy surrounding the arrest, detention, and release process.
The following persons reportedly continue to be held as religious
prisoners: UBCV monks Thich Thein Minh and Thich Hue Dang;
Catholic priests Mai Duc Chuong (Mai Huu Nghi), Pham Minh Tri,
Nguyen Van De, Pham Ngoc Lien, Nguyen Thien Phung, and Nguyen
Minh Quan; and a still larger number of Hmong Protestant Christians.
Credible reports from multiple sources suggest that up to 30 Hmong
Protestants have been imprisoned in Lai Chau and Lao Cai provinces after being charged with "teaching religion illegally" or "abusing the rights of a citizen to cause social unrest." Although not all these arrests can be confirmed, officials acknowledge that the following Hmong Christians have been sentenced and imprisoned under the section of the Penal Code that prohibits "abusing the freedom of religion": Sung Phai Dia, Vu Gian Thao, Ly A Giang, Giang A To, and Giang A Cat.

Unconfirmed reports from the central highlands suggest that some local officials have extorted cattle and money from Protestants in those areas. It is unclear whether their religious affiliation or other factors were the causes of these alleged crimes. Provincial officials in Ha Giang and Lai Chau provinces in the north have sought to pressure Hmong Christians to recant their faith.

The Government bans and actively discourages participation in "illegal" religious groups, including the UBCV, Protestant house churches, and unapproved Hoa Hao and Cao Dai groups. The Government restricts the number of clergy that the Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, and Cao Dai churches may train. Restrictions are placed on the numbers of Buddhist monks and Catholic seminarians. Protestants are not allowed to operate a seminary or to ordain new clergy.

The Government restricts and monitors all forms of public assembly, including assembly for religious activities. On some occasions, large religious gatherings have been allowed, such as the La Vang celebration. Within the past year, the Hoa Hao also have been allowed to have several public activities.

Religious and organizational activities by UBCV monks are illegal, and all UBCV activities outside private temple worship are proscribed. Protestant groups in central and southern provinces and some groups of Hoa Hao believers not affiliated with the group that held the May 1999 congress have petitioned the Government to be recognized officially. They have been unsuccessful thus far. Most evangelical house churches do not attempt to register because they believe that their applications would be denied, and they want to avoid government control.
The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. The Government restricts persons who belong to dissident and unofficial religious groups from speaking about their beliefs. It officially requires all religious publishing to be done by government-approved publishing houses. Many Buddhist sacred scriptures, Bibles, and other religious texts and publications are printed by these houses and allowed to be distributed to believers. The Government allows, and in some cases encourages, links with coreligionists in other countries when the religious groups are approved by the Government. The Government actively discourages contacts between the illegal UBCV and its foreign Buddhist supporters, and between illegal Protestants, such as the house churches, and their foreign supporters. Contacts between the Vatican and the domestic Catholic Church are permitted, and the Government maintains a regular, active dialog with the Vatican on a range of issues, including organizational activities, the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations, and a possible papal visit. The Government allows religious travel for some, but not all, religious persons; Muslims are able to undertake the Hajj, and many Buddhist and Catholic officials also have been able to travel abroad. Persons who hold dissident religious opinions generally are not approved for foreign travel.

The Government does not designate persons' religion on passports, although citizens' "family books," which are household identification books, list persons' religious and ethnic affiliation. The law prohibits foreign missionaries from operating in the country. Proselytizing by citizens is restricted to regularly scheduled religious services in recognized places of worship. Immigrants and noncitizens must comply with the law when practicing their religions. Catholic and Protestant foreigners exercise leadership in worship services that are reserved for foreigners.

The Government Office on Religious Affairs hosts periodic meetings to address religious issues according to government-approved agendas that bring together leaders of diverse religious traditions. Adherence to a religious faith generally does not disadvantage persons in civil, economic, and secular life, although it likely would prevent advancement to the highest government and military ranks. Avowed religious practice bars membership in the Communist Party, although anecdotal reports indicate that a handful of the 2 million Communist
Party members are religious believers. The Government remained sensitive about international and nongovernmental organization investigations. In October 1998, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, Abdelfattah Amor, visited Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hue, and Tay Ninh province. He met with government officials and representatives of the government-sanctioned Central Buddhist Church, the Catholic Church, Cao Dai, a Protestant church, and the small Muslim community. However, security officials prevented Amor from meeting several senior representatives of the non-government-sanctioned UBCV, including Thich Huyen Quang and Thich Quang Do, despite his repeated requests to do so.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

In general there are amicable relations among the various religious communities. During wartime in the 1960's in the central and southern parts of the country, there were strong tensions between Buddhists and Catholics. These were sparked in part by repressive policies against Buddhists by the then-government. In Ho Chi Minh City, there are nascent efforts at informal ecumenical dialog among leaders of disparate religious communities.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy actively and regularly raised concerns about violations of religious freedom with many government officials, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Public Security, the Government's Office on Religion, and other government offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and provincial capitals. Embassy officials also meet and talk with leaders of all of the major religious groups, both recognized as well as unregistered.
The Ambassador has raised religious freedom issues with the Prime Minister, senior cabinet ministers including the foreign minister, senior government and Communist Party advisors, the head of the Government’s Office on Religion, deputy ministers of foreign affairs and public security, and the chairpersons of provincial people’s committees around the country, among others. Other embassy and consulate officials have raised U.S. concerns on religious freedom with Assistant Secretary and Deputy Assistant Secretary-rank officials of the ministries of foreign affairs and public security and with provincial officials. The Embassy maintains regular contact with the key offices that follow human rights issues in the Government. Embassy officers have informed government officials that progress on religious issues and human rights has an impact on the degree of full normalization of bilateral relations. The Embassy’s public affairs officer distributed information about U.S. concerns about religious freedom to Communist Party and government officials, as well as coordinated seminars with a leading government foreign affairs institute on how religion influences American public life and culture.

Representations by the Embassy generally focus on specific restrictions of religious freedom. These issues include detention and arrest of religious figures and restrictions on church organizational activities, such as training religious leaders, ordination, church building, and foreign travel of religious figures. In several cases, the Embassy’s interventions on issues of religious freedom have resulted in improvement of the situation of persons whose religious freedom has been restricted. The release of eight religious prisoners in the autumn of 1998, including Thich Quang Do, Thich Tue Sy, Reverend Nguyen Chau Dat and Hoa Hao Buddhist Tran Huu Duyen, as well as other prominent advocates of human rights including Doan Viet Hoat and Nguyen Dan Que, followed long-term and direct advocacy on their behalf. Embassy advocacy on behalf of detained Protestant Christians in the northwest provinces may have contributed to the release of several of these persons.

Representatives of the Embassy have met on several occasions with leaders of all the major religious communities, including Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao. Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, maintain a regular dialog with NGO’s. An embassy official visited a prominent religious leader in 1999 while he
was detained administratively. On several occasions, embassy officers have met with prominent religious prisoners after their release from prison.

The Department of State has commented publicly on the conditions for religious freedom in Vietnam on several occasions. In March 1999, following the Government's criticism of U.N. Special Rapporteur Amor's report, department press guidance noted U.S. support for the work of the U.N. Special Rapporteur in monitoring religious freedom throughout the world and urged Vietnam to allow open and free expression of religion. Both the State Department and the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi urged the Government to allow Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom Robert Seiple to visit the country, and this visit took place in July 1999.
A-Di-Dà Phật Amida in Japanese, Emitou in Chinese and Amitabha in Sanskrit. Amida Buddha took a vow that whoever recites his name in faith will be born in the Pure Land, the Western Paradise, where realisation is believed to be much easier than on earth. His cult forms the basis of what is called Pure Land Buddhism, a school of Mahayana Buddhism.

A-Nan-Dà Ananda; an Arhant (Buddhist saint) and a prominent follower of the historical Buddha.

ái nam ái nữ hermaphrodite, effeminate
ám đưng yin and yang
anh older brother
áo dài traditional women’s dress with split sides, won over flowing trousers.

Bà Chúa Chợ Lady of the Market

Ba Đầm Đặng Three Responsibilities for women: production, care of the family and defence of the nation. It was a campaign initiated by the VWU in the 1970s.

bà dông female spirit medium that is possessed during lèn dông.

ban cùng ritual group

Ban Ký Mục Council of Notables

Ban Tù Tướng Văn Hóa Office of Ideology and Culture

bánh chưng New Year rice cake. It is made of sticky rice with bean and pork fat on the inside. It is wrapped in bamboo or banana leaves and boiled.

bắt hiếu to lack filial piety; to be disrespectful towards elders, especially parents.

bến phật religion of the Buddhas

bến thành religion of the spirits

bị điên to be insane

bị ế chòng to suffer from a lack of husband

bố tát bodhisattvas

Bộ Văn Hóa Ministry of Culture

Ca-Diệp Kasyapa; an Arhant (Buddhist Saint) and a follower of the historical Buddha
Cao Đài a religion that started in southern Vietnam at the beginning of the century. It combines religions of the tam đạo with elements from the West.

Cắt Tiền Duyên ritual to exorcise a love-sick ghost who is making it difficult to marry.

chi older sister
chính đạo legitimate or orthodox religious practice
Chu-Kinh Nhật-Tạng Sutras for Daily Use
chùa pagoda
cởi mở openness
cùng lễ worship and make offerings
cùng cháo ritual of offering to hungry ghosts. It is usually done before other rituals so that ghosts will not interfere.

Đại Thế Chí Bồ-tát Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva
dạo religious path
dạo đức morality, ethics
Dao Không Confucianism
Dao Lão Taoism
Dao Mẫu Mother goddess worship; cult of the mother goddess
Đạo Phật Buddhism
dế chơi for fun; for entertainment
dế tay-devotee
dền temple
Di-Lặc Phật Maitreya Buddha; the future Buddha who is usually represented as excessively obese and laughing, often covered in children.
dị chơi go out for entertainment
dị lễ go to worship
dị tích lịch sử văn hóa historical and cultural relic
dìa ngục hell
Địa Tạng Bồ tát Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva. He specialises in rescuing souls from hell.
diên insane
diên shrine
diên tổ tọ shrine dedicated to the patriarchs of the pagoda; also nhà tổ

đình communal house. They are usually in the centre of villages and in the past were the essential seat of village-level government. Women used to be excluded from the communal house, but this has changed somewhat since they resumed activities in the Renovation period (starting in the late 1980s).
dò cúng mặn salty offerings; They are offerings that are given to non-Buddhist spirits and saints, and include meat, rice, wine, etc.
dò cúng ngọt sweet offerings; used for buddhas and bodhisattvas, and include fruit and oán.

Đổi Mới The economic Renovation, beginning in the late 1980s.
dông cỏ nancy boy, poofter, dream puff, faggot, colloquial for effeminate
dót mả immolate spirit money
Đức Đại Viên анг The Great Virtuous King
Dược Sư Phật Bhaichadjyaguru Buddha, literally the Pharmacist Buddha; a Buddha known for healing.
em younger sibling
gia đình hạnh phúc ‘happy family’, a trope used (often by the state, and often in relation to family planning) which is mainly seen as the responsibility of women to construct.
giang đường lecture hall
giáo It can mean religion, but also has a negative connotation when used to refer to the minority and foreign Catholics when juxtaposed with lưỡng.
giáo chi religious dogma
Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Vietnamese Buddhist Association. The state sponsored (i.e., official) Vietnamese Buddhist umbrella organisation. There are other unauthorised organisations, mostly in central southern Vietnam.
Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Thông Nhất The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam. An unofficial Buddhist organisation that is generally persecuted by the state.
gọi hồn Literally it means ‘calling souls’, and, not surprisingly, refers to a séance in which a client speaks to dead relatives and friends about a number of concerns through a medium who allows her (usually the medium is female) body to be possessed by the ghost. The medium (not to be confused with the medium in a lén dông) usually has a patron deity (again, usually female) who called the medium to start this occupation.
gió processed pork meat
Hán-Việt Sino-Vietnamese; words of the Vietnamese lexicon that have Chinese roots.
hàng mả immolative objects
hành lưỡng pilgrimage
hậu thành possession ritual, synonymous with lén dông.
he thống system
hiếu filial piety
ho patrilineage
Hồ Pháp, the Dharma Guardians. Imposing figures, the statues of whom stand at the entrance of a pagoda to protect it from malevolent spirits.
Hòa Hao a millenarian sect of reform Buddhism which emerged in southern Vietnam at the beginning of the twentieth century.
Học Viện Phật Giáo Việt Nam Institute for Buddhist Studies of Vietnam
Hội Chủ Bà Elderly Women’s Buddhist Association. It is a colloquial name for the groups of old women who gather to recite sutras and often take responsibility for the care and maintenance of the pagoda. They are generally ignored by the state as being non-threatening.
Hội Đống Chung Minh Sangha Council
Hội Đồng Trí Sứ Trùng Ưng Central Management Committee
Hội Phát Giáo The Buddhist Association;
Hội Phát Giáo Bắc Kỳ The Association of Buddhists in Tonkin
Hội Phật Tự Lay-Buddhist Association; colloquial name for the group who regularly take part in sutra recitals.
hoàn công đức charity box; donation box
hương incense sticks; joss sticks
Khổng Giáo Confucianism
kiếp trước previous life
kinh sutra
Kinh A-Di-Dà Amida Sutra
Kinh Sám Nguyễn Sám Nguyễn Sutra
ky bo stingy, tight with money, miserly
la hán Arhants; Buddhist saints; the followers of the historical Buddha
lạc hậu backwards
lễ cúng ritual
Lễ Giỗ Tổ ‘Ritual for Pagoda Ancestors’. In the context of the pagoda where I witnessed it, it referred to what would be a death-day feast in the secular world, where the pagoda ‘family’ gathered to have a feast and hold rituals for the ancestor-patriarchs of the pagoda.
Lễ Vào Hè ‘Ritual for Opening Summer’. Performed in the early summer to ensure a cool and prosperous season
lên đồng possession ritual in which a series of spirits (male and female) enters the medium, dances, gives pronouncements, and
distributes lộc.

*linh giáo* animism

lộc objects (usually food) that possess supernatural power. Talismans or gifts from the gods/buddhas. See Chapter Four.

*lữ ng* practices of the majority, of tradition and seen as good when juxtaposed with giáo.

*ma* ghost

*ma dơi* hungry ghost

*mặt mặt* to loose face

Mật Trần Tố Quốc Fatherland Front

*mê tìn* superstition

*miếu* temple

*mô cữa* colloquial expression referring to ‘opening the doors’ to the West which accompanied the Renovation in the late 1980s.

*mô hàng* the first money of the day or year in a store. It is considered lucky.

*mô phù* Ritual for opening a palace; ritual performed at a lên dông in which the sponsor, who is suffering from a heavy fate, performs as a bà lông dông.

*mừng tuổi* money given as a gift at Tết.

Nam-mô A-Di-Dà Phật a chant meaning ‘hail to Amida Buddha’. It is the central religious act in Pure Land Buddhism. Amida Buddha made a vow that whoever recites his name in faith will be reborn in the Pure Land, where spiritual progression will be much easier. The implication is that spiritual progression is nearly impossible in our polluted world.

*nắng cân* heavy fated; possessing a bad fate because of immoral actions in a past life.

Ngọc Hoàng The Jade Emperor

*ngu* stupid

Ngũ Hồ Five Tigers. Tiger spirits that are associated with the mother goddesses.

Ngũ Vị Châu Bà The Five Guardians of the Goddess

Ngũ Vị Tôn Ông the Five (Lesser) Gods

*nha mãu* shrine for the mother goddess

*nha quê* country bumpkin; yokel; hick

*nha tổ* shrine dedicated to the patriarchs of the pagoda.; also dien tổ.

Nho Giáo Confucianism

*nói lung tung* saying strange things

*nói tướng* ‘general of the interior’. A trope used of women to indicate
the power they have within the home. It is almost always men who use it.

oân sweet bean powder pressed into the shape of a truncated cone and wrapped in coloured cellophane. It is considered a sweet offering and is used for buddhas and bodhisattvas.

ông grandfather; polite term of address for a man who holds a high position or an old man.

Ông Địa the Earth God; God of the land
ông dông a male spirit medium; they are much rarer than the female bà dông. The one time I saw lêm dông being performed by a man, everyone referred to him by female terms of address (bà, cô), in any case.

Ông Tào The Kitchen God
ông tế ceremonial master
ông thầy scribe
Ông Trời God; the sun; the heaven; the sky
Pháp Điện Lightning Goddess
Pháp Lôi Thunder Goddess
Pháp Văn Cloud Goddess
Pháp Vù Rain Goddess
Phản Viên Nghiên Cúu Phật Học Thuộc Giáo Hội the Branch of the Buddhist Research Institute
phật buddhas
Phật Giáo Buddhism
phát lộc to distribute lộc
Phơ Hiền Bồ-tát Samantabhadra Bodhisattva; a celestial bodhisattvas that appear in the Lotus Sutra, and is generally paired with Manjusri Bodhisattva (Vân-Thù Bồ-tát).
phong kiến feudal
phủ palace
phúc happiness
Quan-Âm (Quan-Thế-Âm Bồ-tát) Guan-yin Bodhisattva
Quan-Âm Thiên-Thù Thiên-Nhân Guan-yin with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes. A common representation of Guan-yin in Vietnam, meant to represent her omniscience and capacity to aid humans.
quan hệ relationship; guan xi in Chinese.
quán họ a traditional form of singing in northern Vietnam, originating in Bạc Ninh province, east of Hanoi.
quán hoàng mandarins and kings
qui demon

quốc ngữ Romanised script; literally, ‘the national language’

sám hối repent

Sám Nguyễn roughly translatable as ‘Penitence Ritual’. There is, by doctrinal definitions, no supernatural being that is in a position to forgive one’s sins in Buddhism. However, as we see in Chapter Four, by some it is interpreted as serving exactly that function.

sự petition to the gods/buddhas. It is a piece of paper that is read out and burnt at the end of rituals and sutra recitals. On it is usually written the names (or the name of the group) who participated in the ritual. It is intended to help the supernatural keep track of people’s prayers and devotion. They can be bought written in quốc ngữ in religious supplies shops, and the information written in the blank spaces provided, However, they are considered to be more efficacious if hand written in Chinese characters.

sọ vọ said of a man who is scared of his wife

‘sư tử Hà Đông’ ‘lioness of Hà Đông’, an expression used of a ‘fierce’ woman, a woman who is strong willed, especially a woman who lords over her husband.

tà đạo illegitimate or heterodox religious practice
tế exercise
tế official offering (at a communal house)
tam đạo three paths (Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism)
tam giáo three religions (Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism)
tâm linh the spirit

Tam Phú Three Palaces

Tam Thê Trikaya, representing the past, present and future buddhas for this world. They are Amida Buddha, Sakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya Buddha.

Tam Tòa Vương Mẫu Three Thrones of the Queen Mother

Tam Tông The Three Submissions; women are supposed to obey first their fathers, then their husbands, and finally their eldest sons.

Tạp Chí Nguyễn Cự Phát Học the Research Journal of Buddhist Studies

tế nạn xã hội social evil

Tết (Nguyễn Đán) Lunar New Year

thái cực quỷ niệm tai chi

thần court installed spirits, or tutelary spirit

thánh holy sages, saints, or deified national heroes. They are more
powerful that thần, and have a national character

thành hoàng tutelary god

thành mẫu mother goddess

Thập Diện Diêm Vương The Ten Kings of Hell

thầy bói fortune teller. There are different kinds, and there is a hierarchy of these. At the bottom of the pile is women who flip coins or look at cards. Higher up is numerology. The highest varieties generally require study and are attributed to ancient Chinese wisdom, especially if related to the Tao Te Ching.

thầy cúng ritual specialist

Thích-Ca-Mâu-Ni Phật Sakyamuni Buddha; the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama.

Thiên Zen meditation. Also the name of a Buddhist school which stresses the experience gained through meditation or sudden enlightenment over more textual or devotional approaches.

Thư Viện Phật Học Buddhist Library

tiên fairies, immortals

tin nguồn belief

tinh cảm sentiment, emotional bond between people

Tịnh Độ Pure Land Buddhism

tình yêu (romantic) love

tổ tiên ancestors

Toà Cửu Long ‘the Nine Dragon Throne’; a statue of the birth of Sakyamuni, typical of the style of northern Vietnam, with the baby Buddha raising one hand and proclaiming that this will be his last rebirth, surrounded by nine dragons.

tội lỗi transgress; also sin, trespass, crime, offence, fault

tôn giáo religion

truyền thống tradition

Tứ Đức The Four Virtues for women: labour; physical appearance; appropriate speech; and proper behaviour.

tự lực to be self-reliant

tu luyện (Taoist) training

tu niệm perfecting thought and imagination

Tứ Phú Four Palaces

tự tâm cultivation of the heart/mind

tự thân self-cultivation

tự tin self-confidence

Tượng Thập Diện Diêm Vương Statues of the Ten Kings of Hell

Tượng Toà Cửu Long Statue of the Buddha’s birth, surrounded by nine dragons
Tuồng Tuyệt Sơn statue of Sakyamuni fasting in the Himalayas before he became a buddha.

tụng kinh recite sutras
Vân-Thụ Bồ-tát Manjusri Bodhisattva; a celestial bodhisattvas that appear in the *Lotus Sutra*, and is generally paired with Samantabhadra Bodhisattva (Phổ-Hiền Bồ-tát).

vàng mã spirit money
Viện Nhiên Cứu Phật Học Thuộc Giáo Hội the Branch of the Buddhist Research Institute

xá pardon; also forgive, amnesty, exempt, free (from obligation)
xem bỡi consult a fortune-teller or to tell a fortune.
xin lộc to ask the spirits for a gift

yêu love

yêu đuôi weakness
ENGLISH GLOSSES

Amida Buddha
Amida Sutra
Ananda ancestors animism Arhants backwards bad fate belief bodhisattva Bhaichadjyaguru Buddha Branch of the Buddhist Research Institute buddhas Buddhism Buddhist Association Buddhist Library Central Management Committee ceremonial master charity box Cloud Goddess communal house Confucianism Council of Notables country bumpkin crazy cultivating the heart/mind cultured

debt
deified national hero
demon
devotee
Dharma Guardians
distribute lộc
Earth God
Elderly Women’s Buddhist Association
Enlightenment
Ethics (morality)
exercise
face (honour)
fairy
Fatherland Front
feudal
filial piety
Five Guardians of the Goddess
Five Lords
Five Tigers
for fun
fortune-teller
fortune-telling
Four Palaces
Four Virtues
‘general of the interior’
ghost
gift of the gods/buddhas
go out for entertainment
go to worship
God
grandchild
grandfather
Great Virtuous King
Guan-yin
happiness
‘happy family’
heavy fated
hell
hermaphrodite
heterodox

'on'
'tánh'
'qui'
dề tù'
Hội Pháp
phật lộc
Ông Địa
Hội Chủ Bà
Giác Ngộ
dạo đức
tập
mặt
tiền
Mặt Trần Tổ Quốc
phong kiến
hiếu
Ngũ Vị Chầu Bà
Ngũ Vị Tôn Ông
Ngũ Hồ
dề chơi
thầy bói
xem bói
Tú Phú
Tú Đức
nội tướng
ma
lộc
dị chơi
dị lệ
Ông Trời
châu
ông
Đức Đại Vương
Quan-Ām
hạnh phúc
gia đình hạnh phúc
nằng can
dia nguc
ai nam ai nu
tà đạo
historical and cultural relic
illegitimate religion
immolate spirit money
immolative objects
immortals
incense sticks
insane
Institute of Buddhist Research

Institute for Buddhist Studies of Vietnam
Jade Emperor
Kasyapa
king
Kitchen God
Ksítigarbha
Lady of the Market
Lay-Buddhist Association
lay-devotee
lecture hall
legitimate religion
Lightning Goddess
‘lioness of Hà Đong’
lose face
love
Lunar New Year:
Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva
Maitreya Buddha
mandarin
Manjusri Bodhisattva
me/I
Ministry of Culture
Monastic (n.)
morality
mother goddesses
mother goddess worship
‘the Nine Dragon Throne’
offering for hungry ghosts
Office of Ideology and Culture
official offering
older brother
older sister
‘opening the door’
openness
orthodox
pagoda
palace
pardon
Penitence Ritual
perfecting thought & imagination
petition to the gods/buddhas
physician
pilgrimages
possession ritual
prayer beads
previous life
Pure Land Buddhism
Rain Goddess
recite sutras
relationship
religion
religion of the buddhas
religion of the spirits
religious dogma
religious path
Renovation
repent
Research Journal of Buddhist Studies
ritual
ritual for opening a palace
Ritual for Opening Summer
Ritual for Pagoda Ancestors
ritual group
ritual specialist
Romanised script
saints
Sakyamuni Buddha
salty offerings
Sam Nguy¢n Sutra
Samantabhadra Bodhisattva
Sangha Council
saying strange things
scribe
séance
self-confidence
self-cultivation
self-reliance
sentiment
shrine
shrine for the mother goddess
shrine for the pagoda ancestors
Sino-Vietnamese
social evil
spirit, the
spirit
spirit medium
spirit money
stupid
superstition
sutra
Sutras for Daily Use
sweet offerings
system
tai chi
talisman
Taoism
temple
Ten Kings of Hell
Three Palaces
Three Paths
Three Religions
Three Responsibilities
Three Submissions
Three Thrones of the
Queen Mother
Thunder Goddess
Tradition
Training (Taoist)
transgress
Trikaya
tutelary god
unfilial

nói lung tung
ông thầy
gọi hồn
tự tin
tự thân
tự lực
tình cảm
diện
nha mẫu
nha tổ or diễn tổ tổ
Hán-Việt
tể nạn xã hội
tâm linh
thần
bà/ông dòng
vàng mạ
ngu
mệ tín
kinh
Chu-Kính Nhật-Tùng
dò cùng ngọt
hệ thống
thái cúc quyền
lọc
Đạo Lao
dền or miêu
Tháp Điện Điểm Vượng Tam Phú
tam đạo
tam giáo
Ba Đàm Đặng
Tam Tông
Tam Tòa Vượng Mẫu

Pháp Lợi
tuyên thông
tự luận
tố lời
Tam Thế
thành hoàng
bắt hiểu
Unified Buddhist Church
of Vietnam

Vietnamese Buddhist Association
Weakness
Worship and make offerings
_yin_ and _yang_
younger sibling
Zen

Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam Thống Nhất
Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam
_yếu duỗi_
cùng lê
_âm đượng_
em
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