Offers rich insights into how the complex dynamics of reformed, market-oriented socialism are played out in ritual practice.

Vietnam in the last two decades has experienced not only market reform and significant economic growth but also a related, symbiotic revival of popular religion. It is no surprise, then, that popular beliefs and rituals that once were attacked as wasteful and superstitious have again become a conspicuous feature of contemporary urban and rural life.

A new blossoming of spirit mediumship has been part of this revival, not least that involving ritual possession by the deities of the Four Palace Pantheon, which this study based in urban Hanoi brings to life with a deft handling of complex theory, historical research, ethnographic material and analysis.

This is indeed a sojourn into the world of mediumship in contemporary urban Vietnam – a spirited world full of colour, laughter, music and ritual dance that operates according to its own rules and principles – but it is also an insightful study of spirituality, performance, gender and heritage, one that highlights the fluidity of ritual practice and contestations of ritual performance among practitioners.

‘This is an excellent volume dealing with timely and important topics for scholars of Vietnam as well as those interested in the cross-cultural study of popular religions.’ (Karen Fjelstad, San Jose State University)

‘Performing the Divine is anthropological research of the highest standard. Based upon innovative field research, this interesting and compelling volume makes numerous theoretical, historical, and ethnographic contributions. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the role of religion and ritual in providing meaning in a dynamic social world.’ (Shaun Kingsley Malarney, International Christian University, Tokyo)
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Performing the Divine

Mediums, Markets and Modernity in Urban Vietnam

Kirsten W. Endres
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Preface

This book is a sojourn into the world of mediumship in contemporary urban Vietnam – a spirited world full of colour, laughter, music and ritual dance that operates according to its own rules and principles. Formerly outlawed by the revolutionary authorities as an epitome of charlatantry and superstition, a growing array of devoted adherents now enjoys the liberty to freely transact with the deities of the Four Palace pantheon in order to deal with the complexities of their lives in a fast-changing world. The efflorescence of urban spirit mediumship is part of a vigorous revival of religion that has accompanied Vietnam’s rapid integration into the global economy since the 1986 introduction of the renovation policy (đổi mới) (Malarney 2003, Taylor 2007). Throughout the country, newly refurbished pagodas and temples are teeming with devotees who make offerings to a vast array of gods and goddesses and petition the sacred realm for health, wealth and prosperity. Pilgrims with bags full of sacrificial items gather in the wee hours of morning in order to board buses which take them to faraway religious sites known for their efficacy in fulfilling the wishes of the faithful (Soucy 2003, Taylor 2004). Shops specialising in selling ritual props openly display their range of supplies, and the manufacturing of votive paper items used as offerings during rituals has become a profitable family business (Nguyen Thi Hien 2006). Fortune tellers (thầy bói), spirit priests (thầy cúng) and soul-callers (người gọi hồn) are patronised by clients from all walks of life, including intellectuals, entrepreneurs and government officials. In this rich landscape of Vietnamese popular belief and practice, Four Palace mediumship – that is, ritual possession by the deities of the Four Palace pantheon – has emerged as one of the most dynamic and imaginative religious movements. This book explores the creative and contingent processes that underlie these dynamics in the economically burgeoning urban context of Hanoi.

The impetus for this work grew out of my doctoral research on Rites, Feasts and Politics in Northern Vietnam (Endres 2000), which traced the reconstruction of village ritual festivals (lễ hội làng) in the Red River Delta and their transformation in the interrelation between local communities and the state. In that work, I addressed the questions of how far and how successfully the Party-state’s project of building socialism intervened in the ritual life of villagers, which factors triggered the process of reappraisal on the upper
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echelons of the state apparatus during the reform era, and how these changes were reflected in the official discourse concerning the role of cultural traditions in the process of modern development and nation-building. Since my research, conducted in 1996 and 1998, primarily centred on the male-dominated ritual space of the village communal house (đình làng), the ritual activities of the village women in my fieldwork location, apart from their regular gatherings in the Buddhist pagoda (chùa), largely escaped my attention – until almost the end of my stay. The engulfing sensory experience of almost five hours of ritualised spirit possession, known as lên đồng or hầu bông, triggered plenty of questions that set the trajectory of my subsequent research. But before I could pursue these questions, my professional career first took another detour when I accepted the offer by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) to run the DAAD Information Centre at Hanoi University of Technology. For three years, from 2001 to 2004, I led the (privileged but arduous) life of an expatriate in Hanoi and networked with government agencies, educational and research institutions, embassies and representatives of business enterprises.

In my free time, however, I immersed myself into a different world. I am grateful to Nguyễn Văn Chính, Nguyễn Thu Hương, and Lê Thị Lan for arranging initial contacts with spirit mediums in Hanoi. One invitation to a lên đồng led to another, and soon I spent many of my weekends crouched in small temples, breathing the incense-filled air and listening to the entrancing rhythm of the chầu văn music that accompanies the rituals of the Four Palace mediums. It was in these early stages of my research that I met Master Cảnh, Master Dương, chị Vượng, em Cường, em Hàng and Mrs. Rose, for whom (as for all of my interlocutors mentioned in this book) I chose these pseudonyms in order to protect their privacy. I am greatly indebted to them for introducing me into the complex ‘world of mediumship’ (thế giới đồng bông). Master Cảnh, a newly established master medium at that time with a private temple located behind Hanoi’s railway station, kindly called me whenever he had a ritual scheduled or a pilgrimage organised. Getting up at three o’clock in the morning and sitting for hours on the hard seats of rattly, non-air-conditioned buses of the Russian brand ‘Seagull’, I joined his first generation of followers in touring the spiritual landscape of the Northern provinces from one temple to the next before returning, exhausted but elated, to the capital. These first encounters with the world of mediumship allowed me to refine my research questions and to develop a framework for a grant proposal. Klaus-Peter Köpping has been a great source of encouragement in this endeavour, for which I am deeply appreciative.
During my year of fieldwork in 2006, I accumulated a great debt of gratitude to many persons. Master Thiền, in particular, widened my perspective by introducing me to many other masters, spirit priests, fortune-tellers, soul-callers, musicians and ritual assistants in her network, and by letting me participate in her variegated ritual activities. Although I often moaned when she ‘summoned’ me to another ritual, which usually meant that I had to cover long distances riding my scooter in Hanoi’s sweltering heat and heavily congested traffic, these events were always enriching and deepened my understanding of Four Palace mediumship. It is through her that I met Master Thương, Master Thuận, thầy Hiền, em Lộc and em Ký, and many others whose voices I recount in this book. During most interviews, I relied on the outstanding professional assistance of my colleague Nguyễn Thị Thanh Bình for whom the world of mediumship was just as exotic as it was for me. Lê Trần Quyên did a marvellous job in transcribing numerous interviews and independently conducting a sample household survey in two different urban quarters (phường), Hàng Trống and Văn Miếu. Special thanks also go to my dear friends Hằng and Khánh who were always there to provide a good laugh, sound advice and practical help whenever I needed it.

The German Research Foundation (DFG) provided funding for the project from 2005 to 2008, with the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Freiburg, Germany, hosting me as a research fellow during that time. I particularly wish to thank Judith Schlehe and Stefan Seitz for providing a stimulating and supportive working environment during the writing process. In Vietnam, I am grateful to the Institute of Ethnology, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), for their hospitality and helpfulness in facilitating my research. Many friends and peers have, over the years, shared with me their knowledge and enthusiasm. I particularly wish to thank Susan Bayly, Andrea Lauser, Vũ Thị Kiều Dung, Phạm Hồng Tung, Natasha Paireaudou, William Smith and Heinz Schütte for their inspiration, support and valued friendship. Ngô Đức Thịnh, Nguyễn Thị Hiền, Phạm Quỳnh Phương, Viveca Larsson and Barley Norton have generously contributed their expertise, experience and stories from the field. The late economic historian Đặng Phong was always a great source of wisdom, humour and kindness and will forever hold a special place in my memory.

After moving to the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle, Germany, I enjoyed and benefited from stimulating discussions and exchanges with many colleagues and fellow researchers, including Patrice Ladwig, Edyta Roszko, Markus Schlecker and Oliver Tappe. My special appreciation goes
to Chris Hann for his continuing mentorship and for generously allowing me the necessary time to complete this book. The revised manuscript has profited from the thoughtful comments, criticisms and suggestions of Karen Fjelstad, Shaun Malarney and Burkhard Schnepel. Huge thanks also go to Gerald Jackson of NIAS Press for seeing the book through to publication. A deep appreciation is extended to my partner, Holger, for his endless moral support, understanding, care and love. This book is my humble offering to the deities of the Four Palaces – may they continue to extend their favours to the spirit mediums who have so generously shared their time, knowledge, experiences and insights that made this study possible.
Note on the Vietnamese Language

Modern Vietnamese is written with a Romanized script known as quốc ngữ. Vietnamese is a tonal language in which the pitch of a spoken word is essential to its meaning. It has six tones that are indicated by diacritical marks as follows:

- mà (high rising tone) cheek
- mà (mid-level tone, no diacritic) ghost
- mà (high rising broken tone) varnish, veneer
- mà (low falling rising tone) tomb, grave
- mà (low falling broken tone) rice seedling
- mà (low falling tone) but, nevertheless

The pronunciation of different vowels and consonants is likewise indicated by diacritical marks: ā, â, ē, ē̄, ō, ō̄, ŭ, and đ. I have included the diacritics in all Vietnamese terms and names with the exception of widely known place names (e.g. Vietnam, Hanoi, Saigon). Vietnamese personal names are conventionally written with the family name first, followed by a middle name and a given name. The given name is the primary form of address, usually in combination with a kinship term or a (professional) title (e.g. Elder Sister Lan, or Teacher/Master Hùng). I have adhered to these conventions and omitted diacritical marks only in such cases when the diacritics were not given, which is often the case when Vietnamese authors or authors of Vietnamese descent publish with foreign publishing houses outside Vietnam. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Vietnamese in this work are my own.
Introduction: Inviting the Spirits

It was in September 1998, the night before the grand annual ritual in honour of the craft ancestor. The villagers of Đại Bái, a bronze-manufacturing village in the Red River Delta, were in a state of excitement. The day had been filled with festive activities: a solemn procession (ruốc) in which the statues of the village deities were carried around in sedan chairs, a ceremonial donation of a lacquer tablet inscribed with the text of an ancient stele, followed by a sumptuous banquet attended by the village elders and dignitaries. I had been researching the resurgence of this festival for the past months and thus followed the events with keen interest. Now darkness had fallen, and my torch threw a flickering light on the dusty pathway to the village Buddhist pagoda. In the adjacent shrine dedicated to the Mother Goddesses a lêndon was to take place, so the residing monk had told me off the record. I had read and heard about this ritualised form of spirit possession, but I had never witnessed it myself. Whenever I had tried to bring up the topic in Đại Bái, my interlocutors reacted in a guarded manner, saying, ‘There are no lêndon rituals in the village. The authorities are very strict about it.’ I was thus all the more thrilled to learn that tonight an old spirit medium, a Đại Bái native from Hanoi, was going to act as a ‘seat’ (ghế) for the deities to descend upon.

When I arrived at the pagoda, the yard in front of Mother Goddess shrine was filled with loud music and joyous laughter. A chèo theatre troupe from a neighbouring district had set up a makeshift stage and was performing a classical play that enthralled a small but enthusiastic audience. It thus remained largely unnoticed what was going on ‘backstage’. The Mother Goddess shrine (nhà mẫu) was densely crowded with elderly village ladies waiting for the ritual to start. The medium, an octogenarian man dressed in...
a white tunic, his long grey hair knotted into a bun at the top of his head, was sitting cross-legged on a platform beneath the altar, facing what looked like a small dressing table complete with a carved mirror. With his gaunt features and long wispy goatee he bore a striking similarity to Vietnam’s late revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh. On the left-hand side of the shrine two male ritual musicians were beginning to play their instruments. One of the women who had denied the practice of *lên động* in the village was sitting to

Figure 1.1 Male spirit medium possessed by the Tenth Prince, Đại Bái 1998
the right of the medium, arranging a pile of ceremonial robes and accessories and helping the old man into a red brocade tunic.

When all was set up he clasped a red piece of cloth with both hands, nodded towards the ritual participants and hurled it over his head. The musicians launched into a musical invitation for the deities to descend and take possession of their host. As their song filled the incense-laden air, the upper body of the medium started to gyrate until a sudden jolt interrupted the gentle movement and his hands formed a gesture to signal the presence of the First Mother Goddess. Politely covering her mouth with a fan, the assistant whispered some words into the medium’s ear. Then he lifted his hands to his forehead in a curling movement, indicating that the deity had left his body. The Second and Third Mother Goddesses indicated their presence in the same brief manner. As I was to learn much later, the principal goddesses ‘do not get to work’ (không làm việc) during a lên đồng, which means they are not ritually enacted. Instead, their brief appearance remains veiled, a practice referred to as ‘serving the hidden shadow’ (hầu tráng bóng).

The ritual performance usually unfolds with the spirit incarnations of the Five Great Mandarins, followed by a varying number of Holy Ladies, Princes, Princesses and Young Princes. After signalling the deity’s presence, the medium throws off the red veil and remains seated until the ritual assistants have changed him (or her) into the appropriate attire. The medium then gets up, bows respectfully in front of the altar and proceeds to perform a short ritual dance that reflects the deity’s rank, gender and personality. After the dance the medium sits down again and takes a few sips of rice wine or water from a small cup. Male spirit incarnations usually smoke cigarettes while listening to the music. The medium then blesses the offerings that had been prepared for each deity in sufficient quantity according to the number of invitees, and sets out allocating shares to the participants, a practice called Phát lộc. Before or during the redistribution of offerings, participants may also come forward with a particular request by which they ask the deity’s special favours (xin lộc), i.e. a cup of ‘incense water’ imbued with healing qualities, or the spirit’s prediction (and advice) about a specific issue in life. A spirit incarnation ends when the medium signals the departure of the deity by covering his head with the red scarf, whereupon the musicians start inviting the next deity.

Despite the air of secrecy, the atmosphere in the densely crowded village shrine was animated and convivial. I was squeezed between old ladies who chewed away on their betel quids and clapped their hands to the lively parts of the music. Some of them smoked the cigarettes that had been handed to
them by the male spirit incarnations. The lên đồng lasted for several hours, during which the medium embodied approximately twenty different deities in succession. Later he told me that he had bribed the village mayor with a banquet in order to be left alone by the officials. I was transfixed from start to finish even though I didn’t have a clue what the lên đồng was all about. I only knew I wanted to do research on spirit possession.

**Mediumship, markets and modernity**

As the epitome of human confrontation with the divine or demonic Other, spirit and deity possession has long captured the attention of anthropologists and has ‘rarely missed a theoretical beat’ (Boddy 1994: 408). An extensive literature in anthropology addresses possession as a means of managing distress and providing agency to disempowered or socially marginal individuals (e.g. Carrin 1999, Crapanzano and Garrison 1977, Lewis 1989 [1971], Ong 1987, Sharp 1993). In his widely discussed (and often criticised) work *Ecstatic Religion*, I. M. Lewis distinguishes between what he calls *peripheral cults*, formed around spiritual powers that have no explicit moral significance in society, and *central possession religions*, involving deities who uphold and sustain public morality. While the latter typically possess and speak through male hosts, Lewis argues, the former tend to afflict the ‘weak and humiliated’, usually women, and act as a channel for articulating their interests and needs (see also Bourguignon 2004). A review of recent studies on spirit possession does in fact reveal that women are more likely, though not exclusively, to be afflicted by spirits than men.

The implications of this tendency, however, vary substantially in different local, cultural and historical contexts. In her study of Malay factory women, Aihwa Ong (1987) interprets possession episodes occurring in multinational firms as rites of protest against the women’s alienated experience of inhumane working conditions. In contrast, Constantinides (1978) points out that zaar bori practices in Sudan form a forum for social networks that supply women with important information and practical support for adapting to modern urban society (see also Behrend and Luig 1999). In southern Orissa, as well as in other parts of India, divine possession by goddesses is appreciated as a significant religious experience and may raise a woman’s esteem within her community (Hauser 2008). In some societies, female spirit mediums can even gain impressive wealth, reputation and influence. For example,
in North Thailand, the rise of spirit mediumship in the past decades has favoured the expansion of ritual and economic spheres where women can wield considerable power (Irvine 1984, Kitiarsa 1999). In a similar vein, Laurel Kendall (1985, 2009) has argued that the shamanic rituals of the Korean mansin continually respond and adapt to the changing conditions of modernity and can therefore not simply be dismissed ‘as archaic survivals or as the mechanism for exclusive catharsis of a feminine subculture’ (Kendall 1985: 179).

As current scholarship has moved away from treating deity and spirit possession as a peripheral phenomenon that afflicts marginal people, more attention is being paid to the creative and expressive aspects that assign possession a central role in cultural production (Cohen 2008, Johnson and Keller 2006, Schmidt and Huskinson 2010). Rather than being interpreted as a weapon of the weak and oppressed, possession is seen as ‘a form of cultural knowledge and a means of knowing and healing’ that ‘widens out from the body and self into other domains of knowledge and experience’, thus enabling practitioners ‘to explore multiple refractions of order and morality; to distill the lessons of history; to sift, evaluate, and situate external influences; and to respond’ (Boddy 1994: 414).

With the proliferation of religious faiths and movements over much of the world at the dawn of the twenty-first century it became apparent that, contrary to what modernisation theorists had predicted, religion had not faded away in the face of modernity’s scientific and technological advances. In their seminal volume Asian Visions of Authority, Keyes et al. (1994) have attributed this to what they described as a crisis of authority in the process of creating modern nation-states:

> By insisting on the superiority of rational action over traditional practice, the modernizers have made the limits of rationality much more clear; the gap between the conclusions reached about the world through recourse to rational decision making and the practical reality of the world generates uncertainty and ambiguity that many seek to resolve through turning to religion. (Keyes et al. 1994: 15)

In Vietnam, the exposure to the vicissitudes of the market since the economic reforms of 1986 has had a similar unsettling effect. The shift from a centrally-planned command economy to a market economy with socialist characteristics set in motion a highly dynamic process that contributed towards the transformation of the impoverished war-ravaged country into one of the
fastest-growing economies of Southeast Asia (Luong 2003, Tran-Nam and Pham 2004, Masina 2006). Today, the streets of Vietnam’s two metropolises, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), are heavily congested with traffic, the city stores and markets offer an overwhelming range of goods, and thousands upon thousands of small businesses and shops thrive on new consumer demands and trends in consumption.

At the same time, Vietnam’s economic rise has sharpened economic and social disparities both within the urban population as well as between urban and rural areas. In this complex new world of risks and opportunities the multifarious ways of interacting with the spirit world has (again) become an important resource for the creation of meaning and purpose. As Philip Taylor remarks, ‘People have turned for assistance to a cast of powerful spirits that concretize and give familiar form to that which is ineffable and apparently uncontrollable’ (Taylor 2004: 87). Many members of the crowded Vietnamese pantheon of supernatural beings have thus become spiritual agents of economic success and material wealth, among them efficacious female goddesses such as the Lady of the Realm (Bà Chúa Xứ) or the Lady of the Storehouse (Bà Chúa Kho) (Taylor 2004, Lê Hồng Lý 2007).

Concomitantly, the emergence of the new Asian capitalisms (Hefner 1998) has spawned a commoditised marketplace of religious goods and services, and even new forms of religiosity have arisen in the context of economic activity and wealth creation. Although praying for profit and other this-worldly benefits has always been an intrinsic feature of Asian popular religious belief and practice, the proliferation of Asia’s ‘boom-time religions of prosperity’ (Jackson 1999a) underlines once more the close interaction between religion and the market and the adaptability of religious faiths to socioeconomic change. Among the various religious traditions that have re-emerged and flourished in Vietnam since the onset of đổi mới, spirit mediumship offers a particularly rich insight into how the vibrant dynamics of reformed, market-oriented socialism are played out in actual ritual practice.

A few years after my first encounter of a lèn đồng at the village shrine, Four Palace mediumship seemed to have grown into a veritable ‘possession movement’ in Hanoi. Many of the spirit mediums I met were young, trendy people with posh mobile phones and fancy motor scooters, and their rituals were no longer shrouded in secrecy. Private shrines dedicated to the Mother Goddesses and the Four Palace pantheon had mushroomed on the rooftops of the tall and narrow town houses that characterise the modern cityscape. Often enough,
I could hear the sound of amplified *châu văn* music reverberating for hours through the hidden alleys of Hanoi’s densely populated neighbourhoods without any action being taken by the authorities.

Pattana Kitiarsa (1999) has cast the re-emergence of urban spirit medium cults in Northern Thailand in terms of an ongoing postmodernisation of Thai religion. Following the same line of argument, Peter Jackson (1999: 49) describes the *modern* stage of Thai religiosity as ‘following a path of doctrinal rationalization accompanied by organizational centralization and bureaucratization’, whereas he sees the *post-modern* stage as ‘characterized by a resurgence of supernaturalism and an efflorescence of religious expression at the margins of state control, involving a decentralization and localization of religious authority’. Fragmentation, de-differentiation, hybridisation, fluidity and contingency are some of the catchwords of postmodern perspectives, and while my own approach may perhaps be labelled ‘postmodern’, I hesitate to use the term ‘postmodernisation’ to capture the dynamics of urban mediumship in Vietnam’s contemporary era. One, I reject the implied, rather evolutionary view of modernity as a stage in the history of nation-states that is followed by postmodernity. Two, recent academic debates have re-charged *modernity* as a key concept by pluralising it into ‘culturally specific forms of modernity shaped by distinct cultural heritages and sociopolitical conditions’ (Eisenstadt et al. 2002: 1). Although this understanding of modernity as a differentiated process does not completely rid the concept of all its difficulties, it nevertheless offers a correction to the Eurocentric and homogenising assumptions that had initially informed it. In a recent essay, Anne Raffin (2008) suggests recognising ‘a hybrid modernity at work in postcolonial Vietnam’, one that has been fostered by the legacies of both the colonial and socialist projects of modernisation (see also Bayly 2007). This, I argue, is a viable approach to which I want to add yet another perspective: that of modernity as a discursive space in which different actors continuously ‘vernacularise’ their own subjective notions of what it means to be modern. This perspective is best captured in the concept of *alternative modernity* that has emerged out of the critique of the classical theories of modernisation (Appadurai 1996, Gaonkar 2001a, Knauf 2002a, Rofel 1999). The alternatively modern is, as Knauf (2002b: 25) suggests, conceptualised as ‘the social and discursive space in which the relationship between modernity and tradition is configured’. This book will show that urban spirit mediumship is one of the many multivocal arenas in contemporary Vietnam wherein the alternatively modern is articulated and negotiated.
A world of gods and spirits

In his famous 1958 essay *La Religion des Annamites*, the French missionary Cadière contends that the true Vietnamese religion is the cult of spirits (‘La vraie religion des Annamites est le culte des esprits’; see Cadière 1992 [1958]: 6). The Vietnamese world of gods and spirits (Ho Tai 1987) is in fact a bewilderingly complex and heterogeneous realm inhabited by a motley array of spiritual agents, such as mythical and human ancestors, legendary Vietnamese warriors and heroines, guardian spirits, immortals sent from heaven to spend a lifetime among humans, and the wandering ghosts of the unjust dead. Levy et al. (1996) conceptually distinguish between *gods* and *spirits* by identifying the following features as characteristic for the two types of numinous beings. As territorially bounded and canonically standardised entities, gods are central to the moral order of a community and are attended to by high-status religious functionaries. Spirits, in contrast, are uncanny, fluid beings that exist at the margins of human order and thus lack social boundedness. Their attendants and mediators, according to Levy et al., are more likely to be ordinary or low-status people, some of whom even have dubious or ambiguous reputations. Whereas gods tend to be ‘more distant from sensual experience’ (ibid.: 15), spirits engage the senses and bodies of humans in a more direct way, e.g. through spirit possession. In their fleeting and unbound form, spirits are often perceived as a threat to the moral order imposed by political and cultural elites.

An ontological distinction between *gods* and *spirits* is certainly useful as a conceptual tool. More often than not, however, a clear-cut borderline between the categories is hard, if not impossible, to draw. In the Vietnamese case, a look at the emic terminology pertaining to these entities shows that, as such, the distinction does not even exist. The most common terms used to designate a divine being are *thần* and *thánh*. The former is translated as ‘deity, genie’ (Đặng Chấn Liêu et al.), ‘god, spirit, ghost, deity’ (Từ Điển Lặc Việt), ‘dieu, esprit, génie, âme (god, spirit, soul)’ (Gouin 2002), the latter as ‘saint’, ‘sage’ and ‘spirit’. The compound words *thần thần* and *thánh thần* encompass both ‘gods and saints’, which is a further indication that both terms are often used interchangeably. In common parlance, however, *thần* is most often only used as a generic term for ‘gods and spirits’ (with the two sub-categories of *nạn thần*, deities of human origin, and *thiên thần*, deities of heavenly origin), whereas *thánh* is the more common, respectful term to address and speak
about these spiritual beings. Conversely, if we look at the entries for the English word ‘god’, the Vietnamese translations given are chúa (originally a title granted by royalty that has been translated as ‘master’, ‘governor’, ‘queen’ and ‘princess’) and trời, heaven/sky. A compound word composed of both terms, thiên chúa, is used to denote the Christian God; the imperial title of chúa is most often used as an honorific for female goddesses, e.g. Bà Chúa Xứ, Bà Chúa Kho. While ‘gods and saints’ may differ from one another in character and personality, rank in the heavenly bureaucracy, and supernatural potency, they do not appear to be ontologically distinguished from a category of ‘spirits’. I therefore choose to apply both terms interchangeably throughout the book, though for the sake of convenience I prefer using the gender-neutral term ‘deity’ instead of ‘god’ or ‘goddess’.

Rather than contrasting gods and spirits, the Vietnamese distinguish between deities (đền, đền) at the one end of the supernatural spectrum, and ghosts (ma, quỷ) at the other. Ma is the generic term for the ghosts of the dead who, in contrast to the souls of the ancestors (linh hồn tổ tiên), do not receive any care from the living. Among them are the wandering souls (cô hồn) of people who have died untimely and agonising deaths in unknown places. Forever trapped in the negative emotions of mortal agony and grief, they dwell on the edge between the world of living humans and the yin-world (cõi âm) of the dead, unable to make the transition (Kwon 2006, Malarney 2002). The ontological boundaries between ghosts and deities, however, are nevertheless permeable. Just like meritorious heroes and ancestors may become deified, a wandering ghost can, under certain circumstances, hiển thánh, that is achieve sainthood and ascend into the ranks of a powerful deity (Harrell 1974, Kwon 2008). Heonik Kwon’s latest study provides us with two vivid ethnographic examples from central Vietnam in which he describes the transformation of two young females from their existence of wandering ghosts to that of efficacious goddesses. Kwon confirms that these cases are no isolated incidents. They are similar in sharing ‘a common meta-historical plot of tragic early death, improper burial, and absence of ritual commemoration, and further, separation from origin, reburial, and regeneration as a trans-local deity after a generation’s lapse of time since physical death’ (Kwon 2008: 119). Moreover, the process of the two young women’s deification involved a time of study and apprenticeship in an otherworld academic institution while gaining a reputation by possessing new spirit mediums or soul-callers and transmitting their stories through them. Many gods and saints are said to be worshipped in appreciation of their meritorious contributions to the good of
the country and its people, as expressed in the adage: ‘When you drink water, think of the source’ (uống nước nhớ nguồn). For the devotees, however, the historicity or the personality or the heroic deeds of the worshipped divinities was never, and still is not, their primary concern. The reason why certain deities enjoy more attention than others is, first and foremost, to be found in their perceived spiritual efficacy (Dror 2007: 19). This is why the Vietnamese spirit world is not only inhabited by ‘worthy’ divinities but also by thieves, beggars, prostitutes, night soil collectors and others whose moral qualities are dubious but who have proved themselves responsive to the prayers of the people in time of need.

Attempts at controlling the multiplicity and heterogeneity of local spirit cults have often been a major means of asserting state power in local communities, and the Vietnamese state has been no exception in this regard. Local cults and spirit practices had been integrated into a national cult of royal authority since the eleventh century, and contacts with the supernatural were an integral part of Vietnamese kingship (Nguyễn Thế Anh 2002: 228). However, it was not until the reign of the early Lê Dynasty (1428–1788) that Confucian orthodoxy was rigorously enforced and called for an ‘administrative control of the spirits’ (Whitmore n.d.). In the sixteenth century a decree stipulated the registration and ranking of all village guardian deities and authorised the Ministry of Rites to endorse them with standardised hagiographies that would demonstrate their worthiness for recognition by the imperial authorities.

Official recognition was acknowledged by imperial certificates of investiture (sắc phong) by which each deity was assigned a rank in a three-tiered divine hierarchy (see Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930: 118; for a detailed characterisation of each rank see Phan Kế Bính 1995: 59–60). The imperial state ‘thus moved away from the general amorality of the earlier spirit world to gain a spiritual hierarchy that was acceptable in Confucian terms’ (Whitmore n.d.; see also Boudarel 1991, Nguyễn Thế Anh 1997). While the spirit realm was gradually brought under the administrative control of the Confucian state, popular religious practices such as spirit possession, fortune-telling and sorcery were expressly prohibited. The Lê Code, a law code enacted in the fifteenth century under the Lê dynasty, contained provisions against spirit mediums, diviners, sorcerers and printers of religious books, ‘accusing them of preying upon the people to confuse them and to cheat them out of their money’ (Dror 2007: 165). Yet this repressive stance towards such practices, characterised as ‘superstition’ only in the twentieth century, was not continued in an unbroken line by imperial successors, nor was it rigidly enforced at the local level.
Consequently, a diverse range of religious practices and beliefs continued to exist outside of Confucianism (Nguyễn Thế Anh 1997: 153).

During the French colonial period, the abounding richness and diversity of Vietnamese religion puzzled colonial administrators and missionaries alike. Whereas Paul Giran dismissed it as a product of the primitive confusion of Annamite thought, Cadière metaphorically portrayed Vietnamese religion as a dense and fecund thicket of entangled roots, outstretching branches and bizarre flowers that conveys to the observer an effervescent vitality. Although the French colonial administration tried to control popular religion and had certain cults put under constant surveillance as potential political threats to the colonial regime, no legal action was taken to curb this vital multiplicity (Dror 2007: 171). After gaining independence from French rule in 1954, the revolutionary authorities embarked on the ambitious task of building a new culture in which there was no place for spirit beliefs and practices. Although some seeds of the revolution seem to have taken root, the recent resurgence of religious activity after years of state-imposed restrictions has proved that the ‘inextricable forest of Vietnamese religion’ has ultimately withstood...
the communist party-state’s zealous attempts to trim its treetops and clear the mossy undergrowth of so-called depraved customs (hủ tục) and harmful superstitions. The current cultural–nationalist discourse on Vietnam’s cultural roots (nguồn gốc văn hóa) and national identity (bản sắc dân tộc) even capitalises on the persistence of the spirit religion (đạo thành) in order to claim an indigenous Vietnamese heritage that predates ‘imported’ religious and ethical codes such as Confucianism, Buddhism, or Christianity (Taylor 2003; see also Vũ Ngọc Khánh 2006 [2001], Đặng 1998).

The Four Palaces, their pantheon and ritual dynamics

Who, then, are the spirits that possess contemporary Vietnamese mediums? This book is concerned with possession rituals of the so-called Mother Goddess Religion (Đạo Mẫu) or Four Palace Religion (Đạo Tứ Phủ). Both designations are in fact recent innovations by Vietnamese folklorists (e.g. Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996; see also Chapter 6). With the exception of Paul Giran (1912) who described it as the Cult of the Three Worlds (Tam Phủ),

![Figure 1.3 Altar dedicated to the pantheon of the Four Palaces](image)
the scholarly literature of the colonial period usually refers to this popular religion as the Cult of the Chư Vị, the assembly of spirits who inhabit the three realms of sky (heaven), earth and water (e.g. Phan Kế Bính 1995 [1915]: 238, Nguyễn Văn Huyên 2002 [1944]: 256, Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1931). The French ethnographer Maurice Durand, in his classic study Technique et Panthéon des Médiums Viêtnamiens (1959), again claims that it was commonly called the cult of female mediums (culte des bà đồng). In contrast to academic endeavours, journalistic and literary works did not attempt to name the cult and instead resorted to treating it as mediumship (đồng bông) (e.g. Trọng Lang 1935, Nhất Lang 1952). Rather than describing a clearly defined belief system, all of these publications emphasise the practice of ritual possession, called hâu đồng (a medium’s service), hâu bông (serving the [deities’] shadows), or lên đồng, mounting the medium.4

In the preface to his book Popular Religion in China (2001), Stephan Feuchtwang notes, ‘We have come to expect of religions that they can be named like identities of nations or cultures or at least that they can be understood as doctrines.’ Popular religion, however, eludes any distinct identification simply because it has no name. Moreover, Western concepts of religion hardly apply to the localised and heterodox religious practices of polytheistic societies.5

The recent reconceptualisation of Vietnamese spirit mediumship as a distinct belief system basically serves two separate, yet closely intertwined purposes. On the one hand, it enables adherents to assert and legitimate their beliefs in and ways of establishing contact with the ‘world of gods and spirits’ vis-à-vis the modernising agenda of the post-colonial nation-state.6 On the other hand, the essentialisation of spirit mediumship as Đạo Mẫu or Đạo Tứ Phủ and the devoted efforts of social scientists to re-situate it within the category of folk belief (tín ngưỡng dân gian) must be seen as part of the (ongoing) process of constructing Vietnam’s national heritage and identity. The veneration of Holy Mothers (Thánh Mẫu) within the Chữ Vị Cult was a particularly rich source cultural agents could draw from: The worship of female goddesses as mothers came to be treated as an autochthonous belief with ancient roots dating back to the mythical matrifocal culture that is assumed to have prevailed before Vietnam came under Chinese domination and the influence of Confucian thought (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996). Whereas it is not within the scope of this book to debate these claims (for a detailed discussion see Taylor 2003, Phạm & Eipper 2009), it is necessary to keep in mind that various political and cultural agendas, as well as social-theoretical assumptions, have been at work in the making of the Mother Goddess Religion.
That said, let me now give a brief overview of its basic cosmology. Contemporary spirit mediums of the Four Palaces perceive the world as divided into four distinct domains or palaces (phủ): Heaven (Thiên Phủ), Earth (Địa Phủ), Water (Thủy Phủ), and Mountains and Forests (Nhạ Phủ). Scholars as well as spirit mediums often point out that there had once been only three palaces, to which a fourth one, the Palace of Mountains and Forests, was added at a later stage in Vietnamese history. One of the most renowned master mediums in present-day Hanoi, an enigmatic figure and eloquent storyteller named Master Dương (a pseudonym), relates his version of the origins of the Three Palaces cosmology as follows:

At first, there were only three palaces (or domains, phủ): the Palaces of Heaven, Earth and Waters. People worshipped these three domains because their knowledge of mankind and nature was still very limited and backward. The people wished for favourable weather (mưa thuận giò hòa) in order to make a living and prosper, and where did this favourable weather come from? From the heavens, from the sky, so their conception was to worship the sky – this is the first domain. Then people got the idea to make offerings to the land so that it might yield harvests of plenty, so they worshipped the land and it became the Earth Palace. Since the time of the Hùng Kings, the people grew wet rice in the northern delta region. Every year during the rainy season, the rivers rose above their banks. The people were terrified because the flood water claimed many lives and swept away houses and possessions. This is why they started to worship the spirits of the water, or what became known as the Water Palace. (Interview 08.04.2005)

Whereas Master Dương’s musings about the rootedness of the Three Palaces in human awe and fear vis-à-vis the forces of nature are clearly informed by Vietnamese academic writings that offer an evolutionary perspective on the origins of folk beliefs, his historico-mythological explanation of how the fourth palace came to be added to the system nicely reflects the nationalist discourse that celebrates the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese against foreign aggression and proclaims national unity amidst ethnic diversity (Pelley 1998):

When Emperor Lê Thái Tô [better known as Lê Lợi] fought the enemy Liễu Thăng [a general from China’s Ming dynasty who invaded Vietnam in 1427], a deity from the region of mountains and forests (Thượng Ngàn) appeared in a dream and helped the emperor to defeat Liễu Thăng. The Lê Dynasty then realized that the mounts and forests [i.e. the region populated by ethnic minorities] contributed greatly to protecting
the country and the people, and this is why the Palace of Mountains and Forests (Nhàc Phủ) was added to the three existing ones. (ibid)\(^7\)

Associated with the three or four palaces are the Mother Goddesses. Their denomination as Tam Tòa Thánh Mẫu marks them as a trinity, and as such they are also represented on the altars erected to them. According to Giran (1912: 273), the first goddess is the Goddess of Heaven, followed by the Goddess Liễu Hạnh (described as the goddess of earth, mountains and forests), and the Goddess of Waters. By contrast, Durand (1959: 30) lists the goddesses in the following order: first, the Heavenly Mother Liễu Hạnh, second, the Mother of Waters, and third, the Mother of Mountains and Forests (Thánh-Mẫu Thượng Ngàn).\(^8\) Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996: 23) speaks of four, rather than three, goddesses, and ranks them in the following order: Mother of Heaven, of Mountains and Forests, of Waters, and of Earth. Master Đường presents yet another account of how the pantheon evolved:

> The trinity of Mother Goddesses exists since ancient times, nobody knows since when. [...]. The first one is the Goddess up in the Sky. Second, and this position is a bit unstable, is the Goddess of Mountains and Forests, and third is the Goddess of Water. Three goddesses. But then, during the Lê dynasty, Princess Liễu Hạnh descended to earth (giàng trần). [...] Due to her far-reaching fame, Liễu Hạnh eventually ascended to the second rank as the Goddess of Earth, and the Second Goddess of Mountains and Forests moved to the fourth position. [...] Nowadays, nobody knows about these things anymore. They just worship at random; they turn the whole pantheon upside down.

Again, Master Đường’s account is revealing for a number of reasons. First, it indicates that the emergence of Princess Liễu Hạnh’s cult in the sixteenth century eventually resulted in a reorganisation of the pantheon of Mothers. It is beyond the scope of this book to discuss the historicity of Liễu Hạnh in detail (see Pham Quỳnh Phương 2001, Dror 2007). According to legend, she was expelled from heaven by her father, the Jade Emperor, and born into a human family in Vụ Bản, Nam Định province, in 1577. Her fame as a powerful and vengeful spirit evolved when, after her early death, she reappeared in various places and incarnations, helping those who respected her and punishing others with misfortune and disaster. In line with Master Đường’s argument, most scholars argue that Liễu Hạnh’s cult was eventually integrated into the previously existing pantheon of Mothers. Olga Dror, in her recent book *Cult, Culture, and Authority: Princess Liễu Hạnh in Vietnamese History* (2007), presumes, in contrast, that the Four Palaces pantheon itself
was more probably invented to be attached to Liễu Hạnh’s cult. There is, however, no historical evidence to support either of these hypotheses.

This leads us directly to the second argument of Master Đường which states that people ‘just worship at random’. Previous as well as recent scholarship has, at least for the most part, ignored the pantheon’s actual messiness and instead tried to portray it as an orderly system in which each goddess has her fixed rank. The devotees of the four palaces, in turn, generally seem to attach little importance to the subtleties of religious change as described by Master Đường, and simply worship Liễu Hạnh as the Supreme Mother Goddess (of Heaven). The reason why the question of her rank and affiliation in the pantheon is not a hotly debated issue among Four Palace mediums (as it is for some other deities, see Chapter 4) is because, unlike the lesser deities, the mother goddesses do not take form in the body of the medium during ritual performance. As I have already mentioned in the brief description of my first experience of a lên đồng ritual, they only appear very briefly during possession, and the medium’s head remains covered by the red scarf (khăn phủ diệ).

The first deities that are fully incarnated are the Great Mandarins (Quan Lớn). They are represented as potent warrior-heroes of great prowess, invested with magical powers and capable of scaring away evil demons. As with most of the pantheon’s deities, their names are consistent with the sequential and hierarchical order in which they appear (e.g. First Mandarin, Second Mandarin, etc.), and the colours of their tunics indicate their affiliation with the corresponding palace: red for the Sky Palace, green and blue for the Mountains and Forests Palace, white for the Water Palace, and yellow for the Earth Palace. Next in rank are the Holy Ladies (Chầu Bà). Some of them are avatars, ‘royal representatives’ or attendants of the mother goddesses. Ladies (as well as princesses) associated with the Palace of Mountains and Forests are perceived as belonging to different ethnic groups of the Northern highlands, such as the Nùng, Mường, Dao, or Thái. Even if their imaginative costumes are not authentic, at least they clearly mark them as ethnic. The Princes (Ông Hoàng) and Princesses (Cô) are ranked below the mandarins and ladies, and this is also reflected in their less stern and stately demeanour. They are generally perceived as more receptive to human requests than the higher ranking deities, and devotees frequently approach them during a lên đồng in order to ask for ‘blessed gifts’ (lộc). Although some of the princes are ascribed an ethnic-minority identity, they are all dressed in the long tunics typical of the lowland Vietnamese warrior-scholar-officials of the past. The Young Princes (Cậu), finally, also referred to as boy attendants of the princes, are the most
mischievous spirits in the pantheon. Conceived of as playful little children they may tease the ritual participants by acting in an impish and childlike manner.

The legends and defining characteristics of the Four Palace deities are orally transmitted through songs for the spirits (Norton 2009) known as chấu văn. Even more importantly, they are re-enacted through ritual performance. Four Palace mediumship is, after all, a religion that emphasises ritual practice rather than conceptual doctrine.

For a long time, the study of ritual had been dominated by questions of social function and structure. Émile Durkheim’s (1976 [1912]) central thesis that ritual sustains and reproduces the social order has inspired generations of scholars to concern themselves with the functional aspects of ritual in society. Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960 [1909]) classic work on rites of passage emphasises the role of ritual in orchestrating (and dramatising) changes in social role and status ‘in an orderly and sanctioned manner that maintains the integrity of the system’ (Bell 1997: 37). Building on van Gennep, Victor Turner (1969) theorised ritual as a dynamic process, characterised by a dialectical relationship between transformation and continuity. In doing so, he clearly departed from earlier anthropological approaches that, in the words of Kapferer (2004: 38), ‘regarded ritual both as a technology of traditional, relatively static societies, a mechanism for their reproduction, and as a means for the delusion and mystification of populations, which facilitated the legitimacy of dominant orders’. Recent trajectories in ritual studies focus on the dynamics of rituals and their role in an ‘unstable world’ marked by contingency, uncertainty and change (Kreinath et al. 2004, Wulf and Zirfas 2004, Henn and Köpping 2008). They not only show that rituals effectively resituate practitioners in a rapidly changing (late-modern, post-colonial, globalised) socio-economic context, but also draw attention to the ways in which ritual practices, over time, change and adapt to shifting social, political and economic realities. Thus, rather than being conceived of as ‘unchanging, time-honoured customs of an enduring community’ (Bell 1997: 210), rituals are in fact one of the multiple expressions of modernity itself (see Kapferer 2002, 2004). As I will show in this book, the ritual practice of serving the deities in Four Palace mediumship is no exception.

**Entering the world of mediumship**

In 2001 I returned to Vietnam on a mission other than research. My fulltime job at the DAAD Information Centre left me with little time and energy for
research at the end of the day. Yet I was able to establish first contacts with spirit mediums and participated in their ritual performances and pilgrimages whenever possible. Before I went back to Germany in 2004, I fervently prayed to the Mother Goddesses and the Four Palace deities to bestow their favours upon me and induce the German Research Foundation to fund my (then) planned research project. The grant proposal was successful and I returned to Vietnam for a full year of fieldwork in January 2006.

My first visit was to Mrs. Rose, a spirit medium in her late sixties at the time, who had informally adopted me as her con nuôi, her foster child (Endres 2008a). While she scurried around her small apartment bringing snacks and drinks to the table, she filled me in on her life since the last time I had seen her. My second visit was to the private shrine of Master Cảnh, a master medium I had first met in early 2002 and who had since been a valuable source of insight into the world of mediumship. He lit some incense, placed my offerings (consisting of seasonal fruit and some special treats from Germany) on the altar and informed the deities about my return to Vietnam. Then we sat down to exchange news and pleasantries over a cup of hot green tea. I told him that

**Figure 1.4** A devotee is introduced to the deities by presenting a tray of areca nuts (trình giậu)
I would like to thank the deities for their support and asked for his advice on what to do. He suggested I sponsor a lễ trả nợ bốn phủ, a rite of paying back the debt to the four palaces. It would be a lên đồng ritual with plenty of votive paper offerings as in an initiation ritual, he said, and due to the recent rise of the general price level it would cost me a total of eight million Vietnam Đồng (appr. 435 Euro/520 USD at that time). The sum came as no surprise, as the average price for a lên đồng in Hanoi had already been at five to six million Đồng in previous years, with no upper limit. My research budget of course did not allow for lavish rituals, and so I had to cover the costs myself. After much careful deliberation, I decided to do it. Hadn’t this research secured my income for the next three years? For a destined medium, this amount approximated more than half of the annual income of an average Hanoian, whereas for me it wasn’t even half of my monthly salary – so why should I be parsimonious? The deal was sealed and the date set for the fifteenth of January, which was four days later. Master Cảnh had invited several of his followers to the event, some of whom I had already met on various occasions. They were now gathering on the outer veranda of the small private shrine on the top floor of Master Cảnh’s living house. The offerings prepared for each deity, such as cans of beer and soft drinks, boxes of cookies, fresh fruit etc., were nicely arranged on round trays and placed on the balustrade. I was told to sit cross-legged on the left edge of the platform in front of the altar. I was still too inexperienced – and much too overwhelmed – to make sense of all the details and trusted that Master Cảnh would guide me through the ritual. During the embodiment of the Great Mandarins he waved the flaming bundle of incense (used by all male deities to purify the ritual space) over my cupped hands and signalled me to wipe my face. Next followed the incarnation of the Second Lady, whose role is most crucial during an initiation ritual as she takes on the important task of ‘transferring the veil’ (sang khăn) to the novice medium. When the music swelled into a lively Xa-melody typical for the female mountainous deities (Norton 2009), the Second Lady started dancing with several burning rope-candles in her hands. With a swift gesture the ethnic deity motioned for me to sit right in front of the altar. One of the assistants quickly put a ready-to-wear turban (khăn xếp) on my head and covered it with Master Cảnh’s red veil. I felt something heavy resting on the crown of my skull and knew it was a tray bearing a branch of areca nuts. I swayed gently for a short moment, unsure whether the movement was induced by the assistant who held the tray in balance or whether it had come naturally. During a ritual performance, the swaying is usually interpreted as a sign that the spirits have
descended upon their host. I felt engulfed by the music, the smell of incense, and the faint mustiness of the veil. While I was still pondering how it would feel to be possessed, the weight on my head suddenly lifted and the veil was pulled off again.

Two months later my Vietnamese colleague Bình and I went to see Master Đường whose temple is located in a street lined with trendy bars and cafés in the heart of old Hanoi. Within the first minutes of my visit he blurted out the pressing question, ‘Is it true that you have undergone a lễ tiễn căn?’ A lễ tiễn căn is a ritual of cutting the root, or seeing off the fate of a medium, and is suggested as an alternative to an initiation ritual to those whose destined aptitude for mediumship is rather light. I was therefore surprised, not so much about the fact that the news of my ritual had reached his ears, but that its purpose had obviously been misunderstood. Or hadn’t it? If a person doesn’t have a root of mediumship (căn đồng), Master Đường went on to explain, a small ritual would perfectly suffice to repay a debt owed to the Four Palaces. Big rituals such as mine were only necessary if a person had căn. As a Westerner (người tây), however, I was certainly not destined for mediumship. ‘Have there been eggs in the ritual?’ Đường wanted to know. Yes, there had in fact been eggs; they had been wrapped in red, green, yellow and white paper symbolising the different palaces. At the end of the ritual, Cảnh’s wife had given me nine white eggs and said that these were for me alone to eat, not to be shared with anyone else. ‘Clearly a lễ tiễn căn.’ Master Đường shook his head, ‘This was wrong.’ But it was too late. Unwittingly, I had become a follower of Master Cảnh – or so the gossip went. Moreover, my case seemed to have created a welcome opportunity for rival masters to criticise him.

It was at this point that I became acutely aware that the world of mediumship was in fact a minefield of contested claims, meanings and power relations. Where was I to position myself, as an anthropologist, in this dangerous terrain? I decided to tell Master Cảnh that my ritual had been the subject of rumour. The opportunity came a few days later when I joined his group on a pilgrimage to the Mẫu Đầm Đa cave temples in Hòa Bình province. ‘Master Đường thought I had a lễ tiễn căn,’ I said to Cảnh. ‘It seems that people gossip a lot.’ Cảnh wanted to know whether Master Đường had said anything else. ‘No’, I said, evading the truth, ‘just that. I told him it was a lễ trả nợ bốn phủ in order to thank the deities.’ ‘Don’t worry,’ Cảnh assured me, ‘most important is that you have done something from your heart. Moreover, if you want to delve deeply into research about mediumship, you also have to go a little bit into the religion; you have to experience it to some small degree, rather than
just observe.’ I was dumbstruck. Master Cân had pinpointed the cornerstone of anthropological methodology: participant observation.

Anthropologists have often been faced with various (ethical, moral, personal) dilemmas in the task of balancing engaged participation and dispassionate observation. How deeply anthropologists can get involved into the events they are observing depends not only on their willingness to blend into the other culture and their ability to establish the necessary trust, but also to a great extent on how much intrusion into their lives, customs and rituals the researched are willing to tolerate. Scholars of Islam or Christianity have often faced the dilemma of balancing the religious interests and restrictions of their interlocutors (e.g. attempts at conversion, rules for dealing with people of other faiths, etc.) with their own religious or a-religious orientations (Coleman 2003, Baer 2003, Lukens-Bull 2007). For scholars of indigenous religions, however, the question at stake is rather how much personal involvement in religious practices is methodologically justifiable before they run the risk of being accused of ‘going native’ by the custodians of the discipline. In her book Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, the Vietnamese-born filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha maintains that an anthropologist who identifies ‘with the needy alien from the subordinate cultural system’ may even be regarded as a traitor to his own people:

The proper anthropologist should be prevented from “going over the hill,” should be trained for detachment in the field if he wishes to remain on the winning side. The classic example of the man who spent years trying to learn the religious secrets of a particular society and refused to divulge them once he became a member of that cult has been seen as loss, a loss of objectivity, for the man changed sides and – why not say it – betrayed his own kind, the kind of his “origins”. (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989: 55, italics in the original)

Nevertheless, some anthropologists have been initiated into the cults they studied, others became apprentices of shamans and healers, and several have experimented with hallucinogenic drugs, be it in order to gain trust or to induce altered states of consciousness and perhaps experience the spirit world. Yet few of them have made their involvement public. Carol Laderman (1991) mentions her apprenticeship to a Malay bomoh and his partner rather in passing, and her own subject-position as a researcher-cum-student remains sketchy: ‘[T]hey were eager for me to learn and to record what I had learned,
to preserve their knowledge for future generations of Malays, and pass it on to my own countrymen’ (Laderman 1991: 52). In the course of his research on Songhay spirit possession in Tillaberi, Niger, Paul Stoller became initiated as a *sorko benya* (praise-singer to the spirits). His long participation in a troupe of Songhay spirit mediums ‘plunged [him] deeply into the human dimension of possession’ (Stoller 1989: 209) and resulted in a vivid ethnography entitled *Fusion of the Worlds*. Yet like Laderman, Stoller does not engage in methodological reflections that discuss the anthropologist’s deep personal involvement. In contrast, Karen McCarthy Brown (1991), in the introduction to her book *Mama Lola. A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, muses about her personal involvement with Vodou as one that represented both gains and risks in relation to her work. One of the major risks of this involvement, Brown admits, was ‘losing the important distinction between Vodou interacting with the life of a Haitian and Vodou interacting with my own very different blend of experience, memory, dream and fantasy’ (McCarthy Brown 1991: 11). However, she also argues that the gains ultimately outweigh the risks:

> When the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant-observer and informant break down, then the only truth is the one in between; and anthropology becomes something closer to a social art form, open to both aesthetic and moral judgment. This situation is riskier, but it does bring intellectual labor and life into closer relation. (ibid.: 12)

It was therefore not without some regret on my part that those few seconds under the veil in Master Cảnh’s shrine remained the closest I would get to a subjective experience of Four Palace mediumship. Although I was somehow convinced that I could only reach a deeper understanding of spirit possession if I were to be initiated as a medium, undergoing initiation was in fact never an option open to me. Although mediums often jokingly urged me, ‘Become a medium!’, most of them were convinced that a destined aptitude for mediumship only relates to Vietnamese citizens because the Four Palace pantheon consisted of autochthonous Vietnamese deities. A foreigner like me, therefore, could at best have ‘a heart’ (*tâm*) for the Mother Goddesses and their associates.¹¹ In the words of Lukens-Bull (2007: 174), ‘ethnography is a peculiar form of research that relies on the researcher’s ability to negotiate an identity that is betwixt and between’. I was able to negotiate this identity by assuming the role of an enthusiastic ritual participant who watched, listened, clapped her hands to the music, puffed on ‘blessed’ cigarettes, and
grabbed for the small banknotes tossed into the crowd. I participated in
the rituals of rich but graceless matrons and of sleek androgynous males. I
joined the devotees on their pilgrimages to remote temples in the region
and witnessed numerous len đồng rituals performed by less affluent rural
spirit mediums. I saw frail old grannies who even after five hours of spirit
embodiment did not show the slightest sign of fatigue. I was present at the
initiation ritual of a twelve-year-old boy who performed his first len đồng
with the confidence and composure of an adult. After each ritual I felt that
my research questions became more numerous. Significantly, so did the
answers and opinions I received from Four Palace mediums, spirit priests
(thầy cúng), ritual assistants, and chau văn musicians. It is this plurality of
voices in the world of mediumship that this book wants to capture. This
endeavour has its limitations, though. The vast realm of regional variations
in Four Palace mediumship, of strongly individualised possession practices
and hybrid new religions that combine elements of popular Buddhism,
Taoism and spirit mediumship, were beyond the scope of this research.
My focus here is on urban mediums and their rituals in Vietnam’s bustling
capital city, Hanoi.

Outline of the Book

Four Palace mediumship gradually leads to a transformation of the self and
of social reality by creating a different sense of being-in-the-world. Chapter
2, ‘Personal Fate and Spirit Identities’, traces the life trajectories of different
spirit mediums and analyzes common patterns of pathway-into-mediumship
narratives. Spirit mediums distinguish between two different notions of fate:
first, that of fate (số mệnh) as a power that determines the general course of life,
and, second, that of a destined aptitude for mediumship or ‘root of mediumship’
(căn đồng). This root is anchored in the spirit world. It designates a predestined
relationship with one or more deities in the Four Palace pantheon and implies
the idea of a karmic debt that needs to be repaid by serving the spirits in
this life. As is typical in spirit possession religions, the signs and signals of a
medium’s fate become apparent in terms of a personal crisis precipitated by
a variety of symptoms such as haunting dreams, an illness that cannot be
medically cured, or a continuous streak of bad luck in business or personal
affairs. By being initiated as a spirit medium, a destined person’s spirit root
is ritually acknowledged and his or her debt gradually repaid. Moreover, the
rather fluid identities of the Four Palace deities open to the devotees a wide spectrum of possibilities for individual interpretation and identification. After being initiated into mediumship, neophytes usually experience significant improvements in their everyday lives. As mediums frequently engage in sharing and exchanging pathway-into-mediumship stories, Chapter 2 explores how narrative theory can enhance our understanding of the therapeutic effects of mediumship. Following Stromberg’s (1993) line of argument with regard to Evangelical Christian conversion narratives, I contend that that the personal transformation of Four Palace mediums is as much powered by the ritual process as it is by the narration of this process.

The centrepiece of this book is a detailed examination of ritual performance in Four Palace mediumship. The performative turn in ritual studies (Rao and Köpping 2001) has profoundly challenged the hitherto dominating notion of ritual as prescribed and rigid symbolic acts and instead addresses rituals as dynamic and transformative processes that constitute ‘creative strategies by which human beings continually reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments’ (Bell 1992: 76, Turner 1987, Kapferer 1997, Köpping and Rao 2001). As symbolic acts, they are, in the Turnerian sense, multivocal and polysemic, and therefore receptive to the creative force of human imagination. Religious meanings and practices are thus not stable in time, but continuously in the making. Their contestability is mapped out in contentious claims to ritual authenticity, proper ritual and moral conduct, and interpretative authority. In Four Palace mediumship and ritual practice, these claims have significantly been informed by different narratives of Vietnamese modernity.

Chapter 3, ‘Performing the Divine’, sets out from an ethnographic vignette, followed by a brief historical review of how the advocates of the French-colonial modernisation project had attacked mediumship at the beginning of the twentieth century. A concise theoretical discussion of ritual as performance and theatrical enactment then provides the background for the ethnographic analysis of the ritual process by which the symbolic system of the Four Palace religion is inscribed onto the novice medium’s body as a lived experience. During this process, the neophyte is moulded to conform to the rules of proper ritual enactment and aesthetics. These rules, however, are subject to constant negotiation and contestation.

Chapter 4, ‘Negotiating the Rules of Proper Performance’, pays detailed attention to these contestations as well as to the changes that Four Palace mediumship has experienced in the course of the socio-economic transformations in the post-đổi mới era. Whereas the secularising effort of the Vietnamese
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State has led to a diminishing emphasis on the healing and divinatory functions of Four Palace mediumship, the transition to a market-oriented society has underscored the importance of ritual consumption and aesthetics. Vietnam’s growing consumer culture has also prompted an explosion of ritual expenditure and significantly changed both the range and the amount of sacrificial offerings in len đồng. Moreover, it has informed the conceptualisation of the Four Palace deities: rather than as vengeful supernatural beings who punish even the slightest mistake in ritual conduct, the deities now seem to be conceptualised more as ‘partners’ in a ritual exchange relationship that aims at conjuring wealth and prosperity in this world.

Chapter 5, ‘The (Gendered) World of Mediumship’, leaves the stage of ritual performance and instead explores the world of mediumship (thế giới đồng bóng) from the perspective of social practice. It conceives of the Four Palace religion as an arena of the alternatively modern in Vietnamese society, within which spirit mediums may enact identities that move beyond the restricting frames of hegemonic social norms and traditions. The issue of gender is particularly salient here. Two important aspects are addressed in the fifth chapter: the bias toward belief in male superiority (often expressed in the phrase ‘one male medium equals one thousand female mediums’), and the construction of transgenderism in Four Palace mediumship. The voices and views on the topic draw from a diverse range of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ concepts and reflect not only on the gender dynamics of ritual performance but also the gender contestations in contemporary Vietnamese society at large.

Chapter 6, ‘The Heritagisation of Four Palace Mediumship’, finally links the various contestations and negotiations in the world of mediumship with the discourse on Vietnamese national identity and cultural heritage. In tracing the arduous process from the condemnation of Four Palace mediumship as a wasteful superstition to its glorification as a folk performing art, I examine how official attitudes (i.e. expressed by state agencies, scholar-intellectuals, and the media) and policies towards Four Palace mediumship have changed over time and in which ways these discourses have reverberated in the len đồng scene. Ritual competition among spirit mediums and religious commodification are a particularly hot topic of debate, and accusations in this vein are not entirely unfounded. Chapter 6 therefore discusses the possibility of Four Palace mediumship becoming a religion for the rich and outlines intellectual attempts at taming and streamlining its unruly aspects. I conclude that despite the vital role of Four Palace mediumship as an arena wherein the alternatively modern is articulated and negotiated, the current appraisal of len đồng as a folk
performance of spiritual music and dance also indicates that the Party-state’s secularisation campaign has largely succeeded in its goals.

In analogy to the spirits who ride back to their palaces after possessing the medium, the epilogue, Chapter 7, ‘Return to the Realm,’ discusses the process of returning home and writing ethnography after a year of ‘being possessed’ by the mediums and their rituals. I then reveal some hitherto untold stories and interpret them as first signs of a possible decline in the spiritual appeal of Four Palace mediumship. On the other hand, however, the realm of the Four Palace deities keeps expanding across ethnic and national boundaries, offering a spiritual framework for the creation of hybrid identities in a transnational, deterritorialised world.

Notes

1 Thần and thành are also used as ‘titles’ or generic terms before the proper name or function of a deity, e.g. thần thành hoàng (guardian deity), Thần Nông (God of Agriculture), Thần Đất (Earth God), Thánh Gióng (a heaven-sent mythical giant) or Đức Thánh Trần, the legendary general Trần Hưng Đạo who fought the Mongols in the fourteenth century and was accorded a separate cult (see Phạm 2009).

2 Ông Trời, Lord Sky, is a rather vague conceptualisation of a supreme god and creator of the universe. At the popular level, however, there has been no cult of Heaven; the rendering of such a cult was instead reserved to the emperor who performed an annual ritual sacrifice known as Tế Nam Giao.

3 The first decree in this regard was in fact issued in 1572 during the intermediate reign of the Mạc Dynasty (1527–1592) (Whitmore n.d.).

4 Despite the cult’s apparent conspicuousness during Cadière’s service in the Missions Étrangères (1892–1955) it remains without mention in his seminal work on the beliefs and practices of the Vietnamese, first published in 1944 (see Cadière 1992). As Cadière describes other spirit practices in much detail, it is rather unlikely that the cult has escaped his attention. One reason for this neglect could be that it did not prevail with the same intensity in the central region of Huế where Cadière was based. However, a localized version of the cult, with the Cham goddess Thiên Y A Na at the centre of the pantheon, is very much alive in Huế and has been described by various scholars (Tran Van Toan 1966, Didier 1996, 1999, Nguyễn Hữu Thông 2001). Father Adriano Di St. Thecla (1667–1765), a Discalced Augustinian missionary who in the eighteenth century spent almost thirty years in Northern Vietnam, does not mention the ‘assembly of spirits’ or the three palaces associated with them either, although he makes a brief but revealing reference to Princess Liễu Hạnh and to spirit mediums.
becoming possessed by her (Di St. Thecla 2002: 145; see also Chapter 6). In the section ‘On the Sect of Magicians’ of his Small treatise on the sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese, he also mentions spirit mediums, referred to as Bà Cốt, and their ‘magic practices’: ‘To treat the sick they make offerings of food to the spirits and to the deceased, to whom they invoke, honor, and sing superstitious prayers, without any sense and order and mixed together with shouting. (…) They make different images appear in a mirror, and they call them the souls of the deceased, with whom they pretend to speak secretly and thus have many things revealed to them’ (Di St. Thecla 2002: 168). Although the mirror, at least to my knowledge, is not used in contemporary rites of calling the souls of the dead, it is an important requisite of Four Palace mediums during a-len đồng, as it is said to reflect the shadow of the deity (bồng thành).


6 The Hinduisation of Indonesian ethnic religions is another example in this regard; see Ramstedt 2004.

7 Ngô Đức Thịnh (1996, 2006) sees the four palaces as having evolved from a ‘primitive’ yin–yang duality. He argues that whereas the Yang principle associated with heaven remained primordial, the Yin principle gradually split into the realms of earth, water, and mountains and forest. There is, however, no historical evidence to support this claim.

8 According to Durand (1959: 32), the mother goddesses are in fact Vietnamised avatars of ‘the great Chinese goddesses’ such as the Queen of the West (Si Wang-Mou) and the daughter of the Dragon Kinh Tung Ting.

9 In fact this messiness is even much greater than my brief overview may suggest. An interesting but hitherto neglected point mentioned by Giran (1912: 269–273) as well as by Master Dương is that, in former times, three or four Ông Vua had been associated with the palaces. These divine kings had been paired with the Mothers. Whereas the Mothers’ male counterparts have now passed into oblivion, the pairing of male and female deities into mother–father dyads remains an enduring pattern in Vietnamese culture; the most recent example being the pairing of the Mother Goddess Liễu Hằng with the national military hero Trần Hưng Đạo as a Father of the Nation (see Phạm and Eipper 2009 for a detailed analysis).

10 The Mandarins are sometimes preceded by Saint Trần (Trần Hưng Đạo) and his children, but not all mediums serve (hậu) the Trần family by incarnating them during-len đồng. For an informed and fascinating journey into the lives of contemporary Saint Trần mediums see Phạm Quýnh Phương’s recent book Hero and Deity: Trần Hưng Đạo and the Resurgence of Popular Religion in Vietnam (2009).

11 A sincere heart (có tâm; thành tâm) is an idiom for ‘faith in spiritual powers’ (Nguyen Thị Hien 2002: 114) that stresses the emotional element in religious belief.
Personal Fate and Spirit Identities

Master Thiền’s small temple in Hanoi’s Cầu Giấy district was crowded on that particular November morning in 2006. The female master medium and owner of a private temple had invited thầy Nhật to see the fortunes of some of her followers. The skilled fate-reader, a dark-skinned, chubby man in his late forties, lived in a village approximately fifteen kilometres away from the city centre. In order to save her followers time and energy, Thiền had asked him to divine for them at her place. When I arrived at the temple, thầy Nhật was sitting cross-legged on the floor, holding a deck of ordinary playing cards in his hands. His two state-of-the-art cell phones had been placed on a little plastic plate next to him. After shuffling the cards, he spread them out face down in front of a young woman sitting opposite him. ‘Take one with each hand,’ he told her. ‘Each hand one card?’ she asked, still hesitating. Thầy Nhật smiled and confirmed, ‘Right, each hand one card, just take any card you like, turn them around.’ The woman drew two cards and turned them up face up. Queen of spades, nine of diamonds. The diviner frowned and slowly tapped his finger on the Queen: ‘It means . . . this Queen clearly indicates that a person . . . she just died, and she will drag another person with her.’ The woman looked a bit puzzled. ‘Right, a paternal aunt in my husband’s family,’ she said. Thầy Nhật pressed on. ‘Yes, without doubt she will drag another person from the family, from your family,’ he said, and the woman nodded pensively. Then she blurted out, ‘It’s going to be my husband’s mother!’ But thầy Nhật looked at the cards and shook his head. ‘I don’t know who,’ he said, ‘but she will drag someone; I don’t know whose mother, I only know it’s going to be a woman. She cannot avoid her fate.’
Belief in the power of fate is common in Vietnam. Confucian notions of the inevitability of fate and destiny exist side by side with Buddhist concepts of reincarnation and karma which hold that a person’s present situation in life has been predetermined by his or her behaviour in a previous existence (kiếp trước). Thầy Hiền, a spirit priest well versed in the ancient texts and oral traditions of popular ritual practices, holds that, first and foremost, fate is preordained or given by Heaven:

A person’s fate (số mệnh), if we speak true to the meaning of it, comes down from Heaven at the time of birth. [A person’s] fate has been there beforehand; to say this is my fate (cái số của mình) or destiny (định mệnh của mình) means that my life has to be like this. (Interview with thầy Hiền 16.6.2006)

According to this notion, fate is handed down from Heaven as something unchangeable, like a screenplay for life from which one cannot deviate. If, for example, fate has destined a man to become a criminal, all of his efforts to lead an honest life will be undermined by adverse circumstances and events. Thầy Hiền elaborates:

If fate has predestined me to become a professional thief (làm cái nghề ăn cướp) I have to become a thief, no matter what. If I try to change to another occupation I am doomed to fail – e.g. if I decide to work in an enterprise, that company will go bankrupt, the next one will be disbanded and so on. Regardless what I try, it’ll all be fruitless.

The belief in the immutability of fate is also reflected in numerous popular proverbs such as ‘A dry tree is always dry even if soaked in water’ (cây khô xuống nước cũng khô); ‘Life and death are matters of fate, riches and honours depend on Heaven’ (Tử sinh hữu mệnh, phú quý tại thiên); or ‘Medicine can cure an illness, but it cannot change fate’ (thuốc chữa được bệnh, chẳng chữa được mệnh). Even skill and talent (tài) cannot overcome the limitations imposed by fate. This is made explicit in the opening lines of Nguyễn Du’s early nineteenth century epic poem The Tale of Kiều: ‘A hundred years in this life span on earth, talent and destiny are apt to feud’ (Trăm năm trong cõi người ta, Chữ tài chуш mệnh khéo là ghét nhau). Fate is a dominant theme in The Tale of Kiều. The poem recounts the trials and tribulations in the life of a virtuous, beautiful and highly talented
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woman named Kiều. Yet as the beginning of the Tale suggests, this combination must ultimately lead to misery. In order to save her father and younger brother from jail, Kiều unwittingly sells herself into prostitution. When the deal is settled, Kiều murmurs, ‘Thus is my fate. Whatever it may be, I must accept it as it is reserved for me’ (Nguyễn Du, transl. Lê Xuân Thủy 1968: 113).

Yet the Vietnamese perception of fate is not as relentlessly deterministic as it may seem, as it also offers (at least to men) a certain degree of scope for the improvement of one’s lot through self-cultivation (tu thân, see Marr 2000: 772, Do 2003: 132ff), hard work, dedication, and a virtuous lifestyle.2 Thay Hiền explains, ‘We also have the proverb “morality wins over fate” (đức nằng thắng số), which means that if a person lives in a morally good way then this will conquer fate, and since time immemorial our most important moral doctrine has been that of filial piety (đức hiếu).’ The filial obligation to love and respect one’s parents and forebears is deeply enshrined in the Confucian code of ethics and regarded as a cardinal virtue in Vietnam. The notion of fate thus also functions to reinforce moral values and ethical behaviour. On the other hand, when human endeavour and virtue fail to succeed, fate comes in and acts as a reminder that more than one agency is at work to determine a person’s existence (Harrell 1987).

According to the Buddhist principle of karma (in Vietnamese: nghiệp), a person’s fortunes or misfortunes in life are caused by actions committed during a past incarnation. Popular karmic theories not only ‘explain certain dimensions of one’s present existential circumstances in terms of a predetermined destiny’, but also ‘define the nature of the responsibility that one should assume for one’s actions in order to attain positive (including post-death) ends’ (Keyes 1983: 13). If one’s destined fate in this life cannot be changed, at least one can contribute to shaping one’s fate for the next life:

Being born is part of the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth (luân hồi), and if I have established a positive karma in my past life then I will enjoy excellent fortune (hiểu phúc lớn) in this life, this is the meaning of ‘establishing karma’ (tao nghiệp). If in this life I cultivate great virtues, then in my next life I will be a rich man (một phú ông), a wealthy and successful man. [...] Or if in this life I am a monk or a nun (di tu), this will establish the karma to continue leading a religious life in my next reincarnation. (Interview with thầy Hiền 16.6.2006, 10/19)

Closely related to these concepts of fate (số, số mệnh or số mạng), karma and reincarnation is the notion of căn, căn mệnh or căn số that links human
existence to the Vietnamese world of gods and spirits. The word căn số carries two meanings: that of root or radical, and that of destiny and fate. In common usage, particularly among Vietnamese spirit mediums, it designates a predestined relationship with one or more deities that needs to be ritually acknowledged. If the căn is considered as light (nhẹ căn), it may suffice to visit the temple of the deity on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month and offer incense and other items in worship. If, however, a person’s căn is identified as heavy (nặng căn), then the person is destined to enter into mediumship (căn ra trình đồng) and become a ‘seat for the deities to sit upon’ (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2007). Whereas Phạm Quỳnh Phương (2009: 102) describes căn as ‘tying a person to certain spirits’, Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2002) has established the useful translation of căn as ‘spirit root’. According to this usage, a person can have the root of, let’s say, the Seventh Prince (căn Ông Hoàng Bảy) or the Third Princess (căn Cô Bơ). This root has been implanted during a previous life (kiếp trước) and usually implies the idea of a debt owed to the deities of the Four Palaces that needs to be repaid by serving the spirits in this life. A spirit root is thus one of several conditions prescribed by karma and fate. In order for a person to move skilfully within these karmic boundaries and destined constraints and to make the most of their potential in life, it may be desirable to know the twists of fate that lie ahead.

Reading fate

Since the beginning of time, mankind has created and used a large number of techniques in order to divine what fate holds in store, e.g. by reading the cracks of burnt bones, the colours and bends of a chicken’s foot, the liver of a slaughtered animal, or the patterns of cowry shells tossed on the ground. Some techniques of fate-calculation are based on sophisticated systems of philosophical and cosmological knowledge such as astrology, geomancy, numerology, chiromancy, physiognomy and so on. In Vietnam, a great number of divination ways and methods (bói toán) are in use. Among the most common ones is the interpretation of the Tử Vi horoscope (tử vi giải đoán). The Tử Vi method is based on a localised version of Chinese astrological charts. It considers the twelve zodiac signs of the Sino-Vietnamese lunar calendar (following a sexagenary cycle that combines ten Heavenly stems, can, with twelve Earthly branches, chi) and links them with the Five Elements (ngũ hành; water, fire, wood, metal, earth) and the principles of yin and yang. The method also
2.1. Books about horoscopes, fate reading and rituals

calculates the influence of various stars on a person’s fate, thereby predicting major and minor obstacles (đại hạn, tiểu hạn) in the course of his or her life (Hữu Ngọc 1995: 664–665). Other popular techniques of fate calculation include divination according to the Book of Changes (bói quẻ dịch), casting divinatory sticks (xóc thẻ) in a temple, face or palm reading (xem tướng, xem tướng tay) and, at least in recent times, reading fate by spreading a deck of standard playing cards (bói bài).

A further important method is divination through spirit contact. The diviner-medium (đồng bói) goes into a trance and transmits the words of a deity to the listener. This special capability (khả năng đặc biệt) of a person may at first occur suddenly or spontaneously, which is often frightening for all persons concerned. Over time, however, through spiritual practice and self-control, the trance can be induced voluntarily, e.g. by prayer or during a lên đồng. Other diviners may have an ‘inborn capability’ (khả năng bẩm sinh) to sense premonitions of events that will occur in the near future. Master Thuận is one example. The eccentric young master medium who owns a sumptuous temple in his native village of Nghĩa Trai in Hưng Yên province traces his fortune-telling abilities to his root of the Ninth Princess (Cô Chín), a royal
escort of the Mother Goddesses with a penchant for fate-calculation (duyên bói toán):

My spiritual abilities (tố chất tâm linh) became apparent when I was eleven years old. For example, I took the buffalos to grazing grounds, and when I arrived at a nearby village I said, ‘That house over there is going to burn’, and three days later the house really burnt. Or, near the pond in my village, I said, ‘Soon there will be a person drowning’, and sure enough, a week later a man drowned in the pond. (Interview with Master Thuận, 10.05.2006)

Yet Master Thuận also admits that he feels his ability has been declining over time. ‘Until now my divinatory ability (khả năng xem) has been reduced by seventy percent, only thirty percent still remains. [This ability] can only stay for a while; nowadays I am no longer as skilful as I used to be.’ As he has seen himself destined for a spiritual career (làm nghề tâm linh) since his early teens, the ambitious diviner-medium has been cultivating his religious knowledge and his skills as a ritual master in order to compensate for his vanishing gift of premonitions.

Consulting a fortune-teller or diviner is a popular way of assessing the possibilities and challenges of what is commonly construed as fate. I agree with Donald Hatfield who argues that ‘fate is a constituent of (talk about) the self and the self’s agency as well as a feature of calculating possible ends and their feasibility. As such, fate is a crucial notion tying notions of subjectivity and agency to a micropolitical field’ (Hatfield 2002: 859). The following excerpts from the life story of Mrs. Rose, a spirit medium in her early seventies at the time of this research, exemplifies that the belief in fate may increase as a person’s choices in life become more limited. One day in the year 1952, when she was a sixteen-year-old teenager full of aspirations, hopes and dreams, a friend of hers went to a certain temple in order to consult a diviner and asked Rose to come along. She reminisces that, at the outset, she had no intention of having her fortune told. After a while, however, Rose changed her mind and asked the blind man to see her fortune. Rose recounts,

‘Fortune-telling stirs up ghosts like a broom stirs up dust’ (bói ra ma, quét nhà ra rác), that’s what I thought, why should I have my fortune told? But then I gave him ten Đồng and said ‘Please, divine for me’. […] He asked me, ‘What do you want me to divine?’, but I really didn’t know, I said ‘I don’t know, please just divine for me.’ He shouted at me, ‘If you
want to have your fortune told you need to know WHAT you want to
know, otherwise there is no point in divining, go take your money back!

Rose was puzzled by the fortune-teller’s words. With a critical attitude she
looked at the altar and thought to herself, ‘Good heavens, what kind of a deity
is this anyway that divines for money?’ The fortune-teller went on to ask, ‘Now,
do you want to see your wealth fortune (cầu tài bản mệnh) or your fate in love
and family matters (nhân duyên gia sự) or your future happiness (tương lai
hạnh phúc)?’ In those days, Rose didn’t know the meaning of all these Sino-
Vietnamese terms, so she just insisted once again, ‘Please just divine for me
(thầy xem cho cháu).’ But the fortune-teller’s predictions were not very pleasant:

He barked at me, ‘Your family hates you, your family is incompatible
(xung khắc) with you!’ Although I was a student at school, I didn’t
understand all of his words, so I asked, ‘What means ‘incompatible’?
[…] Does it mean they hate me?’ He yelled, ‘Right!!! You are the most
dutiful child but the whole family hates you, this is your fate.’

One of Rose’s preoccupations is that she had always felt like an outsider in her
own family. As a young girl, she had to endure her mother’s abuse, whereas
she felt her younger siblings received kinder attention. As an adult, her
relationship with her siblings has been strained, and both of Rose’s daughters
have broken off most contact with their mother. In retrospect, then, it had all
been her fate from the very beginning. The fortune-teller also saw that Rose
was destined for spirit mediumship:

He continued, ‘You are strong and healthy but you have the fate of a
medium (số đồng), if you don’t enter into mediumship (ra trình đồng)
you will become crazy.’ I said: ‘Grandfather, does “medium” mean to
lên đồng, or what? But I don’t have money because I am still a student!’
He said, ‘I only know that if you don’t enter into mediumship you will
become insane’. So I thought to myself, ‘When I make my own money I
will become a medium (ra lên đồng).’

In those days, Rose was a school-girl with a strong passion for learning. One of
the recurrent themes that came up in many of our conversations is her regret over
her lost education, which had come to a sudden end in 1956 due to the political
circumstances of the time. This, too, had been one of the fortune-tellers predictions:

The fortune-teller went on, ‘About your way of learning, you are very
clever, you study well and you are diligent, but your fate is to drop out
of school (phá ngang).’ I started to argue with him, ‘No, I will not drop out, I like learning, I want to graduate from university, my father makes a lot of money with his business, and he will pay for my studies!’ But the blind man insisted, ‘If you don’t believe, then don’t have your fortune told, I will give you your money back, I am a fortune-teller and I’m telling you what I see, and I see that you will NOT study.’ And in fact, later it turned out that he was right.

It is interesting to note that whereas when she was with him Rose boldly challenged the fortune-teller and disputed each of his prophecies in utter disbelief and bewilderment, now she asserts that the blind man’s predictions have been fulfilled to the minutest detail (see Endres 2008a). This also holds true for what the diviner predicted about her future love-life:

‘Now about your love life,’ said the fortune-teller, ‘you have a very burdensome fate (cao số lắm) […] you have to cross the bridge three times.’ I asked him: ‘Oh Grandfather, which bridge do you mean, is it the one at Ngọc Sơn temple at Hoàn Kiếm Lake? And what do you mean by three times – back and forth?’ He screamed at me, ‘Nonsense!!! It means that you will have three husbands!’ At that time I was still very innocent, I did not know what love meant, and I hated frivolous women with many husbands, I said, ‘No way, I am NOT going to marry three times! If I marry a man and he falls ill and . . . dies . . .’ (I did not even think of the possibility of leaving my husband!) ‘. . . I will worship him and raise his children, but I’ll never marry again!’ Again the fortune-teller scolded me, ‘This is just what I see, if you don’t believe me then I’ll stop divining. If my predictions turn out right later please come back and reward me. If they turn out to be false then come back and smash my utensil box. Why do you argue? It is the deity’s prediction (quẻ này ngài dạy như thế).’ […] And in fact all he said eventually came true. (Interview with Mrs Rose, 14.08.2002)

Rose said that in those days she did not pay much attention to the fortune-teller’s words. She had very little knowledge about lên đồng mediums although she had seen some of them perform in a neighbourhood temple and had enjoyed watching. Despite her professed inexperience, however, she had correctly concluded that a certain level of wealth was needed in order to serve the spirits (hữu thánh) by means of a lên đồng: As the anthropologist Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1995 [1944]: 256) observed, toward the end of the colonial period, ‘in Hanoi [temples dedicated to the Four Palace cult] are so much frequented that the price of a consecration becomes unaffordable for people living in simple conditions.’ However, the fortune-teller’s pronouncement came at a
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time when Rose had not yet shown any signs that would have indicated her predestination of spirit mediumship.\textsuperscript{7} In most cases, a destined person would first display a range of unsettling symptoms that would eventually lead to the diagnosis of a medium’s fate, or root of mediumship (căn đồng).

**Signs and signals of a medium’s fate**

Many mediums speak of having been seized as a medium (bị bắt động or bị bắt sát) by the spirits. In the Vietnamese language, the passive marker bị is used when an unfortunate, disadvantageous or grave event is befalling a person. While the idea of being seized seems obviously more applicable in the context of a spontaneous possession (with classic symptoms such as loss of control over bodily movements and divinely inspired speech or glossolalia), it is also used by mediums whose spirit root has manifested itself in other ways, e.g. as a physical health problem.\textsuperscript{8} Master Cảnh, born in 1960, experienced his ‘spell of being seized as a medium’ (cái đợt mình bị bắt động) when he was still a schoolboy. He said his first contact with spirit mediumship had been through a next-door neighbour, an old lady, whom Cảnh enjoyed visiting when he was little. On one occasion, he had seen the woman arranging her ritual robes and was genuinely thrilled by their beauty. In retrospect, Cảnh interprets this instant fascination as a first sign of his predestination as a medium. At the age of twelve, he received his actual calling (or what came to be interpreted as such). One night around ten o’clock he had fallen asleep while listening to the radio. Suddenly, so his mother told him afterwards, he started choking as if being strangled and then lost consciousness. He appeared dead to his desperate mother (coi như người chết), who screamed to her neighbours for help. Luckily, the night guards of a nearby electric power station had a telephone (which in 1972 was a rarity) and let her call an ambulance. The next morning the doctors took a cardiogram but they could not find anything. Cảnh says, ‘They could not detect any evidence of disease, they said I was very healthy. Then I ate a bowl of noodle-soup and a bowl of sticky rice and went back home.’ However, the same incident occurred again three times the following week. The old spirit medium next door came over and said to Cảnh’s mother, ‘I want to tell you something, your child may have been caught by the spirits, you should let him do a ritual, maybe this can cure him; if not, I’m afraid this boy has the same fate as me and you have to let him become initiated as a medium’ (Interview with Master Cảnh, 22.02.2006). So it was decided
that the boy would have a small initiation ceremony organised at a temple in the Old Quarter (which, at that time, still had to happen secretly and inconspicuously). After that, Cảnh never again suffered another episode of unconsciousness.

Sometimes, sudden outbursts of rage or irrational behaviour indicate that a person has a root of mediumship. The story of Hằng is one example. At the time of my first encounters with her, Hằng was in her early thirties and traded in household supplies. She told me she had felt the calling of the spirits since her early childhood:

When I was first seized [by the spirits] I was nine years old. I will tell you how it happened. For three months I could not urinate, I didn’t eat or drink anything except boiled water, for three months I only drank water and ate some corn, manioc, and potatoes. And during these three months, every day at twelve o’clock I would have a fit of sudden outrage and cry violently. After that I would continue to play as if nothing had happened. (Interview with Hằng, 09 October 2002)

One day, so Hằng recalls, the spirits felt pity for her and informed her that she should consult a fortune-teller. She ran home, yelling, ‘Mother, mother, let me go see a fortune teller!’ But her mother apparently hesitated, ‘because she did not believe much in soothsaying’. A neighbour finally convinced Hằng’s mother of the necessity to seek the advice of a diviner. The reading revealed that Hằng in fact had a medium’s fate. As a temporary solution, her mother organised a special ritual to appease the spirits and prevent them from afflicting her child. After this, there were indeed no more incidents until Hằng was ten years old:

One day when I was playing in front of the family altar, suddenly thirty-six spirits possessed me in succession [. . .]. In fact I had never before seen a ritual, because it was not as easy as nowadays – in those days, the old people served [the spirits] at midnight, otherwise the authorities would come and arrest them. From then on, at the beginning and in the middle of each year my mother had to organise a petitioning ceremony for me to ask [the spirits] for a delay (xin khất), until I presented myself as a medium (trình đồng) at the age of twenty.

Cảnh and Hằng both received their calling, indicated by physical symptoms, mental distress and spontaneous possession, during their childhood. Although it does occasionally occur, young children are usually not initiated into
mediumship unless their root is extraordinarily heavy (nặng căn) and their symptoms represent a life-threatening condition. In most cases, however, the root of mediumship makes itself apparent when a destined person has already reached adulthood. Nhưng is one such example. I first met her during a lên đồng ritual of her young protégée, Em Thơm (see below for her story) in June 2006. At that time, the then 52-year-old former state official and Party member had been a medium for over twenty years, and thus qualified for being called a đồng cửu, a veteran medium. The intense woman, much younger-looking than her age, had received her calling through a bilateral leg oedema:

My legs were as big as an elephant’s! But in the hospital they said it’s nothing (chả bệnh gì cả). They pressed my legs and said, ‘Good Heavens, such a grave oedema!’ [...] For two years, I went to every hospital and had everything imaginable checked to identify the illness and find a cure. But no, nobody could give me a diagnosis, both legs were swollen with oedema, and my belly was big from here [pointing to the lower part of her abdomen] downwards. I felt truly miserable (chị khổ vô cùng). Only then did I decide to see a fortune-teller. Actually I did not believe in fate-reading at all. Heavens, I thought these diviners spoke utterly ludicrous nonsense. I didn’t have any faith in them at all.

Expressions of former disbelief in or loathing of spirit mediums, diviners and spirit priests (thầy cúng) are a common motif in pathway-to-mediumship narratives. I asked Nhưng, ‘Then why did you go to see one?’, and she went on:

I was just curious. I remembered my friend [...] who had died of a brain haemorrhage at the age of twenty-seven, because in the 1980s there was not enough medicine for curing. This friend had told me, ‘If you want to live, you have to become a medium (chị phải ra đồng)’, but at that time [I thought very badly about mediums]. She had given me a white brocaded robe from China and said, ‘This is the Third Princess!’, but in those days I didn’t understand at all who the Third Princess was, and so I didn’t care. In retrospect, this friend had shown me the way, she had said, ‘If you want to worship you have to go to all the large temples, the spacious, beautiful ones, don’t go the small places’. One month later my friend had a stroke and died from brain haemorrhage. I was very sad. Around the time when she had her reburial, three years after her death, I started feeling ill. During my illness I remembered her words, and eventually I [embarked on my quest for healing] by trial-and-error.

At this point, Nhưng’s narrative suddenly took a new turn. In the course of our talk, Nhưng had so far not recounted any unusual dreams. Then suddenly,
seemingly out of the blue, she went on to talk about how she had cycled along the dyke of the Red River in order to find a temple she had seen in a dream:

In those days I only had a bicycle. With the bicycle I went as far as Lộ... I followed every alley in that village in order to find that temple, the one that I had seen in my dreams... When I finally found the temple it looked exactly like in the dream! So the four of us – we had come with two bicycles, two friends on each bicycle – took our offerings inside. The weather was cold, but until then everything was normal. When we entered the temple and sat down to worship, I started to shiver and sweat as if I had caught a cold, and then I couldn’t get up any more, I could not lift up my body any more. I said, ‘I don’t understand why I am so heavy!’ My friends said, ‘Good grief, she has caught a cold, come on and lift her up!’, but they couldn’t lift me. I started crying, I said, ‘I don’t understand why I have to be so miserable!’, and Old Lady Kền [the temple master] said, ‘Heavens, this lady’s root is too heavy, this lady has a debt with the Four Palaces!’ I didn’t understand what the Four Palaces were, I said, ‘If I am indebted then please let me pay my debt, how much is it?’, at that time I didn’t understand, finally the Old Lady said, ‘If you don’t enter [into mediumship] you may die, think carefully about it!’

Nhung went back to Hanoi in desperation. She didn’t know what to do and was afraid to make a wrong decision. She retreated to her home and mulled over the matter:

In the following twelve days and nights – just like the twelve days and nights of the Hanoi bombing [in December 1972] – I was lying on my bed, thinking shall I enter [mediumship] or not, I could not sleep even a bit, my brain was aching like crazy, I was really ill. I asked this person and that person, I was really ill so I went in all four directions to find a way, I went from one [spiritual] specialist (thầy) to the next. I thought to myself, ‘If I enter, if I promise to the Spirits that I will enter, and if they let me heal, then I will keep my word... but if they don’t let me heal then I will never enter!’ I was bargaining with the spirits, I am very obstinate, I would not yield. So I went to the temple again. I told the Old Lady, ‘Enough, if I have a debt I will enter, let me pay back’, but the Old Lady said, ‘But I tell you, if you pay back you have to pay back all your life long, you have to do it properly!’ I said, ‘You mean all my life? I can’t just do it for three years?’ The Lady said, ‘No, this is not possible, it has to be for the rest of your life.’ I thought again and said, ‘A lifelong redemption, how dangerous... No, let me go back home again and think!’ And I went back home and started looking for books to read.
I went to every temple and asked, and [I started to understand more about the deities and spirits]. I understood that many saints had been meritorious personages who had fought the enemy in their human lives.
on earth. So I went back to the Old Lady and said ‘Mother, I will pay back for real, I will do it the proper way.’

Once Nhung had made her promise and set the date for her initiation, she went to Hàng Quạt in the Old Quarter, where shops selling devotional objects and ritual paraphernalia are lined up on both sides of the street. Although the product range was not as diverse as it is nowadays – it was the year 1983 and lên đồng ritual still had to be performed in secret – Nhung spent a total of five million Vietnam Đồng on accessories and fabric for the ritual robes, which she said was a very big sum for those times. Again ‘for twelve days and nights’, she kept tailoring the robes, and while she was sitting at home, her oedema started to subside:

During those twelve days and nights while I was tailoring the robes I stayed at home so I could go to the bathroom – can you imagine! But I am a truthful person; I’m not telling you lies! – because I had to urinate every fifteen minutes, every fifteen minutes I had to pass water, for twelve days and nights! From the day I promised I would enter, from the day I started tailoring the robes, [the oedema] slowly dissolved.

By the time Nhung had her initiation ritual (lễ mở phủ) organised, her former beauty was restored. She admitted to me that she still didn’t understand the whole thing. She had no doubts but she felt that ‘there was something mysterious’ (một cái ẩn số) that she could not explain. In her narrative, Nhung constructs herself as a thorough, no-nonsense woman and an inquisitive sceptic who, despite her desperation about her health condition, did not just escape into this spiritual realm without trying to get to the bottom of things first. She even tried to strike a bargain with the spirits in order to avoid a lifelong commitment. Several common motifs in pathway-into-mediumship narratives are woven together in Nhung’s story. A professed naivety or ignorance about religious matters in general and about spirit mediumship and its terminology in particular; an early prophecy by either an outsider (or a fortune-teller, as in Rose’s case) or a close person; a physical (or mental) condition for which doctors have either no diagnosis or no treatment to offer; as well as dreams with common themes and symbols such as flying, rowing a boat, snakes, centipedes, tiger spirits or white ladies. According to Mrs. Rose’s narration, the spirits’ calling became manifest after she had returned from a prison camp in 1971 where she had spent five gruelling years in ‘unjust confinement’ (bị oan) (see Endres 2008a):
At night I often had strange dreams; I dreamt of leeches and centipedes squirming and crawling all around me and clinging to my legs, and of snakes wrapping themselves around my body. I dreamt I was flying across a river and falling down. I was scared to death, I didn’t dare to move or open my eyes until I realised I was only dreaming. That is how the spirits signalled to me that they had ‘seized my body’ (bắt xác).

Sometimes, Rose also saw the spirits in her dreams and usually fell ill afterwards. Moreover, she felt that the spirits made her very volatile and easy to anger. Female mediums often characterise themselves as hot-tempered (nóng tính) or hard to please (khó tính) (Norton 2006). Traits like these deviate from gendered societal expectations and are considered as part of a medium’s fate, e.g. a female medium with a strong male spirit’s root may have a particularly hot-tempered character, or a male medium with the root of a female spirit (referred to as đồng cô) may easily feel offended (hay đợi) and act effeminate (ẻo lả). Predispositions like these or the ways in which the căn becomes apparent may also provide important clues about the nature of the spirit root, e.g. whether it is the root of the Seventh Prince (căn Ông Hoàng Bảy) or the Third Princess (căn Cô Bơ). Often, the destined person at first tries to make sense of her dreams in different terms by interpreting them within the framework of Vietnamese conceptions of ghosts and ancestors. Nhùng’s protégée, a young divorcée named Thơm, describes how she sought to understand the horrifying dreams she started to have when she was twenty-five years old:

In the past I always had these dreams in the middle of the night. I dreamt of leeches and snakes [biting me or strangling my neck] and sometimes I would cry loudly, sometimes I would even cry all day long. Then I dreamt of a person in a white dress calling me to come out to the river. At that time I did not know this is [related to spirit mediumship], I just thought it was a ghost. When I woke up I thought, ‘I am going to die, in my dream someone [from the other world] was calling me over’. At that time I did not yet know that the Third Princess had seized me as a medium (bắt đồng), it was only later that I learned about her. After this dream I fell ill, I could not eat any more, at night I could not sleep and during the day I was dreaming with open eyes.

Thơm’s dreams were similar to those of Rose and many other spirit mediums who had shared their pathway-into-mediumship narratives with me. Snake dreams are likely to occur in all cultures and frequently instil fear. In Vietnam, however, animals are also venerated as powerful spirits, such as the Five
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Tigers (Quan Lớn Ngụ Hồ) and Monsignor Snake (Ông Lót). Although they rarely possess mediums, both animal spirits are integral to the Four Palace pantheon and their images are found in every temple dedicated to the religion. In addition to dreams, another recurrent motif in mediumship narratives is a professed naivety about spiritual matters before the destined person’s first contact with Four Palace mediums. Thơm relates the story of how she had first got in touch with the world of lên đồng mediumship:

Then I met this lady, she was a spirit medium [but I did not know it]. At that time I was working as a tailor, and this lady came to have her ritual robes fixed. So I said to her, ‘You must be an actress in a theatre!’, and she answered, ‘Right, you like it?’ I said, ‘[The robes] are really beautiful’.

Thơm started talking about her dreams and the spirit medium whose robes she had mistaken for theatre costumes suggested that she should have a đội bát hương-ritual, which literally means ‘to carry an incense holder on the head’. The ritual involves a petition or decree (lệnh) written in Chinese characters containing the name and age of the person, votive money, areca nuts, fruits and cigarettes as offerings, and an incense holder. These items are put on a large round tray (mâm) that is balanced on the candidate’s head covered by red scarf, similar to the ritual I underwent in order to repay my debt to the spirits. The master then invokes the spirits to accept the person as a new ‘incense child’ (con nhang) of the temple. Thơm agreed to go through this ritual, although she did not understand what it was all about, but afterwards her condition only became worse and her dreams more terrifying. She also lost a lot of weight until she was down to 36 kilograms, and although she is diminutive in stature, this was way too low. The lady then suggested that Thơm join her on a trip to the Temple of the Fifth Mandarin (Đền Quan Lớn Tuấn Tranh) in Ninh Giang, Hải Dương. It was in this temple that she met her master-to-be, Madam (bà) Thương, and Thơm asked her to ‘consult the yin and yang’ (xin âm dương) for her by tossing two coins:

I said to her, ‘Now I am so sick, going to work is difficult for me, please consult the coins for me’, and she did, but the coins were not favourable. Bà Thương threw the coins nine to ten times but could not get a favourable result. Then she asked, ‘In which year were you born?’, I said, ‘In the year of the Fire Snake [1977]’ and bà Thương exclaimed, ‘Child, your spirit root is very heavy (căn quả của con nặng lắm).’ In those days I did not know what ‘spirit root’ meant, I could not imagine becoming a medium. I only knew going to the temple (đi lễ), I only
knew putting my hands together [in prayer]. I didn’t even know whom people were worshipping. [...] Entering [the temple] I just thought this is to worship Buddha; Buddhism was the only thing I had heard about, I had no idea about worshipping in a temple, in a communal house, or even in a pagoda. (Interview with Thơm, 18.06.2006)

Certain emotional or mental conditions can also be an indication of a mediumship root. As Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2007: 553) explains, what is referred to as insanity (điên) in Vietnam ‘encompasses a range of symptoms including disorientation, uncontrollable impulse, speaking in gibberish and aimless wandering.’ Like bodily illnesses that cannot be cured by physicians trained in Western medicine, these mental conditions are often seen as a yin disease, i.e. caused by supernatural forces in the ‘yin world’, the world of spirits and ancestors. These ‘works of the yin’ (việc âm) stand in contrast to the ‘works of the human world’ (việc trần), and can thus only be treated by yin methods. Though few of the mediums I spoke to had personally experienced insanity in the strict sense, several master mediums readily related stories of madmen and -women who had been cured by becoming mediumship initiates. Master Cạnh recounts his way of diagnosing the works of the yin in the case of a severely disturbed man:

How can I know this is the work of yin? Like in the case of this guy I initiated into mediumship. He was absolutely insane; his eyes were flashing angry glares, really like a madman. When sitting near him I had to be careful lest he would throw things at me. But when I scolded him he would obey. His wife [had sought my advice] and I suggested I would go to the temple dedicated to Chầu Bát [and petition for him there], then I would bring back some [healing] water for drinking. If he would get better immediately after drinking the water, then it is ‘yin work’; if he doesn’t heal, then it is human world’s work.

So Master Cạnh went to the temple and prayed for the madman. He returned to Hanoi with a bottle of blessed water and went to the madman’s house right away. His wife thought of a way of giving him the water without him becoming suspicious. Finally she mixed it with orange juice, of which her insane husband eagerly drank three glasses. The spiritual quality of the water took effect almost instantly:

After drinking the mixture, [the madman] was suddenly of a clear mind and no longer insane. But this lasted only for the rest of the month, and then the next month he was insane again. So I said, this work is truly
yin work. When someone drinks the spirits’ water and his mind clears immediately he has ended up on the yin road (bị đường âm). This is NOT the work of the human world, so what can I do now? Now the only way is to have him initiated as a medium (ra đồng mở phủ). (Interview with Master Cảnh, 24.03.2005, Transcript, 17–18)

The diagnosis of a yin illness does not inevitably include that of a spirit root and, consequently, the initiation into spirit mediumship. Various other yin-related factors can affect a person’s physical or psychological health, and various ritual remedies can be pursued in order to obtain relief. In contrast to these one-time rituals, entering into mediumship is a lifelong commitment. For the majority of devotees, as in the examples I have provided above, the self-therapeutic dimension forms the most crucial aspect of ‘enlisting into the spirits’ service’. Yet there are also cases in which it is considered imperative for a person to become initiated, or else not her own but her husband’s or her children’s lives would be ruined. Master Thiện, for example, was told by a diviner that her eldest son would get into deep trouble (he already was behaving disobediently) if she would not submit herself to the spirits’ guidance. One of Master Lộc’s first initiates was a woman who had been told that her husband would die if she did not become a medium. At that time, however, she did not believe in spirit mediumship and consequently ignored the diviner’s advice. Some months later, her husband suddenly fell ill and passed away. Next she was told that her son would behave badly if she did not follow the spirits’ calling, and she was so scared that she had an initiation organised. During the ritual, when she was sitting in front of the altar, she suddenly started sobbing desperately, tears streaming down her face. Talking about this incident afterwards, Master Lộc reasoned, ‘She thought of her husband and that she could have saved his life if only she had decided to enter into mediumship earlier’ (Interview with Master Lộc, 19.12.2006, fieldnotes).

**Narrative transformation of the self**

Narrative theory holds that it is through telling stories that people construct their lives and create coherence and meaning. In this vein, Jerome Bruner has convincingly argued that ‘the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them […] become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future’ (Bruner 1987: 31). Or, in short,
it is our stories that give direction to our lives (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). As I have elaborated elsewhere (Endres 2008a), the question of how past events are narratively constructed is of particular interest in the analysis of personal life stories. A religious (or spiritual) encounter that gradually leads to a transformation of the self and of social reality by creating a different sense of being-in-the-world is a crucial experience in a person’s life history that requires special attention. With regard to the major ‘world religions’ and their variants (in particular Christian and Islamic movements), such encounters are generally treated as conversion experiences, whereas they are usually subsumed under the anthropological concept of the ritual process (e.g. in rites of passage, rites of healing, etc.) when they occur in the context of an indigenous religion. A noteworthy exception is Salvatore Cucchiari, who, within an existentialist–psychoanalytic framework, analyses Sicilian Pentecostal conversion experiences in relation to ‘conversion’ in the traditional ‘shamanic’ Sicilian religion (Cucchiari 1988: 3). Rather than as a response of the deprived, alienated and oppressed (a line of argument that has also emerged in the study of spirit possession), Cucchiari views conversion ‘as a creative and constituting religious encounter leading to a transformation of the self, marked by new awareness, new social being, and a new relationship to the sacred’ (ibid: 417–418). The same is true for a destined person’s road into lênlồng spirit mediumship. Different religions may attach more or less importance to the biographical reconstruction of the conversion experience. In Pentecostalism, the conversion narrative is not just an account of past events ‘as they actually happened’. Rather, as Peter Stromberg has pointed out, ‘the conversion narrative itself is a central element of the conversion’ (Stromberg 1993: 3). This, I argue, also applies to pathway-into-mediumship narratives, and it is in this sense that I treat these stories as belonging to the genre of conversion narratives.

Many mediums I talked to asked me at one point or other whether I actually believed in the spirits’ workings and the efficacy of mediumship. I have illustrated above that they had often categorised themselves as non-believers before their initiation. Yet after their commitment to this whole new universe of meaning (and sometimes, as in Nhung’s case, even before the actual initiation), unanimously they had experienced an overall improvement in their everyday lives. It is this efficacy of ritual transformation that has ultimately dispelled their doubts about the veracity of the belief. At the same time, the very same efficacy remains a mystery for many devotees, something ‘that cannot be explained’ (không thể giải thích được). Nhung, for example, made a
point of having no explanation for her sudden healing after she had committed herself to becoming a medium. In contrast, Hằng (the petty trader who was ‘seized by the spirits’ at the age of nine) tried to rationalise her experiences by assuming a psychological effect of **lên đồng** ritual performance:

> After serving [the spirits] I inevitably feel at ease, my mind is at ease. Generally speaking, I suddenly have something to trust in [...], I don’t have to worry anymore. If you ask me like that, I think this is kind of psychological (**tâm lý**). I don’t know how it works, but for example like last year, some days after [my ritual performance], I was very fortunate (**có lộc**) like I had some good profit when trading. It is usually like that, like after serving the spirits my work bodes favourably, and I think the fact that this inevitably happens so naturally after serving [the spirits] (**hầu**) is also sort of a psychological thing.

Whether or not their commitment to the Four Palaces has really changed the devotees’ objective social and material conditions is not for me to judge. What has definitely changed, however, is how Four Palace mediums construe and assess their social and material conditions, or, in a wider perspective, their human realities (see also Cucchiari 1988: 428). Four Palace mediumship thus represents an important arena for the exercise of agency and self-empowerment. I very much agree with Phạm Quản Phượng who describes the process of becoming a medium as a process of empowering the self. This empowerment, so Phạm explains, ‘comes through the shift in the spirit mediums’ view of themselves, of who they are, who they want to be and who they might be, not only in the religious context but also in their everyday lives’ (Phạm 2005: 172). This transformation, I argue, is as much powered by the ritual process as it is by the narration of this process. However, the point I would like to make here is that the devotee’s transformation is not effected at one instant during his or her conversion (or, if we want to avoid the term, the new religious commitment). Rather, a person’s identity may be gradually transformed as he or she ‘learns over time to construe herself and her life in terms of the canonical language’ (Stromberg 1993: 15–16). Experiences of contingency, suffering and internal crisis are cast into a new framework of meaning and significance.

Moreover, these experiences are coded into a new terminology. Like many other religions, Four Palace mediumship has developed a terminology of its own. Expression such as **mở phủ, hầu đồng, bắc ghế, căn**, etc. do not make much sense to Vietnamese who have no knowledge about or contact with the Four Palace religion. A new medium has to learn, understand and incorporate
the semantics of lèn dồng-lingo into his or her narrative practice. One way of doing this is listening to the narratives of other mediums. Whenever I joined groups of mediums and Four Palace devotees on their pilgrimages to remote

Figure 2.3 The Ninth Lady incarnated in a male master medium
temples in Northern Vietnam or during their gatherings in a master medium’s private temple (diện), plenty of pathway-into-mediumship narratives were exchanged. These narratives all follow a basic pattern that includes mention of former religious ignorance, personal suffering and crisis, the quest for relief or cure, the diagnosis of a spirit root, the inner struggle over the decision of whether or not to become a medium, and, finally, the positive changes since the initiation. The narrative enactment and re-enactment of these patterns and meanings, or, in other words, the performative dimension of narrative, is in fact a crucial factor in the construction (or transformation) of identity in len đồng spirit mediumship. Following Stromberg in this respect, my thesis is that pathway-into-mediumship narratives possess an ability to effect transformations in ways similar to that of ritual performances (e.g. see Turner 1987, Kapferer 1997; for an overview, see Rao & Köpping 2000). At the risk of being redundant, let me briefly relate a few accounts of how mediums experienced their conditions after having committed themselves to the spirits’ guidance (Endres 2006:139).

Cường is a cheerful young man who had been initiated by Master Cảnh at the beginning of the new millennium. His spirit root had made him feel restless and floundering, he was constantly worrying about his future, and his mind was never at rest. After his initiation, his self-perception changed and he no longer felt wretched and unhappy:

> After the palace-opening, after I started following the spirits, I felt at ease and untroubled, I felt very happy, and I felt that many activities went absolutely smoothly [...]. Now I can carry out all my plans, I have confidence in myself. So whatever I do, I do it accurately, I am always steady. I am not confused anymore like before. Before the palace-opening I was about to be ruined, and now suddenly I can sail in smooth waters.

Yet this is only part of the story. The other part is that Cường’s căn is associated with the princess spirits (căn cô), in particular with the Little Princess (Cô Bé), whose characteristics he identifies with and describes as gentle (nhỏ nhẹ) and leisurely (đủng đỉnh). However, Cường’s rather sweet nature does not comply with the common Vietnamese ideal of masculinity. Like Cường, many male spirit mediums display feminised patterns of behaviour, though not all of them are (or profess themselves as) homosexual (Norton 2006: 142, Endres 2006: 139). Although tolerance for gay people has grown in recent years, homosexuality is still commonly perceived as a disease (bệnh) in Vietnamese society (see Chapter 5). Four Palace mediumship not only
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offers different spiritual conceptualisations of queer gender identities, e.g. by tracing the spirit roots of effeminate men (referred to as đồng cô) to the Princess spirits, but also provides a vibrant and colourful arena for enacting these identities. Moreover, the notion of a root being inextricably linked with a diverse range of spirit identities transforms the common ways of narrating the self, as it allows mediums to comprehend their personalities in different terms than mainstream society.

This also holds true for Rose, whose difficult character has not made her life any easier. Barley Norton has correctly observed that ‘even though female mediums are usually not thought of as being “masculine” or behaving like men, they are “difficult” women, and “unfeminine” in the sense that they do not conform to stereotypical women’s roles or behaviour’ (Norton 2006: 68). Accordingly, Rose attributes her hot-temperedness and her penchant for ‘male’ pursuits such as cigarettes, love affairs and games of luck to the Prince spirits (Ông Hoàng), her childish playfulness and petulance to the Little Princess root, and her rigid unforgivingness and spite toward those who she feels have wronged her to the root of the Third Princess (Cô Bơ):

When I am very stern and hot-tempered this is because of my spirit root of the Seventh Prince. Like me, he likes gambling, but he is fortunate [có lộc]. Then I have the spirit root of the Third Princess, who . . . decided never to forgive, so when I hate someone, I hate that person till death. People say that I like eating fruit because my fate is linked to the Little Princess who lives in the forest, and the Little Princess also likes playing with toys – I have many dolls and cuddly toys upstairs; I like toys very much. If somebody says, ‘You are old but you still like playing with toys’, I get very angry and scold, ‘Get lost!’ [ . . . ] The Little Princess is also very sharp-tongued – in fact I never start an argument with anyone, but if someone starts an argument with me, I don’t give way even one inch. The Little Princess behaves capriciously, but if anyone yields an inch, then I will yield a mile. The Little Princess gets easily offended and sulky, and I am like this, too. Then I also have the spirit root of the Third Prince, he is lascivious, and he likes elegance and beauty.

Repaying the debt

A common feature of the literature on Four Palace mediumship is that it emphasises the positive assessments by spirit mediums of initiation and regular ritual practice. In her Ph.D. dissertation, the folklorist Nguyễn Thị
Hiền (2001: 21) frames Four Palace mediumship in terms of a ‘mythic model’ based on Vietnamese traditional concepts of health and disease, and describes it ‘as a mode of therapy that brings to its performers and audience a happy state of mind as well [as] an expectation of healing and auspiciousness’. In a similar vein, albeit from the angle of psychological anthropology, religious studies researcher Nguyễn Kim Hiền understands lên đồng as an explanatory model for illness (hệ thống giải thích bệnh) within the Vietnamese folk belief system, whose therapeutic effect is based on the psycho-physical impact of ritual and music as well as on its social-integrative function. Karen Fjelstad and Lisa Maiffret, in their research on Four Palace mediumship among Vietnamese diasporic communities in California, point out that personal transformations result from role modelling in which spirit mediums emulate the attributes of the spirits. This way, so Fjelstad and Maiffret (2006: 126) argue, ‘they learn to respect their elders, empathise with others, and live virtuously’.

Phạm Quỳnh Phương, in her work on spirit mediums of Saint Trần (as the national hero Trần Hưng Đạo is addressed in the religious context), emphasises, particularly with regard to female mediums, the aspect of empowerment in mediumship. General Trần Hưng Đạo is revered as a national hero for his military achievement of repelling three major Mongol invasions into Vietnam in the thirteenth century and has been mythologised as a powerful force against evil spirits. Formerly reserved for male mediums and distinctly separate from the predominately female domain of Four Palace mediumship, female devotees in recent years have appropriated the Saint Trần cult as a source of self-empowerment and healing. For Phạm, ‘[t]he empowerment that spirit mediums achieve lies in the way a narrative of empowerment emerges from the image of Saint Trần himself’ (Pham 2009: 120). Likewise, albeit in a less compelling way, the royal court model of the Four Palaces – with its pantheon of Great Mandarins, Holy Ladies, Princes and Princesses – represents a ‘symbol of power in the Vietnamese imaginary’ (ibid.). All of the proposed theories and interpretations hold some substantial validity. However, it is also true that Four Palace mediumship is a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon that ‘defies reduction to a single, unitary interpretation’ (Norton 2006: 75). I do not intend to offer a whole new interpretation to the already existing. Rather, I would like to add one perspective that has hitherto been neglected. This perspective is concerned with the concept of repaying the debt to the Four Palaces (trả nợ bốn phủ).
In the Vietnamese language, there exist two words that can be translated as debt:  ơn and nợ. The first term designates a moral debt of gratitude and carries the connotation of a deep, long-lasting relationship between the giver and the receiver (Malarney 2002: 112). Children, for example, learn that they owe their parents a debt of gratitude that is so immense it can never be measured, let alone repaid. This moral debt even continues after the giver has passed away and creates an eternal link between the living and the dead. Family members are constantly reminded to remember the debt (nhớ ơn) they owe their ancestors. Village communities feel a debt of gratitude toward their village founders or craft ancestor, as expressed in the adage: uống nước nhớ nguồn – when you drink water, remember the source. (Endres 2000: 8). Furthermore, this Confucian concept of morality has been appropriated by the Vietnamese Party-state, which admonishes its citizens on large communist billboards to remember their moral debt to the founding fathers of the nation as well as to their national heroes and heroines (anh hùng), including the revolutionary martyrs of war (liệt sĩ) (Malarney 2001: 167). In short,  ơn is a debt that is both immeasurable and eternal.

In contrast, a nợ is a debt that must be and can be repaid, for example when a person has borrowed a sum of money. Moreover, nợ more likely describes an exchange transaction rather than a timeless moral obligation. Elaborate exchange systems of gifts, favours and banquets (Yang 1994) that produce obligation and indebtedness with no fixed term of repayment are an important means by which human relationships are shaped and cultivated. The exchange that takes place at weddings and funerals, for example, is described as ăn uống trả nợ miệng nhau – exchanging debts through eating and drinking (Malarney 2002: 133). Yet just like an  ơn, a nợ can also extend to the otherworld.

A destined aptitude for mediumship (căn đồng) implies that a person owes a debt – a nợ – to the Four Palaces. This debt is karmic in the sense that it was created during a previous incarnation (kiếp trước). Thơm's understanding of this karmic debt is typical and also explains why lên đồng ritual practice does not work for everyone in the same way:

Some people's  căn is light, others have a heavy  căn. […] Maybe in their previous lives . . . the former have committed an offence, just a small one, so now in this incarnation they have to repay the debt (phải trả nợ), but after they become initiated, they feel totally different, from health to work, everything changes [for the better]. […] But for people whose  căn is heavy the situation may be not so easy and they may not feel an immediate improvement of their situation. Like in my case, for example,
although I have gained weight since my initiation and feel healthier, I am still very thin and weak.

Thơm’s success story is not one of miracles, although she has gained several kilograms of weight since her initiation and generally feels much better than before. Yet this does not in the least shake her belief in the efficacy of mediumship. Why, if Princess Liễu Hạnh herself had once committed a crime in Heaven for which she was banished from the Celestial Empire and had to spend a lifetime full of hardships on earth? At least, for Thơm the idea of a heavenly căn does not seem improbable:

Some people may also have a căn in the Upper Heaven, like for example if in my former life I was a Princess (công chúa) or something like that and I owe the deities up there something, like I broke a cup or something like that, then in this life I have to self-improve.

In many of the legends that abound about Liễu Hạnh – who is most commonly identified with the Supreme Heavenly Mother – she is portrayed as
the daughter of the Jade Emperor (Ngọc Hoàng), the Daoist ruler of Heaven. One day she was behaving clumsily and broke a jade cup, a misdeed that resulted in her descent to earth where she was born into a human family. Her story became most well known in the version by the eighteenth-century female writer Đoàn Thị Điểm, titled Vân Cát Thần Nữ Truyện (Story of the Vân Cát Goddess). This text ‘is neither legend, myth, nor hagiography but a highly elaborated, for the author’s time and place, novel that entangles elements of myth, legend, romantic imagination, and Đoàn Thị Điểm’s own biography with her intellectual inclinations and aspirations’ (Dror 2007: 104). Significantly, Liễu Hạnh is the only Four Palace deity with a sophisticated biography penned by a gifted poetess. The identities of most other deities in the Four Palace pantheon are rather fluid, a quality which opens to the devotees a wide spectrum of possibilities for individual interpretation (see Taylor 2004: 203–208). What they seem to have in common, though, is a high degree of responsiveness to human attention.

In his brilliant study of local goddess worship in Southern Vietnam, Philip Taylor suggests that in contrast to the ‘warrior-scholar-official spirits’, the goddesses’ earthly lives as humans had usually been cut short by an untimely or unjust (oan) death. According to popular Buddhist conceptions, this results in their soul being ‘unable to disentangle itself from its prematurely terminated incarnation and unrealized destiny’ (ibid.: 202). Socially excluded and trapped in their karmic manifestation, they need the care of the living in order to sustain themselves. By offering candles, fragrant incense, flowers, ritual objects made of paper (vàng mã), fabulous food offerings and divine entertainment, spirit mediums repay their karmic debt to the Four Palaces. At the same time, however, these activities also create a debt of reciprocity between humans and deities. The deities are accessible to human needs and aspirations, and respond to the attention of their propitiants by bestowing upon them divine favours and blessed gifts (lộc). My interlocutors’ depictions of the spirits correspond well to the observations Philip Taylor made with regard to Southern goddesses: ‘They will help anyone with anything, but the assistance they offer is conditional on dealing with them correctly, believing in them, staying faithful to them, and repaying them’ (ibid.: 266). Unlike the stern warrior-hero Saint Trần (and also unlike Buddha), they don’t seem to care so much about the moral integrity of the petitioners or about the moral merits of their purposes. The Four Palace religion is thus basically amoral; to use the words of Master Thuận it even contains ‘a dash of evil’ (một chút tà đạo). According to the
effeminate male master, the goddesses (Thánh Mẫu) are tricky (éo le) and artful (‘they can turn a bitter gourd into a spinach vine’), but they can also be ruthless and wicked (tàn ác): ‘They can play any trick if they choose, they’ll make a man leave his wife and a woman abandon her husband’ (thích gì cô chän động Choi, cho giai bỏ vợ gái rói chồng ra) (Interview with Master Thuận, 10.05.2006). Conversely, however, a skilled master like him may also be entitled to command them for his purposes, he may even ‘rouse the damsels up from their sleep to come and mount their chair’ (sai rí rí dậy gọi nàng nàng lên) (Interview with Master Thuận, 23.06.2006).

Much like a Geertzian ‘model of’ and ‘model for’ everyday life in this world, the basic ideas of the Four Palace religion signify an extension into the spirit world of the moral economy of obligation and indebtedness that shape human relationships. Adherents of the Four Palace religion not only learn that their actions have consequences reaching from one life to the next, but also feel empowered to (symbolically) settle some of their karmic debt burden from a previous life by establishing a relationship of efficacious reciprocity with the world of spirits, thereby improving their lot in this lifetime. This, it seems, is an easier and more down-to-earth way to free oneself from bad karma than practising Buddhism. Thầy Hiền, himself a spirit priest and a ritual musician, explains the appeal of the Four Palace religion as follows:

Why is the spirit religion (đạo thánh) so strong? It is because Buddhism has its shortcomings. Not everyone can understand the prayer books, not everyone can lead a religious life. This draws the spirits closer to the people. For humanity, at all levels of society, the spirits are closer than Buddha.12

This ‘closeness’ is suggestive of Victor Turner’s point about the polysemic and multivocal nature of religious symbols (Turner 1967). Their fluidity and indeterminacy allow enough room for personal interpretation and appropriation and thus open up new ways of narrating the self. However, the transformation of the self and of social reality that is caused by being initiated into Four Palace mediumship is not solely a matter of telling stories. Equally compelling are the ways in which whole new worlds of meaning and relationship are inscribed onto the medium’s body through the performance of ritual.

Notes

1 Similar adages also exist in China (see Smith 1991: 173).
2 Leshkowich (2006: 290) calls attention to the fact that there is a strongly gendered component to the Vietnamese notion of fate, insofar as women’s fates are considered to be much more unyielding and thus more difficult to alter than those of men.


4 Toan Ánh (1968: 467) refers to this as căn thờ, a ‘căn for worshipping’.

5 Another ‘astrological’ method is the Hà Lạc horoscope (Số Hà Lạc) that combines the Heavenly stems and Earthly branches with the Eight Trigrams (bát quái) of the Book of Changes (I-Ching, in Vietnamese: Kinh Dịch).

6 In front of the altar, believers pray to the patron deity of the temple and shake a container of sticks until one falls out. Each stick has a number that corresponds to a divinatory paper with poems on it. As the poems are often not clear in their meaning, interpreters offer their services for a small fee.

7 From my data, it is hard to assess whether the identification of a root of mediumship is a diagnosis to which every fortune-teller would adhere. I assume that a diviner’s personal belief as well as his or her method of divination may determine the course of the prediction and the remedies recommended.

8 Not every medium agrees with the concept of being caught by the spirits, though. Some argue that the spirits are essentially benevolent and it is therefore improper to use the slightly negative expression of being caught. One master rejected that notion outright and said only ‘simpletons with a low education’ would use it. For him, becoming a medium is a matter of following a belief rather than a compelling call for commitment.

9 This excerpt from the interview with Hằng has already been cited in Endres 2006a. Here, a mistake has been corrected: at the time of the incident, Hằng was nine years old, not six.

10 During my research, master mediums usually pointed out the ‘specialness’ of cases like these. In late 2006, Master Cảnh initiated a twelve-year-old boy – an event that was so special to him that he even allowed me to take photographs and film the boy’s first lên đồng, whereas it is usually not allowed to document the first performance of a novice medium. At that time, there was also a VCD available at Đồng Xuân market, featuring the hầu tạ-ritual (100 days after the initiation) of a nine-year-old boy in Bắc Ninh. Another case I came across by chance was that of a twelve-year-old girl whom I saw performing in the Fifth Mandarin’s temple in Ninh Giang, Hải Dương. Whereas the two boys mentioned had undergone a proper initiation by a master medium, the young girl had, according to her mother, a fortune-teller, ‘only been guided by the spirits’.
11 *Xin âm dương* is a very common way of asking the deities for approval. Two coins, usually old Chinese coins or reproductions of them, are tossed onto a plate. If one fall heads and the other one tails, it means that the deity agrees to the petitioner’s request. If both coins fall heads it means the deity does not agree, and both tails means the deity is laughing (*thành cười*). The coins may in fact be tossed several times until a positive result is achieved. Sometimes, the exact way the coins fall onto the plate is also taken into consideration: on which side of the plate they land, in which relation to each other they fall, etc.

12 I should note, however, that for thầy Hiền the ‘spirit religion’ first and foremost represents one way to understand Buddhism. According to him, ‘Buddha invented the spirit religion, so that its adherents would be imbued with religious ideas and gradually understand more about Buddhism and the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth (*sư luân hồi*)’ (Interview with thầy Hiền, 16.6.2006). His ideas reflect the ideological dominance and supremacy of Buddhism over the Four Palaces that was enforced in the course of history. In temples dedicated to the Four Palace pantheon, statues or images of Buddha are often placed above the representations of the deities as a visible expression of this supremacy.
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On a sunny October afternoon in 2006, I manoeuvred my motor scooter through the choking traffic of the arterial road connecting Hanoi to its southern suburbs. Bà Thương had invited me to participate in the initiation ritual of a new follower, a tall and jolly man in his late thirties named Chính. When I arrived, bà Thương had already completed her task of opening the palaces (mở phủ) and had transferred the red scarf (khăn phủ diện) to the novice medium. Now Chính had to perform a full lên đồng ritual – the first one of his life. I squeezed into the crowd gathering in the sanctuary and sat down on the floor next to Thơm. The small temple was packed with wrinkled, betel-chewing old ladies, several of bà Thương’s faithful followers, and a young, attractive crowd of Chính’s friends. Some of the women looked like top fashion models with finely chiselled features, flawless white skin, daring necklines and tight designer jeans. Others again represented a louder type of modern woman with curvaceous bodies, plucked-and-painted eyebrows and shoulder-length straightened hair dyed a fashionable shade of brown. Some of them started clapping their hands to the chầu văn music performed by thầy Hiền and his apprentice, Dũng.

The assistants Lộc and Kỳ were dressing Chính in the Little Lady’s robes. When all the sparkling trinkets on the goddess’s headdress had been fixed, the musicians increased the tempo and Chính got to his feet. He looked stunning. Lộc handed him an open feather fan with three sticks of incense and suggested graceful circling movements towards the altar, as part of the ritual salutation to the deities. But instead of following Lộc’s instructions, Chính awkwardly swayed the fan to and fro. Then he returned the fan and received two burning rope-candles (mồi) from Lộc. The assistant started moving his long dextrous
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Playing the Divine fingers in a flowing motion. Chính, in contrast, candles in hand, rhythmically swung his arms up and down, shuffling his feet to the beat. Although he didn’t move his hips, his movements still looked more like modern dance steps than like a lèn đồng ritual dance. As the music gained momentum, some of the participants laughed with glee, wildly clapping their hands. Outside, in the temple courtyard, two of Chính’s voguish friends were skipping and bopping to the music. One woman shouted, ‘Praise you, Lady! You are the most beautiful in Southeast Asia!’ and another one cheered, ‘Praise you, Lady! The dance floor is yours!’ I gave Thơm a quizzical look. ‘He used to work in a Hanoi dance hall,’ she shouted into my ear, ‘and he regularly performs Western dance, that’s why he [serves the spirits] like this!’

Between ‘backwardness’ and (colonial) modernity

Chính’s way of performing brings to mind an interesting passage from Phan Kế Bính’s influential study entitled Vietnamese Customs (Việt Nam Phong Tục) published at the beginning of the twentieth century. The French colonial project of conquest and ‘enlightened control’ had been partly justified as a civilising mission that would bring both moral and economic progress to the country. The discourses of civilisation (văn minh), modernity and progress that emerged in the early twentieth century among the Vietnamese intellectual elite were embedded in the wider context of an East–West civilisational discourse in which East Asian thinkers raised arguments against the presumed superiority of Western civilisation (Duara 2001; see also Winichakul 2000; Bradley 2004; Goscha 2004).

Some sections of the new, French-educated intelligentsia nevertheless perceived Westernisation as an instrumental strategy for fostering ‘civilisational equality with the coloniser and the rest of the “modern world”’ (Goscha 2004: 24; see also Cheng 2002). The acclaimed litterateur and journalist Phan Kế Bính belonged to a circle of Vietnamese intellectuals and writers who devoted themselves to promoting the benefits of the French civilising mission (see Marr 1981: 151). In order to integrate Vietnam into the modern world they strongly endorsed the adoption of Western ideas, values and lifestyles. In contrast, popular beliefs and religious practices such as spirit mediumship were deprecated as outdated or detrimental to the demands of the modern, civilised world. Many of Phan Kế Bính’s musings about Vietnamese mores and beliefs thus decry traditional culture for being ‘backward’, ‘dim-witted’,
and responsible for the deplorable economic state of the country. In his brief chapter about Four Palace mediumship, however, he mocks spirit mediums (referred to as *đồng cốt*) not only for practising a nonsensical cult, but also for being somewhat too modern:

The mediums wear green and red robes and colourful scarves, they hop and bob in front of the altar, wriggling and swinging their hips. [...] It is said that mediums imitate the fanciful European dancing style that provides women with an opportunity to exhibit their attractive feminine figures. As our tradition lacks this opportunity, they borrow the form of *đồng bông* to dance – it is characteristic for women that they want to show their beauty in front of everybody. (Phan Kế Bính 1995, pp. 239, 240; my translation)

The ritual appropriation of colonial practices and imageries has often been described, most notably by Africanists, as a ‘way of tackling the new and unknown’ (Kramer 1993: 117) that indicated fear of and resistance to colonial rule and the changes it brought about (see also Fry 1976, Boddy 1989, Stoller 1995). Phan Kế Bính’s scathing remark bespeaks resistance as well, albeit of a rather different kind. First, it suggests that early twentieth-century urban mediums had expressed their fascination with colonial modernity by creatively integrating some ideas about dance movements and bodily expression from the new fashionable pursuits of an emerging female middle-class into their rituals. Second, it indicates that the advocates of Western-style modernisation were not amused about such apparent ‘derailments of the modernity project’ (Endres 2005). An appropriation of this kind of modernity into this kind of tradition was clearly not what reform-minded intellectuals had in mind.

In his short-story entitled ‘The Little Princess plays Ping-Pong’ (Cô bé đánh Ping pong), Nhất Lang (1952: 102–110) presents the case of a Four Palace master who, after learning about this new sport, thought it a good idea to let the Little Princess play a game of Ping Pong during a *lên đồng* and had special votive paper objects produced for the occasion. The same idea is expressed in a cartoon by the same author, entitled ‘A good idea for the tennis courts not to be left deserted’, that was published in the satirical journal *Phong Hóa* (Customs and Mores) in August 1933. In the 1930s, tennis came to be a fashionable sport among the middle-class urban Vietnamese of both sexes (Nguyen Van Ky 1995: 226). In the cartoon, however, the tennis court is transformed into an altar that is replete with tennis paraphernalia, and the dancing medium’s spirit insignia are replaced by a tennis racket and a ball.
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The humour in this cartoon lies in the unlikely parallels it suggests between these two fashionable pursuits of the female middle class of the day, with the implication that these ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ feminine activities are not necessarily distinct.¹ Not only did modern acquisitions such as European dance (and sports, for that matter) find their way into the religious pursuits of urban middle-class women, but the advent of modern economic growth and the ‘new way of life’ during the 1930s entrepreneurial boom era also spurred an increased fervour in Four Palace mediumship.

According to the writer Nhất Lang (1952), a veritable spirit possession movement (phong trào đồng bóng) emerged among the female members of the new urban bourgeoisie. Drawing in part from Nhất Lang’s writings, Maurice Durand, a French researcher of the colonial period, observed that, in most cases, spirit mediums were ‘socially well-established, intelligent and cultured women’, many of whom were married to European men. At a closer look, however, it had turned out that most of them, despite their privileged status, had a ‘troubled sentimental life’ (Durand 1959: 15, my translation). The most active devotees of the Four Palace cult apparently consisted of widows, divorcees, abandoned wives and heartbroken mistresses. These women, Durand argued, practised mediumship in order to find ‘oblivion, healing, or hope’. In contrast to this rather sympathetic portrayal, the mediums in Nhất Lang’s fictionalised reportages are depicted as basically immoral.² Besides competing with each other for the most luxurious ritual performances and robes, they are described as neglecting their families, lusting for love affairs, spending a lot of money on gambling and trying to cheat each other wherever possible.

Along the same lines, the writer Lộng Chương vividly portrayed the world of mediums in late colonial Hanoi as one that was dominated by rich women vying for status and repute among the ‘children of the spirits’ (con nhà thánh) by demonstrating their religious devotion with the utmost splendour. The main character of his novel Hầu Thánh (1942, reprinted in 1990), Mrs. Hàn Sính, spends large sums of money on her ritual activities and ends up leaving her husband in order to live with a chầu văn musician. It seems, however, that Lộng Chương’s critique not only targeted Four Palace mediumship, but also challenged the ‘new Vietnamese woman’ that had appeared among what Zinoman (2002: 2) calls ‘a colourful array of new social types’ brought forth by the modernizing ethos of the times. Besides being dutiful wives and mothers, these ‘new women’ (đàn bà mới) fulfilled various roles and images of modern womanhood, not all of which conformed to ‘traditional’ Vietnamese
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ideals of proper female moral conduct: the frivolous widow, the coquettish maiden, or the glamorous femme fatale.

One may wonder at this point why male mediums were not an issue in earlier accounts on Four Palace mediumship. In my view, the motley presence of eccentric, androgynous males in the world of mediums is a contemporary phenomenon, otherwise it would certainly have attracted the attention (and the scorn) of Vietnamese and French writers of the colonial period. Yet even today, women – and in particular women merchants – constitute the majority of Four Palace devotees. Moreover, when Four Palace mediumship (or Liễu Hanh’s cult, to use Dror’s words) first appeared in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, it was established as one of numerous “private” cults.
that were popular among women’ (Dror 2007: 59). Many of these women, Dror writes, were successfully engaged in trade and business and thus more independent and geographically mobile than their peasant counterparts in the Red River Delta villages. Accordingly, in most stories about her worldly existence, Liễu Hạnh is portrayed ‘as engaged in some kind of market or business activity, as the owner of a stall, tavern, or inn, which attests to the connection between her cult and female merchants’ (ibid.; see also Phạm and Eipper 2009). Although the role and significance of Princess Liễu Hạnh seems to have diminished in contemporary Four Palace mediumship (most spirit mediums even prefer the term Đạo Thánh, spirit religion, over Đạo Mẫu, mother goddess religion), the connection between the Four Palace worship and (female) market activities is a crucial one and shall be dealt with in subsequent chapters.

An intriguing assumption, even if not verifiable, is that the elaborate way of spirit embodiment in lèn đồng ritual in fact emerged from the Vietnamese chèo theatre. In contrast to the Vietnamese adaptation of the Chinese opera, tuồng, chèo theatre (also called popular opera) was the entertainment of the common folk, performed in rural areas on such important ritual occasions as village festivals (lễ hội) ‘in order to please the divinities’ (Đình Quang et al. 1999: 43) by re-enacting their myths as well as performing scenes of village daily life. In 1437, after periods of royal recognition and the establishment of chèo court troupes, the Lê Emperor prohibited chèo and expelled performers from the official temples, the court and administrative centres. Dror (2007: 78) maintains that ‘[t]his restriction had two consequences: the performers moved to the villages and tried to interpolate their art into religious ceremonies. Ritual songs performed by a special musical group created a background for the dances and praised the incarnating deity.’ If we assume that this is what happened, then lèn đồng ritual has emerged from (or at least was heavily influenced by) Vietnamese popular theatre. This perspective is all the more interesting because it is in contrast to the prevalent view that theatre began in ritual, and not vice versa (see Harrison 1948, Kirby 1982 [1970]; cf. Rozik 2002).

### Ritual as performance

Victor Turner (1990: 12) saw theatre as ‘one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system of pre-industrial ritual which embraces ideas and
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images of cosmos and chaos, interdigitates clowns and their foolery with gods and their solemnity, and uses all the sensory codes, to produce symphonies in more than music. Lên đồng rituals are undoubtedly symphonic in character, as they tease the senses with a complex blend of sights, scents and sounds: the magnificent temple interior, the artfully arranged trays of offerings, the intoxicating smell of incense and flowers, the sumptuous robes and accessories that transform the medium into a deity, the entrancing rhythm of the liturgical music, and, ideally, the virtuosity of the ritual performance. My choice of the term performance in this context is not incidental. It reflects the recent theoretical trajectory of ritual studies that has recast ritual as performance. In the sections below, I shall further elucidate the implications of this paradigm shift in order to facilitate a deeper understanding of the concepts behind the buzzwords.

The development of the performance approach in the anthropological study of ritual builds on the pioneering studies of scholars such as Milton Singer, Dell Hymes, Erving Goffmann, Stanley Tambiah and Clifford Geertz (see Bell 1997, Köpping and Rao 2000). Most strongly, however, it is tied to the works of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner. Salient influences came from sociolinguistics, in particular from Noam Chomsky’s theory of universal grammar and Austin and Searle’s speech act theory. Most notably, Austin’s *How to do things with words* introduced the term *performative* to account for utterances that act upon the world rather than simply describing it. Statements (or, to be precise, illocutionary acts) such as ‘I now pronounce you husband and wife’ are performative in the sense that the act (in this case, of marriage) is performed (under appropriate circumstances, referred to as felicity conditions) simply by the utterance of the words.

Applied to ritual enactments, the turn to a performance focus has profoundly rejuvenated a conceptualisation that had basically characterised ritual as a formalised, rule-governed and redundant mode of human action. In his landmark essay *A performative approach to ritual*, Stanley Tambiah (1979: 119) first defines ritual as a ‘culturally constructed system of symbolic communication’ endowed with the essential features of formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition). He then continues by arguing that ritual is performative in three senses: ‘in the Austinian sense of performative wherein saying something is also doing something as a conventional act; in the quite different sense of a staged performance that uses multiple media by which the participants experience the event intensively; and in the third sense of indexical values […] being attached to and inferred by
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actors during the performance.' Although Tambiah’s performative approach hits a number of crucial points, it misses the one that would, in subsequent years, come to be seen as the most significant feature of ritual, that is to say its creative and dynamic power.

This understanding derives, at least in a great part, from the seminal work of Victor Turner. In the course of his intensive studies of Ndembu ritual, Turner formulated and refined his idea of the social drama. A social drama (defined as conflictive, competitive or agonistic social interaction), is ‘processually structured’ inasmuch as it inevitably follows a basic course of events consisting of four phases: breach (e.g. of social rules), crisis, redress, and either reintegration or recognition of schism (see Turner 1982: 69; 1987: 34–35). The crucial point here is that Turner sees social drama not only as the engine of all social process, but also acknowledges its role as the primary source from which the major genres of cultural performances originate and derive their meaning and force (see Turner 1982: 94).

In general terms, a performance can be described as ‘a form of scripted action [that] tends to be heavily stylized, aesthetically marked, elaborately framed and given to multiple sensory stimulation’ (Brown 2003: 5). However, this scriptedness does not imply that a performance must be seen as a mere enactment of a pre-existing script. Rather, as Brown points out, ‘a performance represents a creative tension between the “what should be” of the script and the “what happens” of the actual performance’ (ibid.). It is this tension that harbours the potential for both continuity and change, the repeatable as well as the emergent in a performance. Not only is there a significant unscripted dimension in all performances that makes them susceptible to contingency and indetermination, but performances, like any human action, may themselves stimulate change and transformation in different spheres of human life, and thus actively contribute to cultural production. For Victor Turner, ‘cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself’ (Turner 1986: 24).

Ritual, as an essential genre of cultural performance, hence becomes understood as an expression of the social drama and a vehicle of transformative social processes: ‘To speak of ritual performance is to shift our concerns away from the “tyranny of form” associated with ritual and explore instead the cultural dynamism, efficacy and transformations that emerge when ritual is recast, following Turner’s thesis, as a processual mode of cultural activity
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rather than a static one’ (Brown 2003: 10). Adopting a performance approach to ritual, then, means to pay close attention to what ritual actually achieves or brings about. In emphasising ritual’s potential as a performative medium through which transformation can take place, the late scholar of ritual and religious studies Catherine Bell (1997: 73) points out that rather than asking how rituals sustain the social order and shape social identities, a performance perspective on ritual looks at the creative and contingent processes of how ‘people fashion rituals that mold their world’.

The theatricality of ritual

A performance perspective on ritual also allows for a re-examination of the affinities between ritual and theatre. Previously, these affinities had been overshadowed by (predominately Western) notions that associated theatre and theatricality with staged illusion and inauthenticity, or even deceit (Schieffelin 1998: 201). For the director and theorist of performance Richard Schechner, however, the question whether a particular performance is called theatre or ritual largely depends on ‘where it is performed, by whom, and under what circumstances’ (Schechner 2003 [1988]: 130). In fact he sees the basic polarity not between ritual and theatre, but rather between efficacy and entertainment. Drawing on Turner’s pioneering studies Schechner attributes the efficacy of a ritual performance to its ability to effect (social, aesthetic as well as actual) transformations, whereas a theatrical performance is supposed to entertain – though he hastens to add that no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment. John Beattie (1970: 2), in comparing spirit possession rituals with theatrical performances, argues in a similar way when he maintains:

> Like the mediumistic cults with which I am comparing it, the theatre too, for a great part of its history, has been regarded, not just as entertainment, but also as a powerful means of influencing supernatural forces. And correspondingly, spirit mediumship is not just a form of religious undertaking, a way of coming to terms with and influencing the spirit world, it is […] also a form or dramatic art in its own right. (emphasis in original)

Whereas (supernatural) efficacy may not appropriately be considered a criterion on which to base stage reviews of contemporary (Western) theatre
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Performing the Divine productions, theatricality must indeed be seen as a necessary precondition for the efficacy of ritual. Köpping (2004) exemplifies this by analysing several sequences of the Hana Matsuri (flower festivals) in Central Japan. He concludes that the positive resonance from the populace (and with it the community-building efficacy of the festival) largely depends on the theatrical aspects of the ritual acts and dances, i.e. the rehearsals, improvisations, acclamations, and the oscillating interactions between gods and humans.

The mention of rehearsals and improvisations is a vital issue that needs further attention. All too often it is assumed that – unlike in theatre – ritual enactments of divine presence just ‘happen’ to the performer (in this case the spirit medium), i.e. when he or she becomes possessed by a supernatural entity. In Four Palace mediumship this is true only to a very limited extent, and not necessarily as a rule. As I will elaborate further below, novice mediums of the Four Palace deities have to study and learn the different rules and roles of ritual performance just as drama students have to attend stage rehearsals. The difference is that there are no institutionalised rehearsals in spirit mediumship, which means that neophytes slowly have to learn the ‘script’ and refine their enactment in the course of each ritual performance. As stated above, however, recent scholarship in ritual studies has revealed that the scriptedness of ritual is much less rigid and rule-bound than former theories of ritual had assumed. Rather, the fluid and permeable boundaries between theatre and ritual leave space for creative expression and innovative interpretations in ritual enactment. Gilbert Lewis (1980: 22) has expressed this in terms of a token-type-relationship between ritual morphology and ritual performance:

[T]he performance is related to the ritual as a token to a type. Not every property that can be predicated of the performance must necessarily belong to the type. The rules establish the type of the ritual as the score does the symphony or the text the play, but in their performance there is essentially an element of interpretation; the performance (token) may have properties in excess of those of the type.

Although this view holds considerable merit, I would also like to caution against the implication that the token (or script) exists independently of the broader historical, political, economic and social context in which it is enacted. Even more significantly, Lewis (and others) seem to overlook the fact that both the rules of ‘proper’ ritual performance as well as the spaces for creativity in the embodiment of scripted action are always subject to continuous negotiation.
and contestation. What is at stake in these contentions is in fact much more than the adherence to, or breach of, ritual and aesthetic conventions. Rather, the ritual sphere must be understood as a dynamic arena in which competing claims to interpretative authority, ritual authenticity and aesthetic validity are asserted and challenged. With this in mind, let me now return to Chính’s initiation ritual of enthusiastic dancing.

Moulding the medium: possession, mimesis and the body

Master mediums often claim that the proper way(s) of ritual performance have been taught to them by the spirits (‘ngài dạy lên đồng’). It is my contention that this is not to be taken in a literal sense, at least in the majority of cases. These claims again emphasise the importance of narrative and personal myth, as discussed in the previous chapter. Master mediums use these narratives to construct themselves as divinely approved spiritual authorities whose tenets of ritual practice are ‘true to the spirits’ rules’ (đúng phép thánh) and thus incontestable. Because a master has to build and maintain a good reputation in the world of mediumship, novice mediums are required to perform exclusively at the temple of their initiation during the first three years. During this period, they have to watch, listen and learn. The learning process basically consists of two elements: first, attending and observing their master’s and other mediums’ ritual performances, and second, applying the observed movements and postures during their own spirit enactments. The latter, however, are rare occasions, as ordinary mediums only perform once or twice a year. After three years, a medium is considered to have sufficient training and may serve the spirits at any temple of his or her choice. Master Cảnh comments:

[The three-year period is necessary] because if [new mediums] perform inadequately, how can you let them go to the provinces? […] Sometimes, a medium doesn’t even know in which order they are supposed to serve the spirits, it is terrible! If I am with them I can correct them right away, but if I’m not there […] that would leave me in a very bad light. People would say: “Certainly the master of this medium isn’t worth a thing; this is why this medium also performs [the ritual] so badly!” (Interview with Master Cảnh, 01.11.2002)

With growing reputation and popularity, however, masters may soon gain more followers than they are able to monitor. This is why many novice mediums
feel left to their own devices after their initiation, like ‘a child abandoned at the market’ (mang con bỏ chợ). Generally, however, it is not the master who is concerned with guiding the new mediums’ movements during their first lênh dông rituals. The responsibility of giving instantaneous instructions to the inexperienced is instead left to the ritual assistants (hầu dâng).

In scholarly treatments of Four Palace mediumship, the role of ritual assistants has hitherto been unduly neglected. Two types of assistants prevail in contemporary Vietnam, whom I shall, for lack of better terms, classify as ‘amateur assistants’ and ‘professional assistants’. Both of them are usually experienced mediums themselves, so the expression ‘amateur’ is not thoroughly appropriate. The most significant difference between the two is that the latter assist in lênh dông rituals as a means of earning a living. This professionalism, however, requires skills that go beyond knowing the ritual script and which costumes and ritual props (i.e. fans, rope-candles, swords, bell-batons, lance, etc.) apply to each spirit. Mediums distinguish between the assistant seated to the left of the medium, who is referred to as tay hương (incense hand), and the right-hand assistant, tay khăn (robe hand). Assistants

Figure 3.2 Ritual assistants attend to the medium during the performance
assert that the role of the robe hand is more difficult than that of the incense hand. Whereas the incense hand is in charge of handing the right props at the right times, the robe hand politely invites the spirits (thỉnh thánh) by whispering the appropriate incantation into the medium’s ear. According to a young professional assistant named Lâm these words are also intended to help inexperienced mediums to remember the order in which he or she is supposed to embody the Four Palace deities. Furthermore, as the name indicates, the robe hand is responsible for dressing the medium in the spirits’ costumes. In recent years, this particular task has been requiring more and more dextrous skills, for example in folding embroidered ethnic scarves into the stunning turbans that have become fashionable for the female mountainous spirits. In addition to these manual and oratorical talents, a professional assistant needs to have good observation and improvisation skills, a good attention to detail, as well as a proficient background in lên đồng ritual performance.

Lòng, an experienced and much sought-after assistant, asserts that just like a company director needs well-trained staff in order for the business to be successful, a good master medium needs proficient ritual assistants in order for his or her work to be efficacious, i.e. for the initiation to bring positive results to the novice medium. In a similar sense, Lộc and Kỳ, the assistants mentioned in the opening of this chapter, compare the master medium’s work with that of a medical doctor, who, after a successful operation (i.e. the palace-opening ritual), leaves the patient in the hands of the nurses for all further treatment (i.e. learning the correct ways of ritual performance). This further treatment is called việc nắn đồng, moulding the medium.

Once the ritual has started, the medium is not allowed to speak any mundane words; only divine transmissions (referred to as truyền phán) may be uttered. Likewise, a ritual assistant may not address the medium as a human being and thus cannot use oral instructions in teaching the correct movements and postures. At the beginning of a spirit sequence, the medium’s head is covered by the red scarf, and the musicians start inviting the spirits according to the prescribed order. The assistant then bends forward and (politely covering his mouth with a fan) whispers into the medium’s ear: ‘I humbly pray your Saintship to descend into the medium of the [family name] family’ (Con lấy Thánh để chắp giáng đầu đồng cho họ [Mai, họ Nguyễn] này”; Interview with Lâm, 25.02.2006). In case of an inexperienced performer, so Lâm explains, this invitation also serves the purpose of reminding the medium which deity is expected to descend next. Before the red veil is thrown off, the descent of a deity is typically indicated by specific hand gestures (see Figure 2-3).
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As novice mediums easily get confused, the assistant may instead give the signal to the musicians to make sure they play the right song. After dressing the medium in the spirit’s attire, the assistant indicates through gestures which postures to assume or which actions or movements to perform, the basic rules of proper ritual enactment depending on the spirit’s rank, gender, legend and distinguishing characteristics.

Becoming a Four Palace spirit medium is thus basically a process of mimetically appropriating the divine Other (Kramer 1993; Taussig 1993). By assuming the postures and gestures of divinity in ritual performance, the symbolic system of the Four Palace religion becomes embodied (in the sense of Merleau-Ponty) as a lived experience. In his work on Songhay possession, Paul Stoller (1994: 642) refers to spirit possession as ‘an arena of sensuous mimetic production and reproduction’ where cultural memory is, in the words of Connerton (1989: 72), ‘sedimented in the body’. For the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (1933), the ‘mimetic faculty’ – i.e the capacity to Other – is a rudiment of ‘primitive’ times, when mankind was driven by a ‘powerful compulsion to become similar and behave mimetically’ (Benjamin 2005: 720). Following Benjamin, Michael Taussig describes the mimetic faculty as

[...] the nature that culture uses to create second nature, the faculty to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become Other. The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power. (1993: xiii)

In spirit possession, the sensual and perceptual experience of the divine is essentially grounded in the body. Ritual performance requires the medium
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to acquire new *techniques du corps*\(^5\), to use his or her body in ways that have (usually) not been attempted before. As Michael Jackson (1983: 334) points out, such ‘altered patterns of body use may induce new experiences and provoke new ideas’. This, I argue, is a crucial aspect of what happens during the process of ‘moulding’ the novice medium of the Four Palace divinities. For a passionate lover of ballroom and night-club dancing like the novice medium Chính this entails that he must, first of all, unlearn the modern dance moves he knows and conform to the rules of divine embodiment. Dressed in a courtly robe and assuming the stately posture of a Great Mandarin, for example, who moves with dignified tread and swirls his lance around in order to fight foreign armies, a medium embodies the protective and destructive power of a great imperial warrior. The transformation into a Princess deity with ‘beautiful ivory skin, rosy cheeks, and lips like autumn moons’, as she is praised in poems (Norton 2009: 169), offers yet another experience of embodied existence that may even induce a deep emotional response. Some mediums suddenly feel overwhelmed by sorrow during their enactment of the Third Princess, who is said to have suffered an unjust fate during her human existence. In contrast to Jackson, however, who sees the (mimetic) embodiment of knowledge in initiation rites as a basic means of recreating the existing (social) order, I would like to stress that Four Palace spirit possession instead offers the possibility of change and transformation brought about by ritual learning and practice. In a certain sense, this also applies to the ethnographer. For me, participating in the rituals – i.e. sitting for hours cross-legged and in close bodily contact with other participants in a stuffy temple crammed with people, breathing in the scent of incense and the smoke of cigarettes, joyfully clapping my hands to the rhythmic parts of the music – also meant that I learnt patterns of behaviour that had previously been unfamiliar to my body (see also Desjarlais 1992: 19).

Rituals not only cause changes in the performer, but ritual practice and performance are themselves subject to alteration and adjustment. The European dancing movements that ‘enhanced’ *lên đồng* in the colonial era indicate that Four Palace ritual style has been susceptible to the spirit of the times since its ancient days. To the Western observer, however, this was apparently not quite so obvious. In 1951, the French anthropologist Jeanne Cuisinier participated in a number of *lên đồng* performances and came to the following conclusion:

The dances of the *ba dòng* in Vietnam are hardly ever beautiful […]. Concerning the steps they perform, they are always swift and
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accomplished within a few strides and some leaps on the spot, and accompanied by repetitive movements of the upper part of the body or the head and some monotonous gestures of the arms. (Cuisinier 1951: 122, 124, my translation)

If seen in light of more sophisticated Asian sacred dance forms that require extensive training and skill, this description in fact holds true for most Four Palace spirit enactments even in the contemporary era. More recently, however, there has been a clear tendency toward a heightened aesthetic sense in lêñ dòng ritual. Whereas the dance movements of elderly mediums generally conform to Cuisinier’s depiction, younger mediums often take great care in perfecting the art of ritual performance by prolonging the dance sequences and moving their bodies in a graceful, fluid manner, sometimes even to the point of being criticised for ‘dancing too much’. Moreover, there has been a notable shift in emphasis towards greater individual expression and style. Cường, for example, is eager to perfect his techniques du corps by learning from the more experienced. He says, ‘I also watch many performances of other mediums in order to find out what is interesting and beautiful in their performance. I perform according to my own style, but I also apply some particularly interesting techniques from other mediums to enhance my performance.’ These techniques involve certain footwork such as tripping, gliding and hopping, or movements of the arms, hands and fingers, as well as the mimetic representation of the deities’ characteristic way of acting or their special skills and favourite pastimes during their lifespan on earth (e.g. rowing a boat, embroidering, writing poetry, fighting, etc.). However, the individual style has to stay within the bounds of the permissible, which means that on the one hand the (more or less) generally accepted rules may not be violated, and on the other that a medium always has to conform to the particular rules of his or her master. If, for example, a master regards the throwing of fruits during the enactment of the Little Princess as unseemly, his or her followers may not incorporate this ludic element into their repertoire, even if it is popular with other master mediums.

There are two prominent reasons for the increased importance of beauty in ritual performance. First, a newly revitalised and creatively enhanced ritual aesthetic emerged along with other sensory pleasures in the post-renovation era and fervently defied the ‘cult of frugality’ (Ho Tai 1995: 284) that had prevailed during the centrally-planned period of ‘sensory depression’ (Thomas 2004), when foodstuffs were strictly rationed, colourful fabrics
simply unavailable, and ritual practices severely restricted or even prohibited. The second and even more important reason is to be sought in the anti-superstition stigma imposed upon spirit mediumship by the Party-state. This stigma and the prevailing negative attitude towards spirit mediums in Vietnamese society is perhaps the main reason why modern cultured – i.e. predominately urban – Four Palace mediums no longer want to be associated with ‘nonsensical beliefs and practices’ that involve being possessed by supernatural entities in ways deemed incompatible with a ‘civilised way of life’ (nếp sống văn minh).

Possession or performance?

Let me illustrate the above with a vignette from my fieldwork. In March 2006, I went on a pilgrimage with Master Cảnh and his followers. This time, our destination was Đông Cuông Temple in Yên Bái province, a six- to eight-hour bus ride from Hanoi. When we arrived in the morning, the huge, newly rebuilt concrete temple was literally flooded with music reverberating through the amplifiers of at least five different chầu văn ensembles at an ear-shattering pitch. Spirit mediums from different parts of the North were performing in front of the altars, some flamboyantly bedizened in glistening silk brocades, the poorer ones clad in cheap, mass-produced satin costumes.

While our group was preparing for the ritual of one of Master Cảnh’s followers, I wandered around, watching and videotaping different performers’ ritual styles. Suddenly my attention was grabbed by one particular medium. A small crowd of (mostly female) followers was huddling around a middle-aged woman hosting the Second Lady. With a commanding gesture of her left hand, she summoned one young woman to come to the fore and kneel down next to her. The medium threw an old, holey veil over her follower’s head and ordered her helpers to balance a tray with areca nuts and offerings on top. Teetering on her toes to the rhythm of the music, the possessed woman circled her hands over the offerings in a blessing movement. So far, this was basically the ritual action of trình giầu, which means introducing a follower to the temple deities by balancing a tray of areca nuts on his or her head. When the tray and veil were removed, the medium kneeled down next to her young devotee, hands akimbo. She then poured the contents of a small cup into her mouth, grabbed her follower’s head, and forcefully spat the liquid right into the young woman’s face. After this, she forced her to bow down deeply before
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3.4 Ritual participants grabbing for blessed money bills

...letting her return to her place. One by one, the possessee called her followers forward and repeated the procedure. Some of them received what looked like a stern scolding, but the music rendered her words inaudible. Standing next to me, Master Cảnh was watching the scene with growing disgust. At one point, when the medium was again spraying the face of a follower with a blast of water from her mouth, he shouted out to her, ‘I dearly hope that Lady has brushed her teeth today, lest someone might catch the bird flu!’ I commented, ‘But she seems to have a lot of followers who believe in her abilities.’ Master Cảnh said, ‘These people are very simple-minded (u mê, u muội) and very susceptible to superstition. If I were the custodian here I would throw this woman out of the temple!’

I have been on many pilgrimages with Master Cảnh and his group, and we had similar encounters and conversations on several such occasions (see Endres 2006: 89). The targets of often scathing criticism were usually rural folk who performed the len đồng ritual in ways that Cảnh and his followers deemed as undue with respect to the ‘spirits’ rules’: wildly hopping mediums, mediums whose faces showed the wrong expression for a particular spirit
enactment (e.g. a smiling Mandarin, or a Third Princess with a happy face), mediums who embodied the spirits in the ‘wrong’ succession, or mediums who – like the woman in Đồng Cuông Temple – spat water on their followers or acted in an excessively imperious way. What I learned from these and other occasions was that mediums distinguish between ‘well-behaved and skilful’ performances on the one hand (đồng khôn bóng ngoan), and ‘mad and foolish’ spirit enactments on the other (đồng điên đồng dại). I soon noticed, however, that rural mediums were more often smirked at or viewed as mad by Hanoian mediums than their urban counterparts. The contemporary rural/urban divide thus seems to have resulted in a disdain for the less elaborate and aesthetically stylised lên đồng rituals where the emphasis on possession is stronger than on performance.

Four Palace mediums claim that only a controlled medium is possessed by the spirits (đồng tinh là đồng thánh), whereas an ‘uncontrolled’ or ‘obsessed’ medium is possessed by ghosts (đồng mê là đồng vong). This emic perspective is consistent with the anthropological distinction between spirit mediumship as ‘the legitimate, expected possession of a specialist by a spirit or a deity’ and spirit possession as ‘an unexpected, unwanted intrusion of the supernatural into the lives of humans’ (Claus 1979: 29). In many cultures, the latter actually precedes that former and either calls for an exorcism of the possessing entity or for an initiation that enables the possessed individual to train in the proper rituals in order to master the spirits’ seizure. During a lên đồng, mediums remain aware of their surroundings, although they may not be able to control all of their actions due to the spirits taking possession of their bodies. The spirits’ presence may be felt physically and emotionally by the mediums who describe their sensations in such terms as feeling heavy (especially in the head and/or shoulders), hot-gutted (nóng ruột), sad to the point of tears, out of balance (mất thăng bằng), or as an electric tingling along the spine (see also Norton 2009: 76–78). The nature and intensity of the sensation depends on the deity’s rank and spiritual efficacy: a powerful and imperious deity like Saint Trần, for example, may feel heavier than a prince or a princess spirit. Whatever the physical and emotional sensations experienced during spirit embodiment, mediums generally describe their state of consciousness as lucid and alert (tỉnh, đồng tỉnh).

Only upon very rare occasions does a medium fall into an unconscious, trance-like state (mê, đồng mê). This is because during the ritual embodiment the spirits are not believed to possess or ‘fill’ the body of the medium entirely. ‘When the spirits descend (giáng) they only descend perfunctorily (qua
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loa). It is not that they descend entirely (hoàn toàn). If they were to descend entirely I would be obsessed (mê)' (interview with Hằng, 08.02.2003). If a particular spirit ‘fills’ its host completely and he or she falls into a trance, this state only lasts for a very short period. Hằng, who frequently gets fully possessed by the Third Princess during her ritual performances, describes this state as follows: ‘The moment the Third Princess incarnates in my body (ốp vào) I fall into a trance-like state (đồng mê). I am obsessed, but only for about five minutes . . . then the Princess leaves swiftly and I am alert immediately. It doesn’t mean that I am ignorant (u mê) during the ritual . . . (laughs)’ (ibid.). Hằng’s anxiousness to emphasise the ephemerality of her trance-like state reflects a general tendency among contemporary spirit mediums to distance themselves from a condition (presumed by outsiders) of uncontrolled behaviour associated with ignorance, superstition (or fanaticism) and irrationality. As mentioned above, these attributes are often used to describe, in a condescending manner, rural spirit mediums who do not conform to the present-day urban standards of lên đồng ritual performance. This, I argue, may be read as a strategy of contemporary Hanoi spirit mediums to construct themselves as sophisticated modern and cultured subjects vis-à-vis their rural counterparts.

Two different but interrelated discourses converge at this juncture. Firstly, the revolutionary socialist government adopted a policy aimed at the elimination of so-called retrograde customs and superstitious beliefs because these were seen as instruments of the former ruling class to keep the masses in ignorance (see also Chapter 6). A primer issued in 1968 by the Cultural Service of Ninh Binh explains this as follows:

When the masses still believe in the heavens, spirits, and fate, they will be powerless before natural changes and the difficulties that the old society has left behind. People will not be able to completely be their own masters, the masters of society, nor the masters of the world around them (cited in Malarney 2003: 227).

In a similar line of argument, spirit practitioners (thầy cúng, ông/bà đồng) were exposed as ‘self-interested (trục lợi), unscrupulous extortionists who took advantage of peoples’ concerns for their own personal gain’ (Malarney 2002: 83). Popular belief in the spirits’ power to cure illness and to alleviate misfortune was roundly ridiculed as ‘completely unscientific’ and lacking any ‘basis in reality’ (Norton 2009: 29). In order to build a new socialist society, the Party state formulated its vision of a civilised way of life as one
that rejected irrational beliefs and instead subscribed to rational thinking and scientific reasoning. In a 1975 educational primer on establishing new customs, two cartoons depict lẹn dòng settings with the following captions: ‘How utterly nonsensical a medium is! They abandon their work and spend their money for ridiculous rituals!’ and ‘Inviting each other to a trance ritual – it is lavish and expensive, and brings forth nothing but more worries!’ (Hà Nội Cultural Service 1975: 43).  

Second, and even more significant, is the way that the Vietnamese traditional countryside is depicted (and imagined) in public discourse. While on the one hand the quê hương – the ‘native land’ – is nostalgically associated with ‘birth, childhood, mother love, ancestral lands, family history, village community and a simple rural life’ (Jellema 2007: 73), it has, at times, also been epitomised as ‘the neglected cesspool of oppressive backwardness’ (Nguyen-Vo 2008: 54–55) that holds the country back from progressing towards modernity. Contemporary urban Four Palace mediums thus want to disassociate themselves from the dominant conception of a spirit medium as an uneducated, dim-witted and possibly mad country-bumpkin who adheres to irrational beliefs and superstitious practices. Randall Styers (2004: 4), citing Gustavo Benavides, puts it aptly: ‘A condition of modernity presupposes an act of self-conscious distancing from a past or a situation regarded as naïve.’ At a first glance, this circumstance seems to corroborate Max Weber’s theory.
of disenchantment that saw the trend towards ‘rationalisation’ as an inevitable consequence of the global modernisation process. A closer look, however, reveals an altogether different picture. Rather than showing the first symptoms of modern disenchantment, Four Palace mediumship and ritual practice has creatively taken shape in and reflected on the historical and political context of the time and has both appropriated and challenged hegemonic narratives of (colonial and socialist-nationalist) Vietnamese modernity.

An articulatory space of the alternatively modern

The resurgence of religious and ritual activity in Vietnam as well as in other parts of the world has long disproved the predictions of the secularisation thesis that saw religion as a declining historical force, destined to give way to the light of reason (Hefner 1998, Asad 2003; see also Keyes et al. 1994, Comaroff 1994, Taylor 2004). Over the past decades, Asian societies have encountered a rapid growth of capitalist market economies and other modern secular changes that have had significant impacts on the peoples’ religious lives. The dynamic relationship between religion and economic processes has not only led to religious commodifications (Kitiarsa 2008) but also provides a fertile ground for the blossoming of ‘new forms of religiosity in the context of economic activity and wealth creation itself’ (Roberts 1995). The rise of ‘prosperity religions’ (Jackson 1999, Kitiarsa 2008), ‘amoral cults’ (Weller 1994) and ‘occult economies’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000) indicates that religion in fact offers various possible ways of addressing the unsettling manifestations of modernity’s malcontents (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993, see also Kendall 2003: 39).

In the social sciences, the multifaceted and divergent responses in different parts of the world to the unleashing of the spirits of capitalism have significantly contributed to a critical reflection on the notion of a singular modernity. Instead, there are suggestions of multiple, vernacular, alternative, or ‘other’ modernities (Eisenstadt 2000, Gaonkar 2001a, Meyer and Pels 2003, Knauff 2002a). What these concepts have in common is that they reject the perception of modernity as a uni-directional and homogenising global process. They elevate a culture-specific and localised perspective and hold that ‘modernity always unfolds within a specific cultural or civilizational context and that different starting points for the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes’ (Gaonkar 2001b: 17). Accordingly, ‘modernity is not
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one but many’ (ibid.; see also Eisenstadt 2000). Randeria (2006) even goes a step further and describes this complex picture as ‘disparate and divergent but uneven and entangled modernities’. This pluralisation of modernity not only raises our awareness of different trajectories of modernity in various parts of the world, but also enables us to conceptualise the unevenness of processes of modernisation in different spheres within a given society.

Without repeating the detailed discussions of the indeed complex and problematic implications of ‘modernity’ in social and economic theories given in the above-mentioned references, let me briefly clarify my understanding of the ‘alternatively modern’ in the context of Four Palace mediumship. Following the theoretical lines of Bruce Knauft and D. P. Gaonkar in this respect, the notion of alternative modernities first of all implies the creative adaptation of (old and new) ideas, beliefs, practices, aesthetic forms as well as personal and social identities to the circumstances and challenges of modernity. Creative adaptation does not just mean adjustment, nor does it denote a resistance to or retreat from the inevitable confrontation with modernity and its various repercussions on the moral, social and institutional contexts in which people are embedded. Rather, it implies a selective appropriation and active negotiation of the ‘modern’ vis-à-vis the ‘traditional’ (and vice versa). Along this line of argument, Knauft (2002b: 26) defines the alternatively modern as ‘the articulatory space through which notions of modernity and tradition are co-constructed as progress and history in the context of culture and political economy’.

Four Palace mediumship constitutes such an articulatory space of the alternatively modern because it allows its adherents to both negotiate their tradition and creatively appropriate modern influences. Following Randeria (2006) in this respect, I see this articulatory space as embedded in the hybrid multiplicity of Vietnamese modernities in which different social actors envision and pursue different political and cultural programmes of modernity (Eisenstadt 2000). Accordingly, I conceive of the modernity of Four Palace mediumship not as a Vietnamese alternative to a paradigmatic ‘Western modernity’, but as an arena in which colonial, socialist, and global/neo-liberal trajectories of modernity interact with the realms of religious belief, human creativity and material reality. The spirits have not ceased to exist in the face of the Party’s persistent secularising campaigns, but are instead adapting themselves to the demands and desires of the modern times. Besides appreciating traditional food offerings such as areca nuts and fruits, they have developed a taste for modern consumer goods packaged in colourful boxes or cans. The intensification of market relations has enhanced the belief in the efficacy of
the spirits not only in terms of easing the worshippers’ burdens of fate but also in fostering their economic success. Moreover, the new economy has contributed to the incorporation into the Four Palace pantheon of spirits associated with trade (Larsson and Endres 2006; see also Chauvet 2004). The increased mobility of the populace enables more and more spirit mediums to travel widely within and outside Vietnam and return with new ideas and items for embellishing their temples and rituals. Affluent mediums have gradually replaced their plain spirit costumes with custom-tailored robes of elaborately embroidered silk brocades imported from China and Hong Kong. Authentic ethnic costumes and silver jewellery from the markets of the mountainous borderlands are creatively combined and accord a hybrid, pan-ethnic identity to the deities associated with the palace of mountains and forests. Popular Chinese history TV soaps have had an influence on ritual costumes, and cultural performances broadcast on television may inspire some mediums to imitate the artists’ dance movements. On the other hand, a diminishing emphasis on the healing and divinatory functions of Four Palace mediumship indicates that the belief has to a certain extent become rationalised.

Particularly crucial to the (re)conceptualisation of urban Four Palace mediumship is the increasing aesthetisation of spirit embodiment. This new emphasis on aesthetics – or ‘beauty’– embodies much of the discourse on culture that has emerged in the post-1986 period. This discourse entails a (partial) reassessment of folk or popular culture (văn hóa dân gian) as a repository of a national cultural essence, replete with ‘beautiful traditions’ that need to be fostered and promoted in order to contribute to the progress of national development (see also Chapter 6). Major cultural festivals (e.g. the Festival Huế; see Salemink 2007) and other staged performances of cultural identity orchestrate ‘traditional culture’ as a primarily aesthetic category of practice, and urban Four Palace mediums draw on this aesthetisation in order to construct their ritual practice as a highly cultured form of religious (or spiritual) expression that adheres to modern standards of civility, hygiene and bodily control. At the same time, and this is crucial, the performative aesthetic of lên đồng has emerged as a major marker of a medium’s ‘sincere heart’ and religious devotion.

The aesthetics of efficacy

On a sunlit afternoon in November 2003, I crouch cross-legged in the cramped space of Master Cạnh’s shrine, squeezed in next to his mother and mother-in-
Performing the Divine law, enthusiastically clapping my hands to the beat of the Little Lady’s song. The deity is incarnated in the diminutive body of octogenarian cụ Dân, who has been a medium for over forty years. Despite her grand old age, she moves with graceful ease and obviously enjoys her performance just as much as everyone else. Some of the ritual participants shout out ‘Châu đẹp quá! – Lady, you are so beautiful!’, and the old ladies next to me look at each other and nod approvingly: ‘Cụ Dân hâu đẹp! – Old lady Dân serves [the spirits] beautifully!’ When the assistants supply her with a bundle of 500 Đồng notes for each hand, the atmosphere gets even more boisterous. Cụ Dân continues dancing with the fanned-out bills in her hand, skilfully interacting with the audience as she gets ready to throw the bundles into the crowd. While some participants continue clapping, others try to catch the Lady’s attention, stretching out their arms in anticipation of the spiritually charged bills, shouting: ‘Lạy Châu! Châu ban lộc cho con! – Praise you, Lady! Bestow your favours upon us!’ But the capricious Little Lady seems to take pleasure in teasing her admirers, turns swiftly – and flings the bills in my neighbours’

Figure 3.6 Young woman asking the Seventh Prince, incarnated in cụ Dân, for divine favours
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direction instead. In the next round, she makes sure that everyone present grabs their share. Then she stops dancing, bows politely towards the altar, and sits down again. The ritual continues for about three hours, but I hardly notice my stiffening legs and back.9

This narrative vignette extracted from my fieldnotes conspicuously resembles the scene described at the outset of this chapter – and, for that matter, many other ritual sequences I encountered as a participant of innumerable:len đồng performances. Yet the similarities are only superficial. Both Chính, the novice, and cụ Dân embody the Little Lady whose dance is particularly lively, and the ritual participants frequently praise the female deities for their beauty. In Chính’s performance, however, the exalted praise of the Little Lady’s splendour – which is also celebrated in her song – was more likely directed at the embodied deity’s outward appearance than at the rather graceless performance of the novice medium. This is not to say that the sumptuous aesthetics of Four Palace mediumship – including a deity’s beautiful attire – is seen as an irrelevant aspect of the:len đồng. Affluent mediums in fact spend large sums of money on spirit costumes and accessories, and it may take up to ten minutes for the ritual assistants to dress the deity and affix all the glittering trinkets. According to Lòng, one of the ritual assistants mentioned above, the reason why beauty is important is because all the deities are beautiful. Since the Four palace pantheon consists of noble and high-ranking spiritual beings such as imperial bureaucrats, queenly ladies, princes and princesses, Lòng says, a:len đồng likewise constitutes an ‘imperial stage/arena’ (hậu thành là sân khấu cung đình) where the style (phong cách) of the deities is re-enacted. But even more importantly, beauty is a crucial criterion used by Four Palace devotees to appraise the success of a ritual. Lòng puts it this way: ‘You have to perform beautifully (hầu đẹp) for the spirits, otherwise you will never receive any divine favours (lộc) and the spirits will not pay attention to you (thánh không để tâm).’

What, then, constitutes the beauty of a ritual performance? The determining factors are indeed neither to be found in the sumptuousness of the ritual, nor in the artistic and technical skills of a medium alone. For Master Cảnh, it is the ‘true heart’ of the performing medium that accounts for the beauty of ritual enactment:

Some people perform beautifully, in a fresh and pleasant way; their faces differ completely from their everyday appearance. But a performance can also be very dull, you watch a while and you feel
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depressed, the person performing may even suddenly look like a ghost, boring and ugly. It is difficult [to explain], but all of these issues revolve around the person’s heart (tâm). It is not a matter of putting on a luxurious performance with lots of offerings for distribution. Some people may be very poor and have a very difficult life but their performances are nevertheless beautiful. This is because they are very true-hearted (thật tâm) and sincere mediums (thật đồng). (Interview 02.11.2003)

In a similar vein, the young assistant Lâm argues, ‘When my heart and mind are directed towards [spiritual] pureness (sự trong sách), then the spirits will pay attention; if not, the medium will perform very ugly, like a madperson’ (Interview with Lâm, 25.2.2006). Hằng, who had been a medium for over ten years when I first met her in 2001, related her personal experience during the ritual dance sequences as follows:

For example, like during the embodiment of the Holy Ladies, I dance like . . . let me put it in simple words, many women learn the different movements, they learn outside [the ritual context] by watching [taped performances] in order to learn, but in the moment of their ritual, in that moment they forget everything, the more they learn the more they forget. It just happens . . . for instance when I am whole-hearted, the spirits will let me dance beautifully (ngài sẽ cho múa đẹp). (Interview with Hằng, 08.02.2003)

Cuống elaborates further on the close relationship between the beauty of the ritual enactment and the medium’s whole-heartedness by introducing the concept of the ‘heart-soul’ (tâm hồn) and adding that his movements need the ritual setting in order to be truly meaningful:

Serving the spirits (hầu thánh) is a matter of the heart-soul. [In the moment of the ritual] my heart-soul does no longer pay attention to the world around me, for example to the comings and goings or the conversations of the ritual participants – in that moment I only think about the [ritual] work (lúc ấy mình chỉ biết làm việc) and only look towards the altar. [. . .] The ritual is considered as beautiful when all the participants enjoy watching, because the medium puts [his or her] whole heart-soul into it. When I put my whole heart-soul into performing, then it looks gentle, composed and beautiful. The movements of the legs and arms are flowing (liướt), light (nhẹ nhàng) and look totally different from my movements outside the ritual context. It is only during the ritual that
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I incorporate this inspiration (có cái cảm hứng nó nhập vào mình), and therefore no ritual resembles another. (Interview 30.10.2002)

In essence, then, it is the ‘ritual commitment’ (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) of the spirit medium that distinguishes a len đồng from a theatrical performance. This commitment must not be understood in the sense of an active role-taking in which an actor or agent wilfully and reflexively impersonates a certain (divine) character in order to make it come into presence. Lienhardt (1961: 151) has used the Latin concept of passio/passiones to indicate ‘an opposite of “actions” in relation to the human self’, a perception of the self as being acted upon rather than acting (see also Kramer 1993: 58–59). Burkhard Schnepel, in his work on the Danto Nato, an East Indian ritual theatre, builds on this concept and draws attention to the dialectic interplay of actiones and passiones, or agency and patiency, in order to understand the ritual experience from an emic perspective (Schnepel 2009; 2008). In the self-conception of the dandua, the ritual dancers in the Dato Nando, the divine powers take possession of their worshippers, thus becoming their passiones and teaching them lessons: ‘Rather than a medium through which something is expressed, the body of the devotee is a medium that is acted upon and through which something is impressed upon the patient’ (Schnepel 2008: 126; my translation). Yet this submission does not mean that creativity is ruled out. According to Schnepel, it is just not part of the dancers’ self-conception. In the Dato Nando, creativity and empathy can only be achieved after the devotees have given up their individual intention and agency. The experience of patiency, or passio, is thus a necessary precondition, not a restraint, for the emergence of agency.

Schnepel’s approach is useful and valid also for exploring the meaning of whole-heartedness and ritual commitment in Four Palace mediumship. The right flow of movements can only be achieved when the medium adopts a stance of patiency and wholeheartedly submits him- or herself to the spirits’ guidance. Or, more true to the Vietnamese phrasing, it is this total submission (or devotion) that causes the spirits to ‘pay attention’ (để tâm) to the medium’s whole heart and lets him or her perform in a beautiful way, no matter how bent their backs and how wrinkled their faces may be. An indication that a medium has reached this state of total involvement, a condition coined as ‘flow’ by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and taken up by Turner (1987), is when his or her face changes during the spirit enactment. Cường enthusiastically commented on the photos I took during one of his performances, ‘If my face changes [like that] when I serve the spirits it means . . . [my performance]
is efficacious (linh), heartfelt (cô tâm), it means the spirits’ presence makes it beautiful (ngài chứng cho đẹp).’ The perceptible presence of the spirits, captured and made visible by modern technology, thus lends the ritual performance an important aesthetic quality that can only be achieved by the true devotion of a whole-hearted performer.

The importance of beauty as an aesthetic category in relation to the divine is by no means unique to Four Palace mediumship. Although its status has been described as problematic, in particular with reference to Christian traditions, many religions – as well as theologians, religious scholars and philosophers – have considered beauty as an intrinsic aspect of the divine as well as an essential way of engaging with divinity (see Martin 1990, Farley 2001). Brown (1990: 1) states that ‘even at their most ascetic [...], the worlds and ways of religion generally have a side that is distinctly aesthetic, if not always

![Figure 3.7 'Performing beautifully': The Third Princess incarnated in a female medium](image)
artistic’. Much of this aesthetic is in fact found in the arts. For the theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw,

The dance reflects the movement of God, which also moves us here on earth. The drama presupposes the holy play between God and man. Verbal art is the hymn of praise in which the Eternal and its works are represented. Architecture reveals to us the lines of the well-built city of God’s creation. Music is the echo of the eternal Gloria. (Cited in Martin 1990: 87–88)

From Gell’s venturesome anthropological theory of art point of view, a spirit medium providing a divinity with a temporary body is to be treated as theoretically on a par with ‘an idol in a temple believed to be the body of the divinity’, and hence as an art object in the wider sense (Gell 1998: 7). With regard to the relationship between aesthetics and ritual performance, Bruce Kapferer (2005: 129) argues that ‘the efficacy of much ritual is founded in its aesthetics’. His work on Sinhalese exorcism and healing rites in fact reveals that ritual aesthetics actively contributes to the creative construction and transformation of human reality and thus needs to be attributed with an agency of its own. Erika Fischer-Lichte, a professor of theatre science, states that in the arts, the aesthetics of the performative ‘concerns itself with the appearances of people and things, not with illusion; it concerns itself with the ephemerality of their appearance and not with life’s transience’ (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 205; emphasis added). In a similar vein, Schieffelin (1998: 203) argues that, in the case of Kaluli spirit séances in Papua New Guinea, the issue at stake during a ritual performance ‘is not performative illusion but the exact opposite: it is the presence of spirits’. For the Kaluli, a séance has worked (i.e. is considered as successful) if the presence of the soul(s) or spirit(s) has been convincingly evoked.

With regard to the Vietnamese lệnh đồng, I argue that ritual aesthetics is not just about a skilful and accurate mimetic representation of the Four Palace deities, but, to an essential degree, about making them actually appear for however fugitive a moment. This is achieved when the medium reaches a state of acting with total involvement; a state of ‘forgetting one’s self’ that allows the beauty of divine presence to manifest itself in the medium’s body and inscribe his or her heart. In other words, if ‘flow’ is achieved when the Four Palace deities mount the medium (which is the literal meaning of lệnh đồng), then the performance is deemed as beautiful and efficacious. The divine embodiment thus not only transcends the devotees’ experience of their everyday selves,
but also contributes to the reflection on and transformation of their human realities by creating a different sense of being-in-the-world (see also Köpping et al. 2006).

On the other hand, the increasing post-dối mới aesthetisation of lên đồng ritual practice has opened up spaces for individual interpretations and creative innovations that are subject to much contestation and debate over which ritual practices and whose ritual style are deemed as appropriate, eccentric, or unacceptable. Some of the key issues in this regard shall be discussed in the next chapter. They are not altogether new, but seem to resume the debates over the ritual ostentation, all-too-gaudy modern flashiness, materialism and immorality of the late colonial period.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Philip Taylor for pointing this implication out to me.

2 Fictionalised reportage, or documentary fiction (phóng sự tiểu thuyết), was a genre of realist literature (văn chương tả chân) that aimed at exposing the ills and evils of colonial society. Schafer (1997) notes that phóng means to magnify or blow up, which entails that the writer may have blown up the actual situation in order to achieve satirical effects.

3 Several scholars have noted the parallels between spirit possession and theatre. Michel Leiris (1958), in his work on the zâr cult in Gondar, Ethiopia, emphasises the theatrical aspects of spirit possession and coins the term ‘lived theatre’ (théâtre vécu), as opposed to ‘acted theatre’ (théâtre joué), to indicate that spirit possession blurs the boundaries between theatrical performance and reality. Raymond Firth (1967) explores the relationship between ritual and drama in Malay spirit mediumship and concludes that a ritual performance indeed contains many elements of a dramatic spectacle. Erika Bourguignon (1976: 52) even argues, ‘Because it is a playing of roles before an audience, possession trance is indeed the prototype of theatre.’

4 See also Taussig 1993, using a slightly different translation.

5 Marcel Mauss (1934) defined techniques du corps as ‘les façons dont les hommes, société par société, d’une façon traditionnelle, savent se servir de leurs corps’.

6 The term tinh connotes an alert/aware state of consciousness, while mê means both ‘to be mad/crazy about something’ and ‘to lose consciousness’.

7 Rouget (1985 [1980]: 44–45) points out that during the renaissance a distinction was made between the state of obsession and that of possession. In the case of obsession, an individual was merely besieged or troubled by a spiritual entity,
whereas possession signified that the spirit (or demon/devil) actually inhabited the victim’s body.

8 This attitude towards popular religious practices is in no way unique to socialist countries in general, or to Vietnam in particular. In Korea, a similar ‘contestation between rational science on the one hand, and charlatantry and peasant credulity on the other’ (Kendall 2001: 26) had for a long time targeted shamanic rituals and other folk healing rites and practices.

9 Of the many lên đồng rituals I have witnessed, Cụ Dân’s performance has impressed and moved me most deeply, and I feel privileged to have met her. A few months after her ritual described above, her health started to weaken until she passed away in October 2004.

10 In my interview transcripts, this expression is sometimes rendered as ‘để tâm’ and sometimes as ‘đề tâm’. The tonal difference, indicated by different diacritical marks, affects the meaning of the two expressions slightly, but significantly. The compound word để tâm carries both the connotation of để ý, ‘to pay attention’, as well as ‘to place in one’s heart’. The term đề, on the other hand, means (among other things) ‘to see, to make evident’ and ‘to inscribe’ (see Gouin 2002). Accordingly, Norton (2009: 77) chose to render the expression as ‘inscribing the heart’, i.e. in the sense that the deities inscribe the heart of the performing medium. From the semantic contexts in which my interlocutors used the term, however, I conclude that rendering it as ‘paying attention’, in the sense that the deities acknowledge the medium’s devotion by bestowing their favours, is more to the point.
Over time, in the course of my research, my perception of lèn đồng spirit possession became more acute. I started to notice even the smallest ritual mistake and developed a keen sense of ritual style and aesthetics. My presence at numerous lèn đồng rituals – often explicitly invited to document the event by either photo or video – had a snowball effect, and I soon had more invitations to lèn đồng performances than my schedule allowed. At the same time, I felt that participating in even more rituals would not necessarily generate any new significant insights. I admit that I also became quite particular: the inept performances of inexperienced or novice mediums no longer enticed me to contort my body into a cross-legged position for several hours. But even the proficient performances of the master mediums I knew had become routine for me to watch and thus rather uninspiring. In short, I was looking for new thrills, for an exceptional performance in whatever regard. When I asked Lòng, the assistant, whether he knew of any mediums whose performances were noteworthy and out of the ordinary, he said, ‘Yes, I know someone whose style of serving the spirits is completely different – Master Tùng from near the Pomelo Market in Hanoi.’ That year, Master Tùng would perform by invitation of the Phú Giây temple management on the occasion of the grand annual festival. As I was planning to visit the festival anyway, this was my chance.

Phù Giây is a temple complex dedicated to the worship of Princess Liễu Hạnh and her subordinates in the Four Palace pantheon. Located in her homeland in Vũ Bàn district of Nam Định province, it consists of seventeen religious structures scattered over different small hamlets. Every year from the first to the tenth of the third lunar month a festival is held to commemorate the death
anniversary of the goddess. After nearly forty years of severe restrictions, the festival was officially permitted to be held again in 1998. Since then it has become a tremendous attraction for tens of thousands of visitors and pilgrims, and most specifically for Four Palace devotees. During the main festival days, the whole area is in a frenzy. Spirit mediums dressed in full garb carry trays loaded with offerings on their heads and into the jam-packed temples. Meanwhile, vendors erect makeshift stalls along the dirt roads connecting the hamlets, offering spirit costumes, props and other possession paraphernalia, as well as chầu văn music CDs and VCDs of taped performances. Amateur ritual associations (đoàn tế lễ) from different locations gather in the temple yards and perform rehearsed dances reminiscent of possession trances. Processions organised by the festival committee escort the statues of Princess Liễu Hạnh from her main temples to the pagodas in order to seek the Buddha’s blessings (thỉnh kinh). On the fifth day of the festival, the procession takes place at nightfall. The flickering flames of hundreds of torches illuminate the dark and lead the way for the worshippers. The torches are lit from the flame of the Little Princess performed into being by a specially invited medium in the main temple of the Phủ Giầy complex.¹ In the year 2006, this medium was Master Tùng.

Master Tùng arrived in the afternoon, together with a small group of followers and friends. Then in his mid-30s, he was an unpretentious and modest man who did not display the same effeminate habitus as most male mediums I had met so far. Instead of the long, white tunic and loose trousers normally used by spirit mediums to wear underneath their spirit costumes, he was dressed in a short-sleeved black T-shirt and matching sweat pants. When his performance started, I was captivated from the very beginning. His spirit incarnations were using large, fanned-out bundles of incense to create enormous flames which he waved through the air in a slow, sweeping motion. The male spirits let out sharp imperious cries, forcefully stomping their legs and raising the flame over their heads. The ladies and princesses – of whom he performed only three – were the most imaginative attempt at creating an indigenous look of the Vietnamese mountainous spirits I had ever seen in a lên đồng. Dressed in a long skirt accented by a waist sash that held a dagger and a bamboo basket (and no blouse to cover the T-shirt), her head covered with a loosely folded black scarf and adorned with a fresh flower behind her ears, the Little Princess danced in her bare feet, waving a sandalwood fan and a long stem of white orchids with large, expressive movements toward the altar and the ritual participants. Master Tùng’s spirit enactment was as
differ from the average lèn đồng performance as modern expressionist dance is from classical ballet. However, for Master Tùng the issue at stake was not innovation versus tradition, or individual expression versus standardised conformity. In my subsequent interviews with the aberrant master it turned out that the point at issue was what he considered as authentic spirit possession and proper ritual conduct.

**Ceremonial Costumes and Accessories**

Rather than in the dances of the Vietnamese bà đồng, the French anthropologist Jeanne Cuisinier found aesthetic value in the spirit mediums’ costumes. 'A sparkle of beauty appears, in every case, in the clothes: the bà đồng possess a sumptuous wardrobe and jewellery of high value; during a séance she changes many times her tunics and turbans that are often enriched with precious stones' (Cuisinier 1951: 123, my translation, diacritics added). Other authors from the French colonial period confirm this observation.
In one of his fictional reportages, Nhất Lang writes about a trip to the Phú Giây festival. The train from Hanoi was so crowded that even though more carriages were added people still did not have enough seats. At the festival, his guide ‘brother’ (anh) K. pulled the author into one of the temples dedicated to the Mother Goddess. Nhất Lang describes the scene as follows:

All the ‘children of the spirits’ (con cái nhà thánh) were dancing around and around, gracefully like fairies who had descended upon the earth. All the rich ladies with lots of money and silver were displaying their expensive ceremonial scarves and stately robes (các khăn chầu áo ngự) embroidered with dragons and phoenixes. [...] One spirit sequence followed the next. Robes and scarves as well, they constantly changed into something new. (Nhất Lang 1952: 39)

Meanwhile, the less affluent rural spirit mediums were ‘serving the shadows’ as well, but they were timidly holding their performances on the lower mats. As they were neither whirling around as much nor dressed as elegantly as the Hanoian ‘spirit ladies’, Nhất Lang jeers, ‘The spirits must realise that they are humans!’ Suddenly, one of the rural spirit mediums accidentally encroached upon a rich lady’s space. The rich lady got furious and spat a mouthful of water into the rural woman’s face. ‘Brother’ K. hastily explained to the author, ‘The spirits are jealous of their ranks, brother! The spirits also must have a hierarchical order and differentiate between rich and poor!’ (ibid.: 40).

Under socialism, this differentiation between rich and poor was to be eliminated. Master Tuyết, an octogenarian female master medium who received her initiation during the state-subsidised period (thời bao cấp), reminisces:

In the past, it was so difficult to perform a ritual. Robes were not readily available – I only had one single robe for all the spirits! The fabric could be found in shops on Hàng Ngang or Hàng Dào Street, but I had to be careful because trading was illegal. I would whisper to the shopkeeper what I wanted, and the bargain took place out of sight under the staircase. Later, I was able to buy another robe, so I had one for the Lady spirits and one for the Mandarin spirits. When I went to a temple to perform a ritual, I placed the robes on the bottom of a basket and pretended to be a vegetable seller by putting veggies on top. [...] We had to perform the rituals without music (hậu vo), and nobody dared clap their hands during the dances of the female spirits. [...] The movements were the
same as nowadays, only the ritual would not take longer than an hour as there was no music, and we could not change robes and distribute a lot of offerings as blessed gifts. When Nguyễn Văn Linh became General Secretary in 1986, things got better and I started to buy lots of scarves and robes for lên đồng! (Interview 20.01.2004)

Master Nga, who is approximately the same age as Master Tuyết, felt privileged to possess four different robes, one for each palace: red for the spirits associated with the heavenly palace (thiên phủ), green for the palace of mountains and forests (nhạc phủ), white for the water palace (thủy phủ) and yellow for the earth palace (địa phủ):

My husband had bought me four robes, one for each palace, from the Great Mandarins down to the Princesses and Boy Attendants. So, the Second Lady would wear the robe of the Second Mandarin, the Third Lady that of the Third Mandarin, the Tenth Lady that of the Fourth Mandarin, and so on.
Mandarin and the Little Lady would again wear the robe of the Second Mandarin. Only four robes (bốn quả áo) put on alternately, it didn’t matter, what costumes did we have? There were no costumes and fabrics such as satin and silk at all. And if there were, what money did we have to buy them? But [after the market reforms had been introduced] everything was available, the kind and the amount you wanted. Then I bought the fabric and tailored all the costumes myself. I made a skirt for the Second Lady and robes for the princesses. The Third Princess would still wear the Third Mandarin’s costume, but for the Ninth Princess I made a pink dress. In those days I only had few robes. (Interview 20.02.2006)

In contrast, Master Cảnh thinks that in present-day Vietnam it is mandatory for Four Palace mediums to conduct their rituals properly – and this implies a full set of ritual costumes. Serving the spirits with only one robe, he says, would nowadays be unacceptable:

The old ladies say that in former times they made one robe and went to serve the deities. That was in former times . . . but today you can’t just have one red robe and then go and serve all of the deities with the excuse of being heavily destined, this is not right! (Interview 24.03.2005)

Accordingly, a medium in contemporary Hanoi possesses up to twenty different brocade tunics, wrap-around skirts and blouses, as well as various headdresses (ready-to-wear turbans called khăn xếp, embroidered ribbons and headscarves) and a range of trinkets and jewellery (large clip-on earrings, silver bracelets, necklaces, brooches, flowery pins). Master mediums (and many experienced ‘amateur’ mediums) even possess several sets of spirit costumes for different occasions such as performing initiations, regular lên đồng rituals at their private temples, and lên đồng performances during pilgrimages. The female deities associated with the palace of mountains and forests represent different ethnic minorities and usually wear an eclectic mix of ethnic costumes, whereas the other deities are clothed in more or less exquisitely embroidered tunics, depending on their rank in the palace hierarchy. If we compare old photographs of lên đồng rituals (Durand 1959) with present-day performances given by affluent urban mediums, it becomes apparent that spirit costumes are also subject to changing fashion trends. The velvety collars studded with sequins for the female spirits and the beaded ribbons crossed over the male deities’ chests, for example, are rarely used in contemporary Hanoi (except by elderly mediums), while they still enjoy popularity with rural spirit mediums. In recent years, hand-woven headscarves from various ethnic minorities have
come into vogue, folded into ornate turbans by the ritual assistants during the dressing sequence. According to several spirit mediums they have been modelled on the headdresses of the female aristocracy in Chinese history TV soaps and Kung Fu movies. Huynh, a distinguished chầu văn musician, finds these new fashionable trends somewhat overstated:

A lot of influence comes from China, from watching Kung Fu movies. Then they want a headdress like that, they try it out, and others just follow suit. In former times, you would wrap a flower-patterned [triangular] scarf around [the Princess deity’s] head and knot it at the nape of the neck, that’s all. Nowadays you have to stick a comb here, apply a flower there, a silver bracelet there, all these things and so many of them. For what! It makes them actually look a bit too artificial. (Interview 20.06.2006)

Likewise imported from China and Hong Kong are the heavy silk brocades embroidered with phoenixes and dragons from which wealthy Four Palace mediums have their Great Mandarin and Princes costumes tailored. Whereas many leading master mediums are proud to possess several sets of these tunics, Master Tùng regards them as unacceptable because they are not consistent with tradition:

The tradition has been hybridised (lai tập) by influences from the chèo theatre and tuồng opera, as well as from international movies. In the old days, embroidered tunics would at the most have been used as offerings, but never as costumes for the ritual. The Mandarin deities would at best wear a tunic patterned with the Chinese characters for longevity, but usually just a simple, single-coloured silk tunic. Robes embroidered with dragons and phoenixes were only allowed to be worn by the emperor and the highest dignitaries, they could therefore not be used in a lên đồng ritual. (Interview 04.04.2006)

As mentioned above, Master Tùng distinguishes himself from the mainstream Four Palace mediums not only through his performative style, but also through the choice of his ritual costumes. In his lên đồng performances he enacts the deities according to his own conception of authenticity and traditionality. The deities of the mountains and forests, for example, walk on their bare feet during the ritual (other mediums wear white socks or satin slippers), their heads covered with a loosely draped scarf. Whereas the hybrid costume combinations of Four Palace mediums are usually chosen for their aesthetics rather than their authenticity, Master Tùng argues that the ritual robes have
to relate to the (in fact rather ambiguous) ethnic affiliation of the embodied deity. Huynh, in contrast, does not so much worry about authenticity than about the spiritual side of lên đồng, which he feels has diminished with the growing importance of aesthetic aspects. He criticises, 'Nowadays the people are more concerned with beautification than with spirituality (tâm linh), they take pleasure in presenting the most beautiful, the newest and latest imports into the world of mediumship.'

For some mediums, beautification also entails the use of facial make-up. Whereas nobody would criticise a female medium for applying a bit of powder and lipstick, it may elicit negative attitudes if a male medium makes up his face. Master Cảnh is particularly critical of male mediums who overtly display mannerisms that he describes as effeminate (eỏ lả) and affected (diệu), and regards make-up as unnecessary:

If someone tells me I should apply make-up in order to look more beautiful . . . I say I don’t need that. Many male mediums put on powder and lipstick; they paint their eyes and their lips to be more pretty. There is really no need for this, and besides, I do not have that root, oh my, what a horror (sợ bỏ cha ra)! (Interview 25.03.2005)
In recent years, Four Palace mediumship has certainly become a very accommodating arena for đồng cô – that is, for highly androgynous male mediums with the root of a female deity (discussed in detail in the next chapter). This is also what Master Cảnh refers to when he says, ‘I do not have that root.’ While not all đồng cô explicitly identify themselves as cross-dressers, mediumship in fact provides a rare environment where males may openly transgress the boundaries of gender. The extent to which these possibilities may be realised, however – e.g. whether it is appropriate if male mediums represent the female deities wearing padded bras, false eyelashes and thick layers of make-up – are a contested subject in the Four Palace world.

**Contested order and changing spirit conceptualisation**

Another contested issue relates to the order in which the spirits appear during a lên đồng ritual. This order is marked by regional as well as individually defined differences. In Hanoi, the deities usually possess their hosts according to their hierarchy in the palace: Great Mandarins, Ladies, Princes, Princesses, and Boy Attendants. Within these categories, the succession is likewise prescribed according to the deities’ names (e.g. First Lady, Second Lady, Third Lady etc.). But because the Four Palace pantheon is to some degree open to new additions, disagreements often arise over the question of which rank in the existing hierarchy (and thus what place in the succession of spirits) the newcomers should be assigned. One of these recent additions to the pantheon is the Second Princess Cam Đường (Cô Đôi Cam Đường). Master Cảnh once related a lengthy discussion about the issue of whether Cô Cam Đường should possess the medium before the Third Princess or after the Little Princess, i.e. at the end of the Princesses’ sequence. In contrast, octogenarian Master Tuyết advocates that Princess Cam Đường should not be included at all in the Four Palace pantheon:

I’m telling you, Princess Cam Đường is not part of the pantheon. The pantheon comprises [twelve Holy Princesses], but not Princess Cam Đường. So this is why I follow [the teachings of] my old master and serve [the spirits] correctly. But nowadays the young people (thanh niên) have changed many things. […] Mainly mediums who trade in cloth enact [Princess Cam Đường], as she used to trade in silk. She died during a sacred hour (giờ thiêng) and was thus deified (hiển thánh), but she does not belong to the spirits’ pantheon! (Interview 28.01.2004)
Master Tuyết’s renderings confirm that the assembly of spirits embodied during a lén dòng ritual is essentially open to accommodate new additions. But she also mentions another important point, namely that mediums always have to follow the rules of their master, even if at one point or other they may reach the conviction that performing them in another order actually makes more sense. An important regional difference is that spirit mediums from Hải Phòng first embody three female deities known as Tam Tòa Chúa Bói (Three Lady Diviners) and then the Great Mandarin. Master Ngọc, however, follows yet another rule in the succession of spirits. The 75-year-old temple master in Hanoi’s old quarter has initiated plenty of devotees into the ritual practice, but says that nowadays she does not get many new followers. According to her, this is because destined mediums nowadays tend to look for a ‘modern’, and preferably male, master. Master Ngọc deviates from the general norm insofar as she embodies the Princes right after the Great Mandarin, followed by the Ladies and Princesses. As becomes clear in her renderings, she regards – just like other mediums – her order of spirits as the only correct one and claims that the contemporary practice is a recent innovation:

[This order] is the only correct one. In former times (ngày xưa) this order was the rule, in this I only follow the custom of the ancestors. [...] Many people say this is not correct, it is upside down (lộn ngược), but I think every man, every woman, every person has his or her own style, nobody is alike (không ai giống ai). And nobody can ban a temple medium (thủ nhang đồng đền) like me from performing the deities in this order. (Interview 09.05.2006)

This statement, however, was confirmed neither by any other medium of Master Ngọc’s generation nor by written sources dating from the French colonial period. Strangely enough, Maurice Durand (1959: 13, footnote 3) specifies the order as follows: First, the Princesses (Cô), followed by the Young Princes (Cậu), the Great Mandarin (Quan Lớn), the Princes (Hoàng), and, at last, the ‘Mothers’, that is the Holy Ladies (Chầu). This order is also reflected in the series of photographs in his richly illustrated book. However, it is hard to imagine that in a strictly hierarchical society like the Vietnamese the lowest ranking group of spirits would be venerated before the higher ranking ones. As Durand’s findings on the actual ritual practice basically rely on the observation of one particular bà đồng, we may conclude that Four Palace mediumship had always allowed its adherents the flexibility to set their own rules. Master Ngọc mentions a crucial point here: that ‘nobody is alike’ (không
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ai giống ai), which means that Four Palace mediums (like all human beings) not only have their individual personalities, but also develop their own style in ritual performance. The question is, how much individuality is allowed to flourish and how much rule-conformity is needed in order for a Four Palace medium to be still regarded as such?

As mentioned above, Master Tùng’s ritual enactment departs from the norm in many ways. As an example I would like to highlight the Seventh Prince of Bảo Hà (Ông Hoàng Bảy Bảo Hà). According to the legend he was a Mandarin (Quan) who defended the northern border regions of Lào Cai-Yen Bái (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2006). In the Four Palace pantheon, however, he is assigned to the ranks of the Princes (Ông Hoàng). Master Tùng, in contrast, not only sees the Seventh Prince as belonging to the Great Mandarins, but also conflates him with the Mandarin Điều Thất who, according to Master Tùng, was transferred for disciplinary reasons from the Red River Delta region to command the imperial troops in the northern border region because of his opium addiction. This addiction is generally seen as a characterizing habit of the Seventh Prince, and spirit mediums represent it by smoking cigarillos or thin dark cigarettes of the brand More instead of normal cigarettes.7 The Seventh Prince embodied by Master Tùng is a man heavily affected by his opium use, whose crooked body – weakened by his addiction and suffering from excruciating pain – can barely stay upright. After a short dance sequence with the flaming incense bundle he sprawls down on the floor and rests his elbow on the arm pillow. His face contorted into a painful grimace, he reaches out with shaking hands to accept the cigarillos (representing the opium) offered and lit by the assistant and starts inhaling greedily, smoking them all at once. Instead of the blue brocade tunic normally used in lên đồng Master Tùng’s incarnation of the Seventh Prince wears the dress of the ethnic Nùng because ‘he had to adapt his dress to the custom of the people he was living among in the border region’. His exceptional interpretation of the Four Palace deities usually evokes mixed comments in public space, ranging from ‘passionate’ (say sứa), ‘really like a minority person’ (giống thổ thật), ‘not conforming to the rules’ (không đúng phép) to ‘disrespectful’ (không lịch sự). Thầy Chính, a renowned and highly regarded spirit priest (thầy cúng) in the mediums’ world, comments on the drugged enactment of the Seventh Prince as follows:

No deity suffers that much! During the Lý Dynasty, which was the time of the Seventh Prince, opium was still unavailable in Vietnam; it
was imported from China at a later time. The habit of presenting the Seventh Prince with opium [as an offering] has been borrowed from the custom of the ethnic minorities in the Bảo Hà region who didn’t have any offerings for the Prince but opium. In a lên đồng the people just represent the deities as they imagine them to be. There are no written records, no laws – only the imagination. (Interview 19.05.2006)

For Master Cảnh, the issue is not opium smoking per se, but the conception of the Seventh Prince as an opium addict, which he regards as misleading:

The song of the Seventh Prince mentions Chinese tea and opium. This is why everyone thinks he was addicted. But this is not true. The ‘addiction’ of the aristocracy in former times was just a happy pastime, not different from the present habit of smoking cigarettes and drinking tea. It was not regarded as something bad at all, it cannot be compared to [the addiction of] these youngster heroin addicts in our time. Nowadays people think that the Seventh Prince had been an addict so this is why he has to act as listless as a junkie (như cái thằng phê) during the ritual. But this means bringing too much of worldly affairs (việc đời) [into the conception of spirits]. (Interview 24.03.2005)

Accordingly, it would also be utterly wrong to ascribe heroin addiction to the spirit root (căn) of the Seventh Prince. Another distinctive characteristic associated with the Seventh Prince is his penchant for gambling. This is in fact an important reason why he has become tremendously popular with Four Palace devotees in the wake of the new economy. Risky business ventures, speculative land deals and illegal games of chance are all perceived to be within the Prince’s scope of power or efficacy. It is his incarnation during a lên đồng that draws the largest number of ritual participants to come forward and ‘ask for the deity’s blessed favours’ (xin lộc thánh). Responding to these requests, the Prince would give out crumpled banknotes whose serial numbers (or the last two digits) would then be played in the weekly (illegal) lottery (chơi số đề) that bets on the last two numbers of the first prize in the national lottery. According to Master Cảnh, the perceived efficacy of the Seventh Prince in maximizing the chances of notorious gamblers is just a popular interpretation – and a new one at that. While it is, for lack of data, difficult to assess to what extent the conceptualisation of the Four Palace deities has really changed since the introduction of the market reforms, it is evident that quite a few spirits are specialising (directly or indirectly) in business affairs and wealth accumulation. The Third Mandarin is particularly popular with businesspeople, the Little Princess and Princess Cam Đương...
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(through a cloth vendor) are perceived to help petty traders earn good profits and avoid getting caught smuggling goods across the Chinese border, the Seventh Prince is said to bring luck in gambling, and the Tenth Prince is said to bestow talent and knowledge (which is why he is approached for requests concerning the passing of exams etc.). However, such an overt projection of this-worldly concerns (việc trần, việc đời) onto the spirit world, says Master Cảnh, is not correct (không đúng). A master’s task is to educate his or her followers about proper ritual conduct: ‘You have to teach the right way and follow the spirits’ rule (phép thánh); you can’t muddle up things according to your own ideas’ (Interview 01.11.2002). But Master Cảnh also admits that there is a difference between spiritual principles and putting them into practice. He argues that bringing ‘worldly affairs’ into relation with the spirit world generally depends on a person’s ‘degree of understanding’ (trình độ hiểu biết). This not only pertains to the conceptualisation of the spirits, but also to the fact that Four Palace mediums imbue their spirit enactments with their own (human) characteristics:

During spirit possession (ngồi đồng), people show their human characteristics. A disorganised person is also disorganised as a medium, a careful person is also careful during the ritual, a strict person will also be strict, a vulgar person who likes joking and laughing will also be joking and laughing during the ritual rather than acting in a serene way. (Interview 24.03.2005)

The issue of rule conformity versus deviance in Four Palace mediumship raises the question of what consequences will follow from a transgression of the spirits’ rules. Will it render the ritual invalid? Will it affect the life of the medium in a negative way? Will the deity punish the medium for transgressing the rules? The Vietnamese countryside abounds with stories about vengeful guardian deities who punished those who had vandalised their temples and destroyed their statues after the August revolution of 1945 that marked the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Marr 1995). Elderly mediums relate stories of policemen chastised by the Four Palace deities for raiding ritual performances and confiscating all of their paraphernalia. The penalties imposed by the deities thereby ranged from severe illnesses inflicted on the culprits to their actual death. One medium told me about the case of a woman who had vowed to perform at a certain temple but then broke her promise and went to a bigger temple instead. When she was possessed by the Second Lady, she suddenly felt strangled round the neck and died before anybody...
could rescue her, because the deities had paralysed all the bystanders. In recent times, however, some mediums see the deities as having changed to a somewhat more generous attitude:

Nowadays the deities have become much more gentle. It’s true! In the old days, if a medium’s performance was unruly (vớ vẩn), the spirits would kill her immediately. The spirits were very vengeful according to the saying: ‘The Buddha is merciful, but the spirits do not forgive even the slightest mistake!’ […] This is very rare today. If the spirits were as vengeful as in the old days, my family wouldn’t be alive anymore! The spirits have become more gentle, that is why many mediums get away with performing in a disorderly way or transmitting nonsensical words. (Interview with Lâm, 25.02.2006)

The (post)modern spirit world has quickly adapted to the new conditions of an emerging market-economy and dramatic social transitions. As ‘spiritual embodiments of the market’ (Taylor 2004: 85), the Four Palace deities have taken on a heightened importance in the contemporary capitalist economy
and extended their role to dealing with modernity’s malcontents. Moreover, they seem to be conceptualised more as partners in an exchange relation rather than as vengeful supernatural beings who punish even the slightest mistake in ritual conduct.

**Serving the shadows**

The changing conceptualisation of the deities also brings us back to the issue of proper spirit enactment with regard to the differentiation between *possession* and *performance*. For the majority of Four Palace devotees, the question whether or not the deities actually descend upon the medium during a *lên đồng* seems to be of minor relevance. As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the medium may sense the presence of the deity in his or her body, and these sensations may indicate that the deity has, for a (more or less) short moment, manifested itself in the medium’s body (*thánh giáng, thánh về*). But a *lên đồng* ritual is also considered as correctly performed if the medium only ‘serves the shadow’ (*hầu bóng*) of the deity. More often than not, the two terms used most frequently by Four Palace mediums to designate a *lên đồng* ritual – *hầu bóng* (serving the shadows) and *hầu thánh* (serving the deities) – do not intend to qualify a *lên đồng* ritual as authentic or inauthentic but are applied interchangeably. Master Tùng, however, takes these expressions in their literal meaning and uses them to separate the wheat from the chaff:

> Among thousands of people there are only a few in whom the deities manifest themselves (*thánh ứng vào*), this is why I differentiate between *hầu thánh* and *hầu bóng*. The former means that the deities really manifest themselves in the medium’s body. Everyone else just imitates the shadow of the deity, i.e. they dress like the deities’ shadows and distribute blessed gifts. Since time immemorial there have been these two schools (*trường phái*). The wealthy people serve the spirits’ shadows, they enact the shadows of the deities (*đóng cái bóng thánh*) to express their gratefulness, but the ones in whom the deities truly manifest themselves you can count on your fingers. In fact there is nothing wrong with that, the problem is rather that many people who claim to be possessed by the deities do so just in order to cheat (*lừa đảo*) (Interview 04.04.2006).

It is interesting to note that Master Tùng speaks of two different branches, or schools, in Four Palace mediumship, one for wealthy devotees who merely imitate the deities, and one for authentic mediums in whom the spirits truly
manifest themselves. As the existence of these two schools was not verified by other mediums I talked to, Master Tùng’s attitude is mostly relevant with respect to the following. Because his unique interpretation of the deities makes him vulnerable to critical attack – e.g. from bystanders in public temples who do not belong to his faithful followers – he legitimises himself in the Four Palace world by constructing his eccentric version of a ritual performance as that of an authentic, genuine spirit medium. In contrast, Master Cảnh presents himself as a legitimate master medium by invoking compliance with the spirits’ rules in ritual performance and thus dissociating himself from ‘crazy’ performers whom he perceives as ‘possessed by demons’.

I have described above how mediums may feel the presence of the deities during their performance, e.g. by feeling a leaden heaviness in the upper part of the body, or by feeling out of balance. In reply to my question how or what he ‘feels’ (cảm giác) during his state of genuine possession, Master Tùng explained:

In principle, a spirit medium can be compared to an actor. Just like actors are no longer their own selves when playing a role, the deities borrow (mượn) the medium’s body in order to manifest (hiện) themselves. For this purpose, [mediums] have to be able to forget their selves (phải quen mình) and release their soul (phải thả hồn), they must no longer pay attention to their selves (không để ý đến mình nữa). [.] The sole difference between a genuine medium and a play-acting medium is that the latter embodies only the shadow of the deity (bóng thánh) (Interview 07.06.2006).

The difference between hầu bóng and hầu thánh, then, is not altogether clear, because both performers – the artist or actor/actress on stage as well as the spirit medium – have to reach some state of self-forgetfulness (which I characterised as ‘flow’ in the previous chapter) in order to perform the – divine or human – Other into actual being. This state of concentration or ‘directedness of the heart’ (tâm) is also described by other mediums, although they may not couch it in terms of ‘releasing the soul’ as Master Tùng. For example for Em Thơm, performing a lên đồng ritual means ‘serving the shadows’ with the aim of wholeheartedly pleasing or entertaining the deities:

Let me put it this way. I truly believe in the Mother [Goddess]’s existence, but when I perform a ritual I serve the shadows; I serve in order for the Mother [Goddess] to watch. It is not that the Mother is inside me; it is not that I become the Mother. In my heart, at that moment, I only think unceasingly of the Mother so that I perform efficaciously (linh đồng hiện bóng). . . . But saying that in this moment I completely forget my body
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(thánh xác) so that I think I AM the [deity], no. In that moment I only wear the costume of the deity in order to represent it, I serve in order for the Mother Goddess, the Mandarins, etc. to watch, this is serving the shadows, just only the shadows, don’t think that in this moment I AM the [deity], this is not the case. (Interview 18.10.2996)

The line between ritual and theatre, between a spirit medium and an actor or actress, and between efficacy and entertainment thus seems to be a thin one even in the spirit mediums’ own conception of their ritual practice. In a similar vein, Master Cạnh not only recognises the parallels between a spirit medium and an actor, but he also regards spirit mediumship as an art form: ‘Spirit mediumship (đồng bóng) is also an art (nghệ thuật), and so is lên đồng. The medium is an actor, not just a normal person at all. So this is why I perform carefully and beautifully’ (Interview 22.02.2006). On a cautionary note, however, Master Cạnh qualifies this statement by pointing out that lên đồng is a genre of folk culture (văn hóa dân gian). A medium’s movements should therefore not be ‘too artificial’ – like the more stylised forms of classical theatre – or ‘too affected’ (ông à ông ẹo) – like, in his opinion, the movements of most đồng cô – but rather ‘light and simple’ (dân gian, đơn gian). The entertaining aspect of the ritual performance is highlighted by Master Tuyết, who looks back on more than forty years of experience as a Four Palace medium: ‘To put it bluntly, first of all, a lên đồng has to be beautiful and convivial (vui), so that the participants don’t get bored!’ As I have already discussed in the previous chapter, the parallels or interconnections between theatre and ritual have significantly contributed to the theoretical debate on ritual performance. According to Rao and Köpping (2000: 12), the theatrical plays an important role in the construction of reality in both the social world and in ritual. A self-forgetting devotion to the role is neither in ritual nor in theatre an essential requirement for the play or the ritual to be brought on stage. However, in order to be able to totally identify with one’s role, to release one’s soul and open up for a different (fictive, imagined, or supernatural) entity, be it on a theatre stage or in front of an altar dedicated to a Four Palace deity, it is imperative to possess performative knowledge, skills and techniques (see also Köpping 2004, Kendall 1996a).

Knowing to listen

First of all, a medium needs to know the basic succession of movements for each category of deities, and which ritual postures, gestures and mimetic
forms of representation appropriately express the deity’s characteristics. A Great Mandarin, for example, has to pace with dignified steps and keep a stern face, whereas the Princesses associated with the mountainous regions

Figure 4.5 The deity’s shadow as it appears in the mirror
may smile cheerily and dance with room for improvisations. Master Cảnh’s follower Cường explains it as follows:

A correct ritual enactment has to follow the rules of the deities (phép thánh). Accordingly, a medium must not laugh or hop around during the embodiment of a Great Mandarin. The dance of a Mandarin only consists of a few stately steps that follow the rhythm of the music. In contrast, the dance of the Little Princess may be merry and vivacious. The ritual songs (văn) relate the deities’ legends, and in order to perform the ritual in a beautiful and correct way, a medium needs to understand the songs. (Interview 30.10.2002)

Many mediums claim that the music is the soul (linh hồn) of the lên đồng ritual. Following Rouget, the ethnomusicologist Barley Norton argues that it is indeed the music that makes a possession by the deities possible, because the songs move the heart (tâm), or heart-soul (tâm hồn, linh hồn), of the medium: ‘châu văn does not merely identify the spirits; it actively “makes” the presence of spirits’ (Norton 2009: 129). During the embodiment of the deities, mediums interact with the musicians in various ways. First of all, it is the medium who basically determines how long each ritual sequence – characterised by different tempi and rhythms – lasts: the salutation of the deity, the dance, the pouring and drinking of wine (or water), and the presentation and distribution of offerings. During the dance, for example, châu văn musicians regard the interplay as harmonious when the medium gives him- or herself to the rhythm of the music for a short period of time and then interrupts the dance at the right moment, in tune with the music. In contrast, inexperienced and self-conscious mediums often tend to interrupt the dance prematurely while the musicians are still trying to animate (bốc) it. Furthermore, the musicians are compensated for playing and singing in the course of the ritual, i.e. mainly during or after the redistribution of offerings. In addition to receiving their share of the offerings to the deities, they are rewarded with money handed over by the embodied deity. This part of the ritual is much expanded during the enactment of the Great Mandarins and Princes. The deity leans his or her elbow on the cubic pillow to the right, draws in the smoke of a cigarette and listens attentively to the music. Then he takes a money bill from the little vanity case in front and maybe holds it for a while, waiting for the appropriate moment in the song lines and rhythm. When that moment has come, the deity bangs his right hand on the pillow (vỗ gối), exclaims, ‘Ha!’ and then hands the bill over to the musicians with a
grand gesture of generous appreciation. This incites the musicians to try holding the attention of the deity by pouring even more heart into their music. But their musical enthusiasm is diminished if the medium does not know how to listen (không biết nghe), to appreciate (thưởng thức) and to extend praise (ban khen). When the musicians feel bored (chán), they may not be able to sing with as much heart as they normally would, and this may be lead to serious misunderstandings. In one case, a medium accused a musician of being greedy, because she thought the musician wanted more money:

When a bà đồng doesn’t know how to perform, if she performs as if ‘the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak’, it can become really intolerable. It may happen that she says, “for others you sing nicely (hát hay), but not for me”, or, “the others probably give you more money!” Of course everybody appreciates money, but it is not true that we only think about money. It is very difficult. (Interview with chầu văn musician Hưởng, 22.02.2006)

In recent years, the chầu văn music played during a lên đồng has undergone significant changes as it has absorbed influences from other forms of music,
for example from the popular Cải Lương folk opera.\textsuperscript{13} Besides new melodies and rhythms, instruments that had been uncommon in \textit{châu văn} music – such as the drum, flutes and the sixteen-string zither – are now used to spice up the genre. Whereas many elderly mediums still prefer the old-style \textit{châu văn} music, the newcomers in the world of mediumship find the new style more appealing. The latter is regarded as lively and joyful (\textit{vui}), while its classical form is increasingly felt as ‘hard to listen to’ (\textit{khó nghe}). In a fast-paced, loud and frenzied modern world, the ability to truly listen to the more subtle sounds and voices gradually diminishes. In contemporary Hanoi, the incessant noise of traffic and construction work and the thumping music from cafés and karaoke-bars has long silenced the sounds of nature: the rustling wind in the trees, the chirping of birds, or the ripple of water. Has it silenced the voices of the Four Palace deities as well?

\textbf{Divine utterances}

During their possession, mediums often transmit the ‘words of the deities’ (\textit{lời thánh}) to the ritual participants. During a regular \textit{lên đồng} performance, words are usually transmitted (\textit{truyền phán, phán truyền}) by the Great Mandarins just before the end of the spirit sequence (giá), after the distribution of offerings. The Mandarin would raise his right hand and signal the musicians to stop singing, and then speak out. After the transmission, the Mandarin would clap his hands together and exclaim, ‘Ha!’, which is the signal for the ritual assistant to cover the medium’s head with the red veil as the deity is about to leave his or her body. In most cases I encountered during my research, the utterances transmitted by the Great Mandarins were more or less standardised formulae and phrases extending praise to everybody involved in the ritual performance – the temple keeper, the ritual specialist, the musicians and assistants, and the performing medium – and witnessing (\textit{chứng}) the sincere heart and devotion of the ritual participants.\textsuperscript{14} Just like the succession of bodily movements and correct postures for each deity, a novice medium has to learn these stock phrases in order to be able to apply them appropriately during a \textit{lên đồng} ritual.

By listing the reasons that make him a proficient master, Master Cảnh asserts that ornate utterances are equally important as beautiful costumes and performative knowledge: ‘First of all, my costumes are beautiful. Second, I perform in a stately way, and third, my transmissions (\textit{phán truyền}) are
elaborate, not just stammering incoherently (bắp bả bắp bà) as some people do. Master mediums need a greater repertoire of divine transmissions than amateur mediums, as the occasions (and the sponsors) of their ritual performances vary. The words of the deities thus need to be adapted depending on whether the lên đồng is performed in connection with a palace-opening rite, a petitioning rite or a thanksgiving rite. Master Thiền, who describes herself as a scientific medium (bà đồng khoa học) because she always organises her ritual performances carefully in advance (and also because she used to work in the administration of the Faculty of Sociology at Hanoi University of Social Sciences until she retired in 2008), says it is simply not true if someone claims that the words are uttered by the deities through the mouth of the medium. Master Thiền usually prepares her words well and adapts them to the particular purpose or occasion of the ritual. For each of the deities whom she intends to give a voice during the ritual she carefully composes beautiful poetic phrases, writes them down and memorises them in advance. She jealously keeps these words as her own possessions and refuses to write them down for other mediums to use in their performances, as she has often been asked to do. Below follows a rough translation of the Second Mandarin’s words during a performance at a temple in Lạng Sơn province held in December 2006:

[I, ] the mandarin-supervisor, come down to this sacred shrine, first of all to praise the temple keeper who serves the spirits with his full heart and mind from dusk till dawn. Second, I honour the services of the spirit priest, I reward the liturgical singers, and I praise all spirit mediums of the Four Palaces . . . Ha! Third, I witness [acknowledge] this heartfelt ritual, the trays of betel and cups filled with wine. . . . The Trần lineage [i.e. Thiền] serves as a chair for the spirits [to descend upon]. . . . I praise all people and families [muôn dân trăm họ], may they all receive the spirits’ favours. I confer honours and spiritual powers to the Trần lineage [i.e. Thiền], may [her] temple be always blessed with spirit favours . . . Ha! [Assistant throws the red veil over her head].

In contrast to these (more or less poetic) standardised phrases, mediums with a fortune-telling ability or with a particular strong root (căn) of a certain deity may also transmit divine advice in a state of possession. For Hằng, the only deity that makes her ‘forget everything’ and fall into a state of trance is the Third Princess (Cô Bơ) for whom she feels most intensely destined. The Third Princess is particularly known for her healing powers, but on the other hand she may also seize a human being into her service by causing
illness and misfortune. In November 2002, I was invited to one of Hằng’s regular performances held at a temple located at the Red River banks in Gia Lâm. As usual, I had my video-camera prepared for the occasion. During the embodiment of the Third Princess, Hằng’s expression suddenly became very sad. The Princess belongs to the Water Palace; she wears a white costume and dances with two oars in hands imitating rowing movements. Her facial expression is usually dreamy and deeply melancholic while she rows her boat across the river at night. Hằng performed the Third Princess’ dance in deep concentration. Then she sat down again and took little sips from the cups offered by the assistants. All of a sudden, she lifted her right hand holding up her three middle fingers, the sign of the Third Princess. The musicians stopped playing. Her upper body slowly swaying to and fro, the Third Princess conveyed the following message in a central Vietnamese accent, referring to Hằng as her chair (ghế của cô). The ritual participants, in turn, commented on these utterances by pleading with the deity to show her compassion:

**Participant:** Praise You (Lạy Cô)! You feel compassion for your chair!

**Third Princess:** [with a choking voice] I’m telling the chair from the Đặng lineage that after three years you have to establish a temple dedicated to me, do you hear me clearly?

**Participant:** Praise You (Lạy Cô)!

**Third Princess:** In three years time, in the lunar year of Giáp Thìn¹⁷, do you hear me clearly? I often make my chair dream!

**Participant:** Praise You (Lạy Cô)! You feel compassion for your chair!

**Third Princess:** My chair has such a whole heart (nhat tâm)!

**Participant:** Praise You (Lạy Cô)! The chair from the Đặng lineage is ever so whole-hearted, please show your compassion and bestow talents and blessings (lộc)!

**Third Princess:** If my chair listens to my words, if she does exactly what I tell her, then my chair will not run out of lộc as long as long as the trees in the forest have leaves!

**Participant:** Praise You! Please show compassion for her, she has such a hard life (nó vất vả)!

For a while, she kept swaying in silence, covering her face with a white feather fan. Then Hằng’s body gave a slight jolt – signalling that the Princess was leaving her – and the musicians continued playing. Hằng collected herself, wiped her face with a kerchief and started with the redistribution of offerings. The request of the Third Princess had been quite clear: she expected Hằng to
build a shrine in her honour. This project was no news for Hằng, as she had already bought a piece of space on the rooftop of a building that had risen up to her kitchen balcony. She had had to borrow money for the deal, though, and it seemed as if the transmissions of the Third Princess only reinforced her determination despite her financial situation.

Hằng’s possession is a good example for the ritual interaction between the deities and Four Palace devotees. The fact that the Third Princess transmitted her requests in a strange, central Vietnamese accent deserves special attention. In the old days, it was seen as a sign of authenticity if the medium spoke in a voice and accent that corresponded to the gender and regional origins of the incarnated deity. Accordingly, the deities associated with the Mountain and Forest Palace often transmitted their words in an ethnic language (or, rather, in a language imagined as ethnic by the lowland Kinh). This, however, no longer seems to be the case among contemporary urban spirit mediums. When I asked the chầu văn musicians about this matter, they said that speaking in ‘ethnic languages’ was regarded as old-fashioned in today’s Four Palace community.

Furthermore, stories abound about mediums who disguise their own requests as demands of the deities. This disingenuous practice called miệng tranh bóng thành (‘human mouth, deity’s shadow’) is often ridiculed as a rather pathetic strategy of self-empowerment for battered wives who don’t dare to speak up for themselves. Nhất Lang (1952) relates in one of his stories the case of his own wife, a spirit medium, who plotted to use a Princess deity in order to persuade him to accept her spiritual ambitions. Contemporary chầu văn musicians and ritual assistants are able to recount plenty of similar stories – whether by hearsay or by personal experience – of female mediums who ‘borrow’ the shadow of the deity in order to criticise their husbands for abusing their wives. These stories provoke much laughter among (male) followers of the Four Palaces.

A more serious issue, however, is when a professed fortune-telling medium (đồng bói) only pretends to transmit a deity’s advice and predictions in order to extort money out of the scared believers, for example by suggesting certain costly rituals (to be conducted by the medium or by an associate ritual specialist) that may prevent harm from befalling the client. These accusations had been one of the key arguments used by the communist party to justify the prohibition of spirit mediumship. As I can confirm from my research – and my own experience, for that matter – they are in fact not completely unfounded. Master Đường is certainly right in his claim that fraudulent fortune-tellers
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(thầy bói) and diviner-mediums seriously harm the reputation of Four Palace mediumship and may even lead to new government restrictions:

I most deeply hate the fortune-tellers, they are most unfounded and impertinent. All they do is think very short-sightedly about making a living for their family; they do not consider the great harm they cause by ruining the happiness and health of so many families. In a wider perspective they even have an impact on government policies. This is why the state has to prohibit fortune-telling. (Interview with Master Dương, 08.04.2005)

By suggesting that lên đồng should be stripped of its divinatory functions – a feature which once represented the most crucial element of Four Palace mediumship (Durand 1959: 12) – Master Dương seems to ask for an enforcement of the sanitizing process that has in fact already led to a diminishing emphasis on its divinatory functions. Meanwhile, there has been a heightened emphasis on a previously less articulate function of lên đồng ritual practice that is likewise subject to much debate and critique: the practice of presenting the deities with offerings and their redistribution among the ritual participants in the course of the ritual.

Distributing blessed gifts

Every time I return home from a lên đồng ritual, I usually carry with me a huge plastic bag of blessed gifts (lộc) from the Four Palace deities: cans of beer, soft drinks, Red Bull energy drink, Choco Pie (biscuits filled with marshmallow cream) and other confectionery treats (bánh kẹo), instant noodle soup, Ajino Moto (MSG), sugar, cigarettes, green tea, mangos, oranges, and some areca nuts. For each deity the medium plans to serve during the ritual, offerings (đồ lễ) need to be prepared in a quantity sufficient enough to distribute one to every guest invited to attend the ritual. The market economy with its growing abundance of new and attractive consumer goods has significantly changed both the range and the amount of sacrificial offerings. Moreover, contemporary ritual aesthetics demand that these products must, most of all, have an attractive packaging that matches in colour the deity’s costume. Master Cảnh explains:

On the whole, the offerings change according to the living standard of society. For example a can of tinned [sardines] with a red label can be
offered to The Ninth Princess [who wears a pink robe], right? There’s nothing wrong with that – because as offerings to the spirits, I simply choose the most delicious. Fruit, confectionery, meat or any other items [used as offerings] have to be considered as tasty, as unusual, and as suitable in colour. [The offerings] have to match the colour [of the spirits’ robes] – for example, if the item has a white packaging it can be offered to the Third Princess but not to the Ninth Princess. (Interview 24.03.2005)

This new sense of ritual aesthetics makes the silvery cans of Diet Coke or Halida Beer a perfect offering for the Third Mandarin and the Third Prince associated with the Water Palace, whereas blue cans of Pepsi or Tiger Beer may be used as offerings for the Fifth Mandarin or the Seventh Prince. Some of the Lady and Princess deities are offered colourful packages of instant noodle soups or biscuits. White items such as Ajino Moto, sugar or small cartons of milk may be presented to the Third Princess. Whether the commodities are imported or locally produced is generally not considered important (cf. Kendall 2008), yet most items piled up on the altars are in fact made in Vietnam. The ethnic female deities associated with the ‘natural’ environment of the Mountains and Forests, on the other hand, are usually offered non-processed produce such as areca nuts, unblemished fruits such as mangos, apples, oranges, star fruit, or an assortment of lime, red chillies, ginger and star fruit that is artfully piled up and held together with toothpicks for the Little Princess. Besides the incorporation of modern luxury food items into len đồng ritual consumption, however, some traditional offerings still remain obligatory today:

The offerings change of course, but there are also essential offerings, like for example areca nuts; even if nobody [in the group] cherishes betel quids anymore you still have to offer areca nuts. Or to the Seventh Prince, you have no other choice than to present him with green tea, nowadays there are many kinds of canned drinks that match in colour and look very beautiful, but you still have to offer green tea. These are essential offerings; they are obligatory. (Interview with Master Cành, 24.03.2005)

Master Tùng, in contrast, altogether rejects modern consumer goods as offerings. He argues, ‘With regard to soft drinks and beer, the deities don’t use these at all, they only drink liquor (rượu), it can be this liquor or that liquor, but it cannot be beer, this is against the tradition’ (Interview 04.04.2006). In
general, however, the new patterns of consumption created by the new market economy seem to have whetted the deities’ appetite for modern consumer goods. This also points to the pragmatic side of sacrificial practice: transformed into blessed gifts, the tokens of divine benevolence are distributed among the ritual participants and taken home for consumption. This is why, Master Cảnh explains, Four Palace mediums ‘have to choose tasty things, things that can be taken home for consumption instead of being given away to outsiders’.

More than anything else, the amount and quality of offerings redistributed – and, for that matter, the number of guests invited – in the course of a lên đồng are an index of a medium’s prosperity and prestige. They are thus instrumental in wealthy mediums’ strategies of distinction. As objects that convey a sense of beauty and luxury, they are employed both to contribute to the overall sumptuousness and aesthetics of the ritual and to effectively assert a claim to a certain social status. In the context of her work on Korean shamans, Laurel Kendall recently suggested conceiving of sacrificial offerings as ‘props’ – i.e. as stage requisites or accessories used in acting a play. The advantage of such an approach is that it allows for ‘more contextual and sensate understandings of the messages that rituals convey and the manner in which ritual business is effectively tailored to or emergent from the specific circumstances of enactment’ (Kendall 2008: 155). Moving from the altars of the deities into the plastic bags of the ritual participant, the offerings take on a ‘social life’ of their own (Appadurai 1986). They are scrutinised and commented upon, praised for their quality or sneered at for their cheapness, and used as measures to set (new) standards for the ritual community. This is why many Four Palace mediums are criticised for engaging in ritual status competition to the point of incurring debts in order to impress their invitees. Master Dương comments disapprovingly on this practice:

Nowadays, many mediums borrow money in order to lên đồng, what for? To compete, to vie with each other, they see their friend give one piece so they have to give ten pieces! But this is so dangerous; it can hurl the whole family economy into crisis! (Interview 08.04.2005)

Precious or paltry, the offerings distributed during a lên đồng are intensely coveted must-haves even if the receiver will give them to the poor neighbours first thing upon returning home. This is because, Master Cảnh explains, ‘the jealousy of husband and wife cannot compare with the jealousy of mediums’ (ghen vợ vo ghen chồng không bằng ghen đồng ghen bóng). It is therefore crucial that a medium always prepares sufficient quantities of offerings lest any of the
participants may be left empty-handed. Furthermore, the act of distributing the offerings as blessed gifts among the ritual participants requires social and interpersonal competences that reach beyond a lavish display of wealth and generosity. Among the various performance skills that are required of an adept medium, the ‘art of distributing blessed gifts’ (nghệ thuật phát lộc) is crucial to ritual mastery.

After the incarnated deity has ritually acknowledged – or witnessed (chứng) – the offerings by waving a stick of burning incense over them, the medium sets out to allocate them to the ritual participants. First of all, the temple owner, the spirit priest (who had performed the necessary ritual acts preceding a lên đồng), the musicians, the assistants, the kitchen in charge of preparing the festive meal (cỗ) that is shared communally after the ritual, and the ‘deity’s chair’, i.e. the performing medium, receive their obligatory shares. The medium usually places the offering(s) on a little plate and hands it to one of the assistants, who then puts them into the cardboard box prepared for the recipients. Next, the medium allocates special shares to individual participants by pointing to the recipient who then has to come forward to receive the blessed gift (often accompanied by an extra) directly from the deity’s hands. These gifts are
the most prized and usually not shared with other people. When the special treats have been passed out, the medium signals with a quick movement of his or her hand that the remaining offerings may now be distributed to the commonalty. This task is taken over by one or two helpers who have to ensure that everyone present receives a piece. If the offerings in kind are not sufficient, they must be replaced by the approximate equivalent in cash. The murmurs from the ritual participants and the rustling of plastic bags continue into the next phase of the ritual, during which individual participants may approach the deity directly with a particular request. This practice is called xin lộc – asking for blessed gifts – and involves an exchange transaction between the petitioner and the deity. The petitioner kneels down beside the deity, politely presenting some money bills spread out on a plate, and puts forward his or her request with the words ‘please witness my heart’ (ngài chứng tâm cho con). The deity receives the plate, ‘acknowledges’ the offerings, then takes some of the bills away and puts some smaller denominations, plus maybe a little extra – a cigarette, a phoenix-shaped areca nut, a flower – back. Sometimes, the petitioner receives a little bit more than he or she offered, but usually it is less.

All these ritual transactions – who receives lộc directly from the hands of the deity, how many extras are given and to whom, how much is taken from the plate of the petitioner, how much is given back – are a matter of close scrutiny and debate. In addition, ritual participants are expected to hand an envelope with a monetary contribution to the medium before the start of the ritual. The amount is specified by each group (hội đồng bóng) and averaged 100,000 Đồng in 2006. Some groups have imposed their own rules, e.g. that half of the amount presented in the envelope has to be returned to the invitee during the phát lộc sequence. This is easy if everyone sticks to the 100,000-Đồng rule, as the medium can prepare little red lucky money-envelopes with 50,000 Đồng in advance. If, however, a participant contributes more than the expected, then the medium has to keep track of how much he or she owes to her guests. Therefore the distribution of offerings is a complicated matter that constitutes an important mechanism of building and consolidating relationships between the performing medium and his or her invitees: friends, relatives, fellow-mediums, followers (if the performer is a master medium), or between a follower and his or her master. Master Thiền explains which common rules need to be kept in mind during lộc distribution:

[The rule is] to first praise (ban khen) the temple master, followed by the ritual specialist, then [the performing medium], the musicians and
the assistants. Then the medium must look outside to see if any temple mediums (đồng đền) are around who have to be addressed before all the other fellow mediums, the oldest one first, then down to the younger ones. According to the ritual order, if you are a [45-year old] medium, and there is a sixty-year old lady [who is not a medium], you are addressed before the old lady because you are a child of the spirits already, so [the rule is] aptitude before age; the issue of phát lộc is not a matter of whom a medium likes or not. (Interview 06.04.2006)

Young and inexperienced mediums are generally overstrained with the complexity of the ritual performance. On the one hand, they are expected to focus their heart-minds on the deities in order to perform them into being. On the other, they need to keep in mind all these social rules and keep track of the offerings and monetary matters in ritual exchange. Some mediums complain that the issue of distributing blessed gifts has recently taken on too much importance so that it has become more difficult for a medium to concentrate on the spiritual aspects of the lên đồng. Others, however, take the opportunity and nitpick at the smallest details. The musician Huynh relates:

Mediums are extremely judgemental and critical of each other. For example, Master Dương performs and I present him with a pack of cigarettes and 100,000 Đồng and he gives me back one cigarette and 90,000 Đồng. And then I present Master Thiền with the same but I get back 50,000 Đồng and one pack of cigarettes. There is a difference – and it is these [petty] differences that cause people to say evil things about each other. It is always only about such kind of matters. (Interview 20.06.2006)

Some mediums therefore try to lessen the emphasis on lộc distribution. They may prepare fewer offerings (i.e. not for each and every deity) or call fewer people forward for individual blessings, which is also much less time-consuming. In order to prevent the participants from rustling through their bags and fussing over their lộc instead of concentrating on the ritual performance, some mediums separate the distribution spatially from the arena of the lên đồng by having the items filled into plastic bags ‘offstage’ and give each participant their bag on their way out. For the great majority of Four Palace mediums, however, the offerings remain their most crucial concern, as this is their principal investment in the supernatural world that earns them interest in the human world, both in the sense that the deities are expected to bestow well-being and prosperity upon them, as well as in the
sense that the distribution of offerings reinforces their bonds with other humans.

The new standards for sacrificial offerings, based on aesthetics, amount and quality, have clearly been set by the material comfort and modern lifestyle of urban life. In contrast, mediums in rural areas may only be able to offer some fruit and rice-cakes to the deities. During pilgrimages to the countryside, the rural–urban divide in contemporary Vietnam becomes most apparent. While the lộc-bags urban devotees fill with conspicuous offerings that had been carried to the temple all the way from Hanoi, hunched and toothless old women in tattered pyjamas squat on the fringes of the crowd of ritual participants, waiting for an opportunity to benefit from the benevolence and generosity of the deities and grab a little bit of lộc for themselves. During the dances of the Little Lady and the Little Princess they may be able to catch a few of the small banknotes that are thrown in thick bundles into the crowd, causing the ritual participants to cheerfully scramble for as many of the spiritually charged bills as they can get. Just as in the story of Nhất Lang mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the old village ladies usually don’t break into the circle of urban participants, for example in order to ask for spirit favours (xin lộc) from the deity. Sometimes, however, they dare. The following encounter related by Huynh, the musician, once again highlights the divide between the rural and the urban, between the poor and the rich, between the possessed and the dispossessed:

I still remember once I sang at Sòng temple and I felt deeply moved by an old lady. She came forward to present [the deity] with 500 Đồng [appr. three cents], and the assistant looked at her from top to bottom in deep resentment; he took the money but didn’t even give it to the deity to perform the witnessing act, he just held it and then gave it back to the old lady; she kowtowed to the deities and went away. Then she listened to me singing and she liked it a lot, she said, ‘I have been to many places, but I have never heard anyone sing so beautifully, I just sit and listen, I don’t have any money, I can only give you these 500 Đồng.’ This incident has left a very strong impression on me, and I still keep that 500-Dông note to this day. (Interview 20.06.2006)

In this chapter, I have shown that both the spirits’ rules and individual styles in Four Palace mediumship are constantly negotiated and contested. I have employed the example of Master Tùng in order to demonstrate that the rules of lên đồng ritual practice are, in principal, very flexible and open to personal adaptation. Individual interpretations such as the ones mentioned above in fact hold the potential for the development of separate ‘schools’ in the strict
sense of the term. This, however, only happens to a very limited extent in Four Palace mediumship. Extreme deviations from the ritual and interpretative norm are rare because they are highly contested. These contestations, I argue, are very much a function of modernity and act as a regulative force within the world of mediumship (thế giới đồng bóng). Contemporary Four Palace mediumship thrives within the field of tension between the Party-state’s visions of a modern nation-state on the one hand, and the combined effects of greater state tolerance, economic transformation and enhanced consumerism on popular religious practice on the other. Whereas the former has led to reflexive rationalisations and spurred tendencies to formalise rules and regulations, the latter facilitates the proliferation of creative innovations and individualised forms of mediumship, including the formation of ‘new religious phenomena’ (Đỗ Quang Hưng 2001; see also Malarney 1996). Leading master mediums therefore draw their legitimation, first of all, from their sense of themselves as ‘sincere’ spirit mediums vis-à-vis those who are either attributed with mercenary motives or with the ‘blind’ and ‘superstitious’ beliefs of poor and uneducated country folk. A second source of legitimacy derives from (the claim of) adherence to the proper rules of ritual performance. Rather than indicating a radical break with these rules and conventions, the often stated claim that nobody is alike (không ai giống ai) thus points towards the bringing forth of ‘regulated innovations’ (a term I derive from Bourdieu’s (1977: 78) notion of ‘regulated improvisations’) within the boundaries of the acceptable.

The following chapter will leave the stage of ritual performance and look into the inner workings and idiosyncrasies of the world of mediumship. Here, I shall deepen my argument that Four Palace mediumship is not a neat and orderly world ruled by religious principles. Rather, it is a richly inventive and complex world shaped both by divine power and human agency. As such, I argue, it also constitutes an important arena for the construction, negotiation and enactment of (gendered) identities that move beyond the restricting frames of hegemonic social norms and traditions.

Notes

1 This nightly procession is most probably a recent invention as it is not mentioned in any of the numerous descriptions of the festival.

2 In pre-revolutionary Vietnamese society, the seating order in temples, pagodas and village communal houses reflected the social hierarchy and was a crucial
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indicator for status and prestige. Accordingly, the higher a person’s social status, the closer to the sanctuary he or she was entitled to sit.

3 Chèo (popular opera) and Tuồng (similar to the Chinese Opera) are the oldest forms of Vietnamese theatre.

4 Another recent addition is Chúa Thác Bờ. Both Princess Cam Đường and Chúa Thác Bờ are considered as deities of human origin (nhân thần), that is humans who have been posthumously deified for their brave and virtuous deeds. All other deities of the Four Palace pantheon are considered to be of supernatural or heavenly origin (thiên thần) and have, according to their legends, spent one or more lives as humans on earth. In contrast, the rule of precedence of General Trần Hưng Đạo, a likewise recent integration of into Four Palace mediumship (Phạm Quỳnh Phương 2009), is undisputed: if the powerful general (and his family) are enacted, it is always done so before the Great Mandarins.

5 Ngài xưa means ‘in the old days’ or ‘in former times’, and the time-period it refers to always needs to be clarified in a conversation. In this case, however, Master Ngọc was not able to define precisely when these ‘old days’ had been.

6 A thủ nhang is a temple keeper, e.g. of a public temple (đền). The term đồng dền (temple medium) is more general and is also used for mediums who run a private temple.

7 In some cases I witnessed, followers presented the Seventh Prince with opium-laced cigarettes during a lên đồng ritual. At Bảo Hà temple it is even possible to buy opium-laced cigarettes ‘under the table’ from the street vendors.

8 The late Lý Dynasty ruled from 1010 to 1225.

9 In contrast to the prevalent practice of contemporary Four Palace masters, Master Tùng does not initiate any followers into lên đồng ritual practice. He argues that, in most cases, it suffices to conduct other rituals for them or to perform a lên đồng on their behalf.

10 The idea of lên đồng as an entertainment for the deities was also related by other mediums. A male master interviewed by Nguyễn Trinh Thi (2005) relates that, according to the legend, Princess Liễu Hạnh was summoned back to Heaven after her second lifetime on earth. Because she missed her human life, she was granted one wish from the world of mortals and she wished for the people to dance and entertain her. This is, so the master explains, why Four Palace mediums dance: in order to entertain the Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh.

11 Even though Thơm denies that she ‘becomes’ the deity during her ritual enactment, she has in fact experienced what Master Tùng would characterise as ‘true possession’: ‘There are in fact moments when the deities descend upon me, but this happens very rarely, I think. Like in October last year, it was such a frightening experience. I truly believe in the Mother and deities (thánh), they MUST exist otherwise I could never have performed like that. When I danced [I felt] like a cloud, I felt that my feet were about to fly off, I was flying . . . very hard to describe’ (Interview 18.10.2006).
In former times, this was the only way by which the musicians received a compensation for their efforts. Nowadays, professional chầu văn musicians often ask the medium for a ‘deposit’ (tiền cọc) in advance, on top of which additional ‘reward money’ (tiền thưởng) is expected during the ritual. However, some musicians I talked to are strictly against asking for such a minimum wage because they consider it as improper. Besides, the ‘reward money’ is much more appreciated than a fixed salary, as the following saying underlines: ‘One hundred Đồng salary cannot equal one Đồng reward money’ (một trăm tiền công không bằng một đồng tiền thưởng).

Cải Lương, roughly translated as ‘renovated theatre’ in English, is a form of modern folk opera in Vietnam that originated in South Vietnam in the early twentieth century. It blends southern Vietnamese folk songs, classical music and modern spoken drama.

The expression chứng tâm, ‘to witness the heart’, relates to the reciprocal relationship between deities and devotees. The sacrificial offerings are seen as an indication of the devotees’ sincere hearts. The deities, in turn, acknowledge this devotion by bestowing divine benefaction, lộc, in the form of health, happiness and good fortune.

The details have been changed to protect Master Thiền’s privacy.

Although Thiền allowed me to video-tape her rituals, she urged me not to give copies to other mediums as she was afraid they would ‘steal’ her divine transmissions.

This will be the year 2024.

During my research I spent lots of my own money on rituals. In many cases I did not regret the horrendous amounts spent, but in one case I felt clearly cheated by a fortune-telling medium who urged me to pay a fortune for a ritual that was a clear ‘rip-off’ – both in terms of quality (i.e. of food and votive paper offerings) and performative skill.

A well-known temple in Gia Lâm stipulates in its rules of conduct that divinatory utterances are not allowed. Mediums may only extend praise to the ritual participants by using the standard phrases.

International brands of confectionery, although available in supermarkets catering to a predominately foreign (Western) clientele, are generally much more expensive than local products, and not necessarily packed in nicer packages. Imported beer brands such as Tiger Beer or Carlsberg are more expensive than the domestic brands in Northern Vietnam, but offer different colour-based allocations.

In the 1990s it was usual to contribute offerings in kind to a lên đồng, but nowadays cash is more appreciated. The reason for this was explained as follows. If a ritual participant, for example, contributes a crate of canned beer consisting of twenty-four cans, then about half of its content has to be given back as lộc to the donor and the remaining half is distributed among the musicians, assistants,
and other participants. A contribution in cash, however, provides the medium with some relief from the financial burdens of the ritual. In 2006, the standard cash contribution from each participant was 100,000 Đồng (appr. 4 Euro or 5 USD), but close friends of the medium would often contribute more than that. On the other hand, urban mediums spent approximately 5 to 7 million Đồng (260 Euro/340 USD to 370 Euro/470 USD) for one lén dọng performance. This amount includes the contribution to the temple owner, the fees for the musicians and assistants, the meal shared by all participants either before or after the ritual, as well as the offerings for distribution.

22 Many temples ban the local population (with the exception of a few old ladies) from frequenting the temples ‘hunting’ for lộc.

23 In a more general sense of the term, i.e. as a body of disciples of the same master, it is possible to speak of different Four Palace ‘schools’ (see Brac de la Perrière 2009 for the case of Burmese spirit mediumship). In the sense of a distinct school of thought or practice that consciously sets itself apart from the rest, however, Four Palace mediumship has not split up into different ‘schools’.
The (Gendered) World of Mediumship

Linh is a young scholar at the Department of Sociology, Hanoi University of Social Sciences. She has been married to her husband Đức for four years and they have a healthy three-year-old daughter. Like the majority of Vietnamese, Linh practices ancestor worship at home (thờ cúng ông bà) and sees to it that all necessary rituals in the annual cycle are observed. In case she needs the help of a spiritual expert, she turns to Master Thiền, a former primary school teacher in her mid-fifties who works in the administration of Linh’s faculty. Thiền has been a Four Palace medium since 1996. When five years later she and her husband had a new house built in Cầu Giấy district, she reserved the top floor for setting up her private temple. A few years after, in 2004, Thiền started operating as a master medium. Although she is not a social scientist, her proximity to the social sciences lends her a certain authority that she can capitalise on. Among her followers, she is known as the ‘scientific medium’ (bà đồng khoa học) not only because of her place of work, but also because she always prepares her rituals very thoroughly. Master Thiền explains, ‘Mediumship is a lot about form and appearance, especially since it has been booming like that. Yet being a learned person gives me authority, and what I do is I try to improve and develop [mediumship] into a scientific discipline (một ngành khoa học),’ (Interview 06.04.2006). While the term scientific may have an entirely different meaning for a spirit medium than for a social scientist, Master Thiền has established a trusted reputation among her clientele, many of whom are staff members of university departments, research institutes and government institutions. Like Linh, many colleagues in the faculty consult her for advice in ritual matters. Through her network of other ritual specialists, Master Thiền is able to offer a wide range of ritual services tailored to her clients’ needs.
In September 2006, Linh went to Master Thiền’s shrine in order to ask for some advice concerning the graves of her ancestors. On that day, thầy Nhật, a diviner and close associate of Master Thiền, happened to be present and suggested reading Linh’s fortune. It turned out that her prospects for longevity were rather bleak; therefore thầy Nhật recommended a lễ tam phủ thực mệnh – a so-called three-palace rite of redeeming one’s life. This ritual is usually carried out by a spirit priest and aims at changing a person’s fate for the better. In thầy Nhật’s words, the ritual ‘transforms a sand wall into a brick wall’, which means that something unstable is converted into something solid and secure. In fact, this was not the first time that someone had advised Linh to have this ritual organised in order to prevent her life from becoming very complicated (phức tạp). With this knowledge in the back of her mind, Linh said that doing nothing would have made her worry even more. This is why the young scholar decided to have a ritual that cost six months of her salary. With the help of her family, Linh was able to raise the money necessary for the life-saving ‘treatment’.

Master Thiền entrusted thầy Khán, a renowned spirit priest-cum-châu văn musician in the world of mediumship, with the task of performing the ritual. The event was scheduled for the twentieth day of the eighth lunar month at her temple. In the Vietnamese festive calendar, this day also marks the death anniversary of the national hero Trần Hưng Đạo, the famed military commander of the fourteenth century who is highly revered as an efficacious and powerful deity among the general populace. Formerly the object of a separate cult reserved for male spirit mediums, Saint Trần has recently been adopted into the Four Palace pantheon and is frequently embodied during lên đồng performances by both men and women (see Phạm 2009). Why is this information important here? It is important because a master medium like Thiền is obliged to serve (hầu) the most important deities on their special festive day (tiệc) by holding a lên đồng ritual. At the same time, a medium may validate the ritual of a spirit priest, such as a three-palace rite of redeeming one’s life, by performing a lên đồng ritual, a practice generally referred to as hầu chứng đàn, i.e. bearing witness to the ritual occasion. By combining Linh’s ritual and Saint Trần’s death anniversary, Master Thiền killed several birds with one stone. She catered both to Linh’s spiritual needs and her own ritual obligations. At the same time, she managed to contract thầy Khán for two different engagements: as a spirit priest for the tam phủ thực mệnh ritual and as a musician for her lên đồng performance. She was thus able to provide Linh with the best spiritual expertise available at the given price, and, at the same
time, to perform a lèn đồng in honour of Saint Trần that did not strain her own personal budget too much. It is, among other things, this skilful (or creative) combination of different events that makes Master Thiền conceive of her approach as scientific.

This chapter explores the world of mediumship (thế giới đồng bóng) from yet another angle. It conceives of the Four Palace religion as an alternative space in modern Vietnamese society within which spirit mediums enact their – often unconventional – gendered identities through complex webs of social relations. Some actors in this network are religious and ritual specialists whose expertise extends beyond the Four Palace religion, such as diviners and spirit priests (thầy cúng). Others have created a professional niche for themselves in the burgeoning lèn đồng industry of the post-đổi mới era. Among them are the chầu văn musicians, ritual assistants and the producers of votive paper offerings (see Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2006). Various combinations occur as well: some spirit priests are also skilled musicians, chầu văn musicians may occasionally help out as assistants, and assistants may also be trained as spirit priests. At least two kinds of working relationships between the latter and a Four Palace medium are possible. One is that the spirit priest, musician or assistant works as a freelancer for individual mediums. In this case, they are free to accept or reject any engagement offered to them, but they also need to build a large clientele in order to secure their income. The other possibility is that a spirit priest, musician or assistant commits himself to one particular master medium which means that he may only accept other engagements if the master does not require their services on that particular day. These kinds of arrangements are, on the other hand, a frequent source of jealousy and conflict. A medium may, for example, wonder why a certain musician chose to play at the ritual of another medium, although she had booked him on many previous occasions. Or a musician contracted by a certain master has accepted an outside engagement because he seems to have no obligations on that particular day, but then all of a sudden the master schedules a ritual and expects the musician to be on hand. Independent musicians sometimes (continue to) pursue a professional career outside the religious sphere (e.g. as teachers at the conservatory of music), but most of them rely solely on Four Palace mediumship as their main source of income.

A particularly important relation is that between master medium and spirit priest. It is common wisdom among mediums that in order to attract many followers, a good master always needs a good spirit priest at hand. Thus on the one hand, a Four Palace master ‘feeds’ (nuôi) the thầy cúng because the
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5.1. Thầy Khán conducts a *tam phủ thục* mệnh ritual in Master Thiền’s temple

On the other hand, however, the master also ‘fears’ (sợ) the thầy cúng because if his reputation goes down, so does the master’s. These close-knit networks

Figure 5.1 Thầy Khán conducts a *tam phủ thục* mệnh ritual in Master Thiền’s temple

spirit priest’s income depends largely on the master’s clientele of followers. On the other hand, however, the master also ‘fears’ (sợ) the thầy cúng because if his reputation goes down, so does the master’s. These close-knit networks
of mutually interdependent personal relationships are an important source of social capital from which mediums can draw to assert their identity and religious authority in the world of lến đồng mediumship.

‘Children of the spirits, followers of a master’

Perhaps the most important relationship in Four Palace mediumship is that between a master and his or her followers. In contemporary Hanoi, a person with a root of mediumship (căn đồng) can choose from a wide range of masters who vary in type from the motherly matron to the youthful androgynous male, and in personality from the calm and steady to the flamboyant and capricious. In principle, finding the right master is like shopping for a therapist in the West; albeit the criteria by which destined mediums decide whether a certain master matches their personalities and needs may be based on different assumptions. For the majority, checking the two horoscopes for age compatibility (hợp tuổi) is a crucial factor in determining their choice. Others are the master’s reputation in the mediums’ world for being knowledgeable and efficacious. An efficacy in changing a destined person’s life to the better is only partly attributed to the working of the Four Palace deities – the other part is attributed to the master, who is seen as a mediator between the spirit world and the disciples. Since efficacy narratives play a crucial role in establishing a master’s authority, a master who opens the palaces (mở phủ) for a highly problematic person faces a high risk of tarnishing his or her reputation. This applies all the more if the master is new on the scene and still in the process of acquiring a certain status and prestige. Thus, when Master Cảnh decided to initiate the mentally disturbed man whose illness he had diagnosed as ‘works of the yin’ (see Chapter 2), his future standing as a master was at stake because at that time he had only just initiated two disciples into the service of the Four Palace deities. Despite the warnings of others, Master Cảnh says he did not care about such considerations as he believed it is his mission to help those in need:

An old master said to me, ‘You are taking a high risk!’; but I said, ‘No, I’m not risking anything, because first of all, it is the deities who bestow reputation and face (ban danh ban diện), and if they don’t, one has to accept that as well. In this case I have consulted the coins, and they have been positive. So I know I can do it, if not the deities wouldn’t let me do it. But [because the coin-oracle indicated success] I feel confident
to go through with it. The old man argued, ‘If [the madman] recovers, then your reputation will be excellent, but if he won’t recover, then be prepared to fall into disrepute. I’m just telling you how it is’. I said to him, ‘I don’t worry about fame or no fame; I do it [to help the man]’.

(Interview with Master Cảnh, 24.03.2005, Transcript, 17–18)

Luckily for Master Cảnh, the man’s mental health condition stabilised within three years of the palace-opening ritual. Initiation into mediumship is, however, not always a guarantee for a better life, in particular when business success is at stake. Hằng, the petty trader whose calling by the spirits already became apparent at the age of ten (see Chapter 3), suffered from repeated setbacks in her business even after she had become initiated as a young woman. One of her harshest failures occurred because she was conned into lending her entire business capital to a woman trader from the coastal city of Hải Phòng, who then disappeared without trace, leaving her to start again from scratch. Some years later, both she and her husband were involved in motorbike accidents and suffered serious injuries. Fortunately for Hằng, a fortune-telling medium (đồng bói) was able to identify the reason behind her misery. Rather than business naivety or poor driving skills, it was Hằng’s master who was to blame for this continuous streak of bad luck. His mistake had been that for the initiation ritual of the graceful young woman, he had ordered a medium size votive paper horse instead of a large one. As if that weren’t bad enough, one of the horse’s legs had broken when it was pushed into the furnace for burning. This is why the fortune-teller recommended Hằng to re-enlist (tái khóa) into the deities’ service with the help of another master. It was by invitation of the celebrated Master Đường, her new master, that I met Hằng on the occasion of her second initiation in November 2001.

Stories abound about mediums who changed their master – also known as sang khăn, to ‘transfer the veil’ – for some reason or other. Lâm (who frequently assisted Hằng in her rituals) related to me the story of a medium who changed her master three times in one year because she did not feel blessed with lộc after each initiation. Although this is an extreme case, changing masters seems to be a quite common issue. In principle, three years after the palace-opening ritual mediums are free to act on their own and to perform at any temple of their choice. Whereas some mediums build on their own networks of kin, friends and fellow-mediums for support and only turn to their masters on special occasions, others prefer the sheltered comfort of their master’s temple community. These communities differ not only in size, but also in their gender ratio, age distribution, education and wealth. Long-
established and reputed masters, such as Master Đường, may have initiated several hundreds of followers into lơn đồng ritual practice. While the bonds that constitute community are naturally weaker in such a large following of disciples, belonging to the retinue of a distinguished master definitely carries a lot more prestige than being associated with a less well-known spiritual teacher. Despite considerable differences in social cohesion between temple communities, Four Palace mediums commonly assert that they feel as if they were part of a large family. Many refer to their master not only as thầy (master, teacher), but also as a parent. And like siblings in a family, disciples also vie for attention and feel jealous if they think their master gives too much attention to others (see Larsson and Endres 2006). Master Cảnh explains why he needs to pamper the novice mediums more than his long-time followers by giving them special treats during lộc distribution:

> I usually call the new followers – i.e. those who are about to receive their initiation – to come forward, I speak some words to them and give them some extra lộc. I do this in order encourage them, to make them trust in the deities (cho người ta tin ở thánh). As to the old followers, no more! This conforms to the rule of conduct and is the only right thing to do. If someone asks me, 'Why did you give me [blessed gifts] in the past but not now?,' I tell them, 'Before your initiation or when you were a novice medium, the deities took special care of you; now you have grown up and you have younger sisters and brothers, like in a family, right? Special treats are only given to the youngest [siblings], not to the older ones!' – I do that to encourage [the neophytes], I see they are new and very much appreciate this kind of encouragement. But [I don't pamper] those who have been a medium for [several] years. (Interview 20.11.2003)

The decision to enter into a master–follower relationship, however, is not taken by the neophyte alone. Masters, too, may have certain criteria by which they decide to accept new followers. For many, the most important condition is that master and follower have a ‘predestined affinity’ (nhân duyên). Thus, rather than on free (and rational) choice, the master–follower relationship is seen as based on a predetermination by fate that becomes evident by feeling and intuition. Master Cảnh says that the most crucial thing is looking at a person’s face – if he feels comfortable with a person he readily accepts him or her as a follower. However, if it becomes obvious that he doesn’t like a person, this proves to him that there is no destined affinity between the two of them and he may advise that person to consider another master. For him, age compatibility is not a decisive factor either: ‘If someone comes and asks “How old
are you, is our age compatible?”, then I tell him straight away, “No, it is not compatible at all! I don’t know what your age is, but if this is a criterion for you, then the two of us do not match!” (Interview 22.02.2006). If a medium wants to change masters, Cảnh even carefully checks the person’s motives because he finds it unacceptable for a medium to blame her old master for any lack of economic success and believe a new master would be more likely to bestow wealth and riches upon her:

If someone says, ‘[My old] master lives without virtue, I cannot respect him, please help me’, then I can accept this decision. But if someone gives as the reason, ‘[My old master] didn’t make me prosper (ăn nên làm ra)’, then I say, ‘It’ll make no difference if I open the palaces for you, because success in life is the fruit of your own labours. So don’t blame your master, I cannot not accept this.’ […] I don’t have any money and riches to give. I only have compassion and virtue; this is all I have to give. Choosing a master should be based on that alone. (22.02.2006)

As mentioned previously, a master medium (ông/bà đồng or đồng thầy) is a medium who has, over a certain period of time, acquired enough religious knowledge and ritual expertise to initiate followers into Four Palace medium-ship. Furthermore, a master must dedicate a (private) shrine to the Four Palace pantheon or be appointed to take custody of an existing (public or private) temple. The most important preconditions for advancement to the rank of a master are fate (cần mạng) and awareness (nhận thức, in the specific sense of religious/ritual knowledge). Besides being well grounded in the history and legends of the Four Palace deities, a proficient master needs to embody this knowledge in speech, demeanour and ritual performance. A master has to pay particular attention to proper ritual conduct, such as the correct succession of incarnations, adequate postures and movements, and appropriate offerings for each deity. Knowledge/awareness and performative skills are thus inseparable, and many years of dedication, practice and experience are required in order to attain the ritual mastery that distinguishes a reputed master medium. Again, the beauty of ritual performance plays a fundamental role and is seen as a sign of divine blessing bestowed upon the master by the deities:

A [medium] who serves [the spirits] in an ugly way can never become a master, because it means the spirits do not bestow reputation and face (ban danh ban diện). It needs a proficient teacher for the students to become proficient; how can the students be skilled if the teacher is dim-witted or insipid? Some don’t know how to open the palaces (mở phủ)
even after fifty years of experience as a medium, they don’t know [which palace] to open first and which one next, or which offerings have to be presented. But a destined person just has to watch [other masters] and to learn from experience – for example, the leg-and-hand movements,
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from the Great Mandarins’ actions to the handling of the water dipper during the palace-opening ritual, the most difficult of all. (Master Cảnh, 02.11.2003)

Whereas knowledge and learning (hiểu biết), performative skills and moral virtue (đức) rank high on the list of vital qualities a master medium should possess, the divinely bestowed gifts of reputation (danh), face (diện) and authority (uy) are seen as even more important. Of course the latter would not be possible without the former. But whether or not a master is blessed with a formidable reputation depends, according to local conceptions, not so much on personal endeavour and commitment than on the favour and benevolence of the deities. The notion of charisma comes to mind here, both in its original sense derived from the Greek word χάρισμα, ‘(divine) gift of grace’, as well as in the Weberian conception of ‘a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities’ (Weber 1947: 329). In order to apply this concept, which was initially formulated in the European context, to a South Indian form of spirit possession, Heidrun Brückner (2001) coined the term ‘divine charisma’. In her ethnographic example, it is during ritual spirit embodiment that a divine entity is seen to favour a human being with its charisma. As becomes apparent from Master Cảnh’s words, this also applies to Four Palace mediumship. While spiritual efficacy (e.g. in terms of healing powers or powers to bestowed lộc upon Four Palace adherents) is a contested issue, it is generally agreed upon that the divine charisma of the Four Palace deities manifests itself, first and foremost, during ritual performance. As I have outlined in Chapter 3, the perceived presence of the deities also constitutes the beauty of a lên đồng ritual performed by a regular medium. In a master medium’s performance, this manifestation of divine presence is even more central and forms a crucial aspect of his or her credibility and legitimacy among the followers.

During their days as ritual assistants, Lộc and Kỳ most often assisted Master Thương and her followers in their rituals. Before they became masters, Master Thương and Master Thiền, the scientific medium, had been close friends. From the time that both of them had started to gain their own followers, their relationship became a bit strained. Although they still joined each other’s rituals in early 2006, these occasions became rarer in the course of my year of research. By keeping in contact with and joining rituals of both networks, I was able to follow the gossip from both sides. Time and again, I was adverted to the other master’s (apparent) personal inadequacies, ritual mistakes or
shortcomings in (temple or ritual) organisation. Master Thiền often borrowed Lộc and Kỳ’s professional expertise, and so one day I took advantage of this constellation and asked the assistants for their critical appraisal of the two female masters. What I have distilled from their answer corroborates the above argument in strongly suggesting that a master medium’s authority in the world of mediums is based on a divine charisma that becomes manifest in the course of ritual performance:

With regard to knowledge and learning, Master Thiền is better than Master Thương. Yet concerning spirituality (tâm linh), the deities have bestowed Master Thương with more authority. Bà Thiền is more eager for success; she always wants to be the best in everything. But when bà Thiền opens the palaces, her hands are not as steady as bà Thương’s hands and she forgets many things; I always have to remind her by whispering or gesturing. [...] In fact she beats bà Thương only in terms of brainpower and education, but with regard to spiritual matters – things that the Mother Goddesses bestow on a medium – she does not match bà Thương. (Interview 16.05.2006)

Like Master Cành, Lộc and Kỳ refer to reputation (danh) and authority (uy) when they speak of ‘things that the Mother Goddesses bestow on a medium’. If the deities do not grant these gifts, this is reflected in a medium’s ritual performance. No matter how ambitious a person is or how hard he or she has worked, a lack of performative skills is a sure sign that the Four Palace deities do not feel much compassion (thương) for or pay attention (để tâm) to the medium. Rather than as a function of disenchantment, the aesthetisation of ritual performance in spirit mediumship is thus construed as an expression of enhanced spiritedness. Moreover, as I have pointed out in Chapter 3, it is the heart (tâm) of the medium that ultimately determines the beauty of performance. Lộc and Kỳ therefore feel that Master Thiền’s ‘scientific approach’ results in a loss of soul (hồn) because her rituals are not acted out from the heart, e.g. when Thiền utters the ‘words of the deities’, she has composed and memorised them in advance.

Reputation and authority in Four Palace mediumship, however, not only derive from divine and human charisma, but also from dominant gender ideologies in society. If we look at the ratio of male to female mediums in contemporary Hanoi, two trends become evident. First, women clearly constitute the majority of Four Palace adherents. Second, master mediums with large followings and thriving temples seem to be predominantly male. Male mediums often contract their alleged superiority into the phrase ‘one
male medium equals one thousand female mediums’ (*một đồng nam bằng ngàn đồng nữ*). It is this gender bias in Four Palace mediumship that I shall now turn to.

‘Gender trouble’ in the world of mediums

Sources dating back to the French colonial period make hardly any mention of male mediums in Four Palace mediumship (Giran 1912, Durand 1959). Instead, they suggest a gendered separation between the female domain of the Four Palaces (or the Chữ Vị cult, as it was then referred to), and the male sphere of the Saint Trần cult. Nguyễn Văn Khoan, a Vietnamese scholar associated with the École Française d’Extrême Orient (EFEO), distinguishes between the following three ‘popular cults’:

Three main popular cults share the favour of the masses: the *chữ vị* cult, the cult of Trần Hưng-Đạo’s generals, and the cult of the infernal spirits and patrons of sorcerers. The priests of the *chữ vị* cult are the bà đồng (female mediums), the ones of Trần Hưng-Đạo’s generals are the ông đồng (male mediums) or thầy pháp (masters of magic formulae), and those who worship the spirits of hell are the thầy bùa (masters of amulets) or thầy phủ-thủy (masters of amulets and waters). (Nguyễn Văn Khoan 1930: 109, my translation)

The male mediums of Trần Hưng Đạo (called ông đồng or thanh đồng) were apparently held in higher esteem than the female mediums (called bà đồng or đồng cốt) of the Four Palaces (Do 2003: 97–105, Phan Kế Bình 1995 [1915]: 239–240, Phạm 2006). Whereas the male cult was associated with the superior morality of Saint Trần whose mediums were considered capable of exorcising demons and evil spirits from possessed (and predominately female) individuals, the female Chữ Vị cult was associated not only with marginalised women (such as widows and childless divorcees) but also with a morally inferior spirit world, as Paul Giran remarks: ‘Among the Chữ Vị [assembly of spirits], there are many subaltern spirits, male or female, that are tolerated by the Holy Mothers even though they cause a lot of trouble for people’ (Giran 1912: 293; my translation). Many of the possessed, so Giran continues, even turn to Saint Trần in order to get rid of these malevolent entities.

Contrary to what these early accounts suggest, it may be safely assumed that the two spirit possession cults have always to some extent overlapped
with each other. Since the resurgence of spirit mediumship in the đổi mới era, however, these formerly distinct ritual realms have opened up and intermingled in complex ways. While on the one hand, female mediums nowadays actively participate in the ritual embodiment of Saint Trần (see Phạm 2006, 2009), male mediums seem to dominate the ranks of masters in Four Palace mediumship. This development may also have informed the pronounced emphasis on the importance of knowledge and learning, because biases rooted in persisting Confucian gender norms perceive male intellectual abilities as superior to that of women and link knowledge and leadership roles with masculinity (Luong 1992: 70, Soucy 1999: 228). However, when I raised the issue of male superiority in Four Palace mediumship for discussion I received an interesting range of replies that reflect gender contestations and negotiations in contemporary Vietnamese society at large.

First of all, there is a strong bias against women’s bodily functions and the social roles associated with them. During menstruation women are generally considered unclean and thus are prohibited from entering sacred places and participating in ritual activities. A female master who has not yet gone through menopause would therefore be severely constrained in her work. Moreover, if a woman fulfils the social expectations of getting married and having children, her family is seen as her first and foremost obligation. Master Cảnh argues that these constraints are the main reason why there are more male than female masters. He explains, ‘A medium’s job is very hard, and female mediums cannot act in the same ways as men.’ As an example he cites that before a palace-opening ritual, a master has to abstain from sexual intercourse for at least one week in order to be ‘pure’\(^4\) A master who initiates many followers thus has to live a largely celibate life. Cảnh maintains that whereas men have no problem being chaste (\textit{sic!}), women in their fertile age cannot withdraw from their ‘conjugal duty’ unless they decide to abandon their husbands. He even mentions the case of a female master who had given birth to her youngest child at the age of fifty, which had apparently caused a major uproar in the lèn đồng scene. ‘The news that the old hag N. had given birth flashed through the whole of Hanoi with lightening speed!’, Cảnh laughed and scornfully added, ‘Who would trust a female master if she is [still sexually active] like that!’

The ‘impurity’ issuing from a woman’s body is a general concern among female worshippers and it entails that most women have already passed menopause when they decide to operate as masters. One of my female interlocutors, Master Nga, related how the problem dissolved into nothing for her:
The deities had made me go [on a pilgrimage] to the Fifth Lady’s temple. At that time I was just over forty. On the way I started [to menstruate], I went to the river and took a bath, and then I pleaded to the deities for help. I said, ’Praise to you, my [heavenly] parents have conscripted me into their service, and now this just happened to me naturally, it was not my own will, it just happened and now I feel so miserable and I shall go back home!’ From that day on [my menstruation] stopped, everyone said I was clean early, many women still [menstruate] until they are over fifty. I’m telling you, the people distinguish between men and women, but the deities provide for all, no matter if man or woman.

In contrast to Master Cánh’s assumptions, the self-confident octogenarian master asserts that women are in fact morally more virtuous than men. Men, so she argues, are more lecherous, they booze and enjoy talking dirty and still lust after women when they are well over fifty years old. Yet she admits that woman, too, have extramarital affairs: ‘Many male mediums have affairs with their followers, their families crumble and this is not good; but women also do that.’ This inclination towards licentiousness, however, is limited to
‘female mediums whose root of mediumship is light’, so the upright master argues. By this she refers to women who have the root of a lesser deity in the Four Palace pantheon. In contrast, a heavy root is related to the morally superior deities such as the Great Mandarins or even Saint Trần. ‘If a woman has a root of Saint Trần,’ Master Nga reasons, ‘she would not dare to do anything dishonest or immoral, or else she’d be punished immediately.’

The căn of a Four Palace medium is often of the opposite gender – i.e. many male mediums have the root of a female deity and many female mediums that of a male deity. Female master mediums who have the căn of a Great Mandarin sometimes argue their căn is higher (cao hơn) than a male master’s căn. While the root of an imposing male deity certainly lends them authority, it does not necessarily grant the bà đồng a higher status or prestige than that of a male master. As I have mentioned previously (Chapter 2), female mediums are often considered as hot-tempered (nồng tính) or hard to please (khó tính). Although these traits do not conform to female ideals, they are not seen as particularly male characteristics either. Master Thiền, for example, is a rather loud and boisterous woman who enjoys leading people and organising ritual events. But she also has a flaring temper that often offends other peoples’ sensibilities. According to her associate thầy Hiền, male masters generally don’t display this kind of hot-temperness. He elaborates, ‘Men do not fly into a temper like that. Bà Thiền’s disposition is very intimidating; she is often angry for trifles and resents petty mistakes.’ Compared to female masters, so thầy Hiền argues, ‘Male masters are more bighearted (quảng đại hơn); they say, “let’s not talk about this any more”, whereas women have to reprimand, to scold and speak out because this is how they think’ (Interview 22.05.2006). Master Thuận, himself a professed homosexual with the căn of a princess deity, sees it differently. He says, ‘Female mediums are more bighearted (quảng đại hơn) than men, and it has to be said that if you want to follow the right path in religion (di theo chính đạo), women are more trustworthy than men’ (Interview 10.05.2006). While he thinks that female masters have greater powers (uy lực) than males, he says male masters are more illustrious (oanh liệt) and imposing (hoành tráng). As both male and female interlocutors have confirmed to me, this assessment applies first and foremost to their performative skills in lên Đồng ritual and explains why male masters usually gain more fame in the world of mediums. Furthermore, Thuận says, ‘Men are more successful as masters because they are more flexible and tricky (éo le)’. The latter traits are consistent with his characterisation of the Four Palace deities whom he describes as cunning and artful even to the point of
being ruthless (see Chapter 2). According to this logic, the (greater) appeal and success of male masters would then not be based so much on any ideal hegemonic male characteristics than on the morally dubious features of female deities who preferably plunge their roots into male human beings. In contrast, a female master’s prestige would basically sprout from the root of the morally superior male spirits within the Four Palace (or the Saint Trán) system. These transgender aspects have gained greater prominence in Four Palace mediumship in recent years and therefore deserve particular attention.

Princesses, queens and imperial concubines

Forms of ‘ritual transvestism’ have been known in Southeast Asia (and beyond) since ancient times. Ritual transvestites, or transgendered ritual specialists (a term I borrow from Peletz 2006), were ‘individuals who in the course of priestly or shamanic functions “switched” genders or took on “gender-ambiguous” roles as they interceded with spiritual beings on behalf of human subjects’ (Blackwood 2005: 849). Following Blackwood and Peletz, I use the term ‘transgender’ to denote a rather broad range of gender transgressive practices and identifications that pass beyond culturally defined gender categories of ‘man’ and ‘women’. Such a wide understanding would, for example, incorporate the ambiguously gendered hermaphrodite just as much as the cross-dressing drag queen or the masculine ‘butch’ lesbian. In a ritual context, transgender practices may be temporary (i.e. in the case of a ritual practitioner who transgresses the established gender boundaries only during ritual performance) or part of a permanent transgender identity of the ritual practitioner. Throughout Southeast Asia, transgendered ritual specialists were most often ‘male-bodied individuals who dressed in female attire while performing certain rituals associated with royal regalia, births, weddings, and key phases of agricultural cycles’ (Peletz 2006: 312). Among the best-known examples are the bissu among the Bugis of South Sulawesi (Andaya 2000) the basir (male) and balian (female) of the Ngaju Dayak, Kalimantan (Blackwood 2005), and the Burmese nat kadaw (Brac de la Perrière 1989).

In contrast to these rather well-documented cases, very little is known about transgendered ritual specialists in early modern and colonial Vietnam. To my knowledge, there is no historical record of their existence, with the faint exception of one French colonial source that discusses the frequency of hermaphrodites among the Vietnamese in Cochinchina and mentions that
a certain ‘class of individuals, the muabum, whose trade is to perform dances and diverse other entertainments’ invariably classified themselves as such (Gaultier de Claubry 1882; cited in Proschan 2002a: 445). The term muabum is most probably a malapropism for the múa bóng, a Southern Vietnamese ritual dance (that also involves acrobatic feats) performed by male transvestite performers (see Taylor 2004: 174). Until now, however, this Southern Vietnamese form of ritual transgenderism has not yet received adequate attention in the research literature. Another indication of the religious role of transgendered individuals in Southern Vietnam is found in Heiman and Le’s 1970s reference to ‘hermaphroditic witches’ (set off in quotes throughout the article) described as male cross-dressers who ‘are trained in their career as healers from childhood’ and ‘believe that they are inhabited by female spirits and that they are spiritually female’ (Heiman and Lê 1975: 93). Outside the ritual context, many of these ‘witches’ apparently lived ‘normal lives’ and did not dress in female clothing.

In the early twentieth century, Four Palace mediumship became the target of much of the venom and scorn poured by Vietnamese modern intellectuals on popular religious practices. In his novel Hậu Thánh (1942), the writer Lồng Chương provides a wealth of fascinating details about the world of mediums that are absent from scholarly works (e.g. Durand 1959). Although transgressive gender practices did not escape the author’s attention, the issue did not loom overly large in the author’s mind. Of particular interest are several references to female same-sex pairings between Four Palace mediums of complementary spirit roots, e.g. the root of a Great Mandarin and that of a Princess deity. This practice was called kết căn (tying the roots) and, according to Lồng Chương, indicated that ‘two ladies have bonded as husband and wife’. One of the characters in his novel is bà Đào, the widow of a school teacher, who ‘seeks the affectionate caress of a strange love with another woman,’ a capricious temple owner named Châu. Interestingly, bà Đào’s same-sex attraction is not condemned as an aberrant deviation from traditional gender norms, but instead explained from a social–psychological perspective according to which social restrictions against the remarriage of widowed females would ‘not leave any other choice for a young widow to satisfy the strong desires of her heart’ (Lồng Chương 1990 [1942]: 53).

In contrast to this rather sympathetic attitude, male-bodied mediums who display effeminate mannerisms (ông à ông ẹo) only receive a marginal but scornful note: ‘[Like the female mediums], these effeminate men also dance and whirl around, they also tie their roots as “wives” and “husbands”, they
are also jealous in love, and sometimes even dress as women’ (Lồng Chương 1990 [1942]: 135, my translation). In his reportage ‘Mediumship’ (Đồng Bóng) published in the satirical journal Phong Hóa (Customs and Mores), Trọng Lang explores the issue in greater detail:

Besides the bà đồng there are the ‘cô đồng’, most of whom are men. They say they are cô đồng because their destined aptitude matches the Princesses like that of husband and wife. In order to express their dedication to the Princesses, they do not get married and stay sexually chaste. Maybe this is a precondition for the Princesses to possess their bodies and help them earn money by telling fortunes or soul-calling. (Trọng Lang 1935, Vol. 166, my translation)

Trọng Lang then offers an intriguing explanation why the đồng cô are generally unable to take a wife (lấy vợ). It is, he argues, because they suffer from the ‘failing-in-love-disease’ (hoạ có bệnh ‘thất tình’), and this would make them become ‘ái nam’. In the strict sense, the Vietnamese term ái nam ái nữ designates a hermaphrodite, but in general usage it also refers to male homosexuality. Trọng Lang’s remark could thus be an attempt to, first, link male effeminacy in spirit mediumship to homosexuality and, second, to explain this ‘deviancy’ in terms of a reaction to an unfulfilled (heterosexual) love life.

In earlier scholarly works, transgenderism was most often treated as an outlet for homosexuality. Moreover, transgendered ritual spaces were seen as providing a culturally accepted niche for homosexual males, an assumption that Blackwood (2005) refers to as the ‘homosexual niche theory’. At first glance, the striking presence of gender transgressive males in contemporary Four Palace mediumship seems to corroborate this argument. As Proschan has noted, ‘The role of the transvestite medium seems to offer an occupational niche to men whose sexuality does not conform to heteronormative expectations’ (Proschan 2002: 463, footnote 40). However, as I will elaborate below, this view is much too narrow. Recent studies have called attention to the connection between gender transgressive ritual practices and sacred cosmologies in Southeast Asian cultures (Errington 1990, Andaya 2000, Johnson 1997, Blackwood 2005). The theme of an original cosmic oneness manifest in dual-gendered or ambiguously gendered deities can be found across island Southeast Asia. In this perspective, transgendered ritual specialists appeared as ‘a metaphor for cosmic unity and incorporation’ (Johnson 1997: 26) and were thus often seen as potent mediators between the world of divinities and the world of humankind. In contrast to these well-documented cases,
Vietnamese cosmology does not provide a consistent, singular explanation for gender-transgressive behaviour. Rather, it seems that gender transgressive Four Palace mediums draw on a variety of spiritual conceptions in order to construct their identities.

Lộc and Kỳ, for example, conceptualise themselves as heavenly fairies (tiên) sent down to earth in a male human body: ‘According to the intent of the creator (tạo hóa) we ought to be females; in the West you wouldn’t put it in these terms but here we say we are creatures of heaven.’ As immortal beings, fairies may be sent down to earth as a punishment for any misdeed committed in the heavenly palace. The most famous example is Princess Liễu Hạnh who was expelled from Heaven for breaking a jade cup and transformed into a powerful deity after serving a lifetime of hardship on earth. According to Lộc and Kỳ’s conceptualisation, many of these fairies come down to earth ‘in the guise of males, but their characteristics and preferences are those of females.’ The reason for this disguise is linked to their task in life, which is ‘self-cultivation’ (tu) by leading a (chaste) religious life. If the fairy-in-disguise manages to practise self-cultivation ‘until the end of this incarnation’, then s/he would be able to ‘escape the eternal cycle of birth’ and ‘leave this world of dust to return to the other side’ (về bên kia). But why, we may ask, does a fairy need the guise of a male body in order to practise self-cultivation? Lộc and Kỳ explain:

If the fairies came [down to earth] in the guise of a woman they could not practise self-cultivation, this is why the council of Buddhas and Saints decreed that they have to be born with a male body. The world is full of temptations in many respects; this is why the fairies need the guise of men in order to practise self-cultivation.

The notion that a fairy in the body of a (young and graceful) woman would not be able to live a chaste religious life is largely consistent with Master Cảnh’s claim that a woman of childbearing age could not abstain from having sexual relations (be it for reasons of a woman’s uncontrollable desire or because it is regarded as her conjugal duty). Yet Lộc and Kỳ admit that their male disguise does not always prevent the fairies from succumbing to mundane temptations: ‘Of course it is very difficult – the fairies are put to a test (thử thách), but it is their own responsibility [to pass it], and this is why not all of them can practise self-cultivation.’ ‘Is there a difference, then, between a đồng cô (a gender-transgressive male medium with a female spirit root) and a gay man?’, I ask the two (then still) assistants. ‘The two are absolutely different
from each other’, Kỳ asserts. ‘According to the Vietnamese understanding, homosexuality – both male and female – is regarded as a kind of illness. In contrast, being a đồng cô is a completely spiritual matter (việc tiên thánh). After all, it is not our free will but the deities have chosen us and bothered us in order to let us know we have a predestined affinity for the Buddhas and Saints.’

In Vietnamese public opinion, male same-sex sexual behaviour has for a long time been perceived as either a sexual deviancy incompatible with traditional morality and customs, a disease (bệnh) in need of treatment or, still worse, as a sign of mental disorder (see Blanc 2005, Colby et al. 2004, Pastoetter 2004). Another common attitude perceives homosexuality as an ‘import’ of debauched Western lifestyles and fashions. In this regard, Vietnam’s most famous sexologist, Dr. Trần Bồng Sơn (1941–2004) distinguished between ‘genuine’ (thật) homosexual men and ‘fake’ (giả) ones, the latter being ‘lured by fashion or experimentation into trying homosexuality’ (Colby et al. 2004: 48). Although recently the media seem to have taken a more balanced view (e.g. Nguyễn Thành Như 2005), these highly prejudiced perceptions of male homosexuality are still reiterated today (see for example N.A. 2006b, Nguyễn Thuận Thành 2005). Many of these stereotypes are even perpetuated in the ‘identity discourse’ of male gender transgressive Four Palace mediums.

This becomes apparent in the motley of concepts presented by the protagonists of Nguyễn Trinh Thi’s recent documentary Love Man Love Woman (hereafter: LMLW) that portrays one of the most prominent Four Palace master mediums in contemporary Hanoi. Master Đ. makes no secret of his homosexual inclination, which he thinks of as half-blessing, half-curse. From a spiritual perspective, he argues that the performative skills of đồng cô (defined as mediums ‘who have a male body and a female soul’) are always superior to that of ‘genuine women’ because, he says, ‘It seems like the gods and spirits look for male mediums to descend into because men are perceived to be cleaner than women in every aspect. So the gods perhaps prefer men’ (LMLW). From a more dispassionate perspective, however, Master Đ. perceives his female spirit root as a punishment from Heaven. ‘This is against nature’s law. And it’s also against the morality by society. I know that – how could I not know that? But this is my fate – what can I do about it? There’s nothing I can do about it’ (LMLW). The way how he perceives his own effeminate demeanour and preference for same-sex relations clearly reflects the wider social ambivalence about homosexuality. In one scene of the documentary, Đ. reminisces that he had demonstrated an affinity for female
pursuits like knitting and embroidering from his early childhood. Yet in another scene, he perceives of homosexuality as a ‘contagious disease’ that he had contracted as a teenage boy when he was seduced by his mathematics tutor:

I have a feeling that this disease is contagious. When I was fifteen or sixteen there was a guy who worked close by and came here often. He asked me to come visit him and that he would tutor me with math. He did tutor me, decently, for a few days. Then, from the fourth or fifth day he started with his hanky-panky. At the beginning I was scared. [...] Then suddenly I found it fun. And I felt I liked it. Then I started to like the guy. That’s it. From then on it was getting worse [...] Then later some of my friends – first they didn’t know. They were [genuine] men. And I was fond of them. Then suddenly, they got infected as well. You see! Then one led to a series of others. (LMLW)

In answer to the cheeky question of the filmmaker whether he had ever tried to get ‘cured’ he passionately exclaims, ‘I don’t want to get cured! I don’t want to get cured to be a total man. Because I still find love, I still find fun with people of the same sex. What on earth do I have to get cured for?’ Despite the ambivalence in his opinions, Master Đ. does not clearly distinguish between Vietnamese ‘traditional’ conceptions of male gender transgressive behaviour and contemporary ‘secular’ constructions of male homosexualities. Another male gender-transgressive master interviewed in the documentary, however, sees things differently. He argues that ‘in the old days’ there had been only few đồng cô, but recently their numbers had grown significantly because of exposures to Western ideas and culture:

First we had the đồng cô. Then we got exposed to the West. There are gay people in the West. Now it’s spreading into Vietnam. [...] Being gay is for a [different] class of people – for those men who like being playboys. Spirit mediums like us are different. They should be differentiated. (LMLW)

Besides the conceptualisation of gender transgressive males as đồng cô, Vietnamese culture also offers another explanation for effeminate behaviour in male-bodied individuals. Human beings are believed to possess two different kinds of human souls: three ‘spiritual souls’ called hồn and seven (for men) or nine (for women) ‘material souls’ called via or phách (Nguyen Văn Huyễn 1995 [1945]: 237). According to this concept, an effeminate male may be perceived as having eight via – one more than a normative man and one
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less than a normative woman.\textsuperscript{12} Even more compellingly than the notion of a female spirit root, the idea of eight \textit{vía} emphasises a transgender identity outside the binary system of male and female. This third gender is seen as particularly efficacious in mediating between humankind and the spirit world.

For Master Cảnh, there is no difference between a female spirit root and homosexuality: 'Here they say the female spirit root is too heavy, we don’t refer to it as homosexuality, but in actual fact it is homosexuality, isn’t it. Someone who [sexually] desires men and boys is homosexual, what else.' In his opinion, male effeminacy and homosexuality is the result of a disrupted equilibrium between the two cosmic principles \textit{yin} and \textit{yang} that express the polar quality of all things. Four Palace mediumship, Master Cảnh argues, can be an effective way to restore this equilibrium – or, in his words, to ‘clear the psyche’ (\textit{giải tỏa tâm lý}):

\begin{quote}
[Four Palace mediumship] can clear the psyche. It means that after entering into mediumship [male effeminacy] lessens. That is, it raises their masculinity. In the West you have ways to change your gender. But in Vietnam we sneak into the temples to clear the psyche. (Interview 24.03.2005)
\end{quote}

Whereas many male mediums would in fact be classified as homosexuals, others strictly deny that their demeanour indicates any (sexual) interest in other men. Cường, for example, feels offended because his slightly effeminate behaviour is perceived as a homosexual trait in mainstream Vietnamese society:

\begin{quote}
[As a child], one learns how to speak and then later I develop my way of speaking, so how can this be changed later, the language, voice, manner and bearing are also related to fate, to my spirit root. They cannot be changed […], we are how we are from early childhood, we are born like that. But alas! Many people say, ‘This guy behaves effeminate, womanish, and even transgendered (\textit{ái nam ái nữ})’ […]. If people talk like that it kind of hurts my self-esteem. Sometimes I think if I could behave as dignified as a normal person others wouldn’t say all these spiteful words, but [being like I am] is my fate and I have to accept it.
\end{quote}

By tracing his \textit{đồng cô}-characteristics to the spirit root of the Little Princess, Cường now enjoys recognition within a group-network of fellow-mediums that comprehends his personality in different terms than the vast majority. Like many other gender transgressive male spirit mediums, he has fulfilled social expectations by getting married and fathering children. According to Confucian teachings, the failure to produce offspring is considered the
greatest sin against filial piety (see also Nguyen Van Huyen 1995 [1945]: 29). Not conforming to the expected heterosexual norms by openly assuming a gay identity or, as Lộc and Kỳ have suggested, by practising self-cultivation and living a celibate life is thus not an option pursued by many. Rather, as one of my interlocutors put it, they choose to have ‘one leg in each world’ (kiêm chi đôi nước) and only act out their transgender identities in the safe space of Four Palace mediumship.

As mentioned above, the đồng cô are often perceived as exceptionally talented and dextrous in ritual performance. For Master Thuận, artistic skilfulness is an innate or essential characteristic of transgendered people that he (in stark contrast to Master Cảnh!) links to a greater balance of the male and female element: ‘All over the world, transvestites and homosexuals are more skilful than normal people, because [...] the unity of yin and yang always brings forth people of talent beyond the normal’. But while, on the one hand, they are seen to make the Four Palace religion prosper, concern has been voiced from within their own ranks that nowadays many đồng cô smear the religion’s image by bringing in a lot of negative things:

Despite their skilfulness, most đồng cô don’t take the right path in the religion. Eighty-five percent of them follow the wrong path (di theo tà đạo), i.e. they are stubborn, deceitful, untruthful, dishonest and chaotic. It is perhaps difficult to make them improve their conduct, but it is these people who have made the spirit religion (thần đạo) prosper, without the đồng cô the religion cannot develop (Interview with Master Thuận, 10.05.2006).

For the octogenarian Master Nga, the đồng cô are at best a bunch of nonsensical liars and pleasure seekers, and a gang of drug dealers at worst. Based on what she has learned from the media she rails against their alleged immoral and sinful conduct, although she herself has initiated many đồng cô into ritual practice. One of her followers is assistant Lâm who was twenty-four at the time of this research and apparently no longer as obedient to his old master as he used to be when he was initiated at the tender age of fourteen:

When he was seventeen or eighteen years old, he often drove me crazy, and then I gave him a good scream and he didn’t dare to do it again. But now that he is grown up I said to him, ‘I’m not following you [in person] but I’m following [the likes of] you on television, they call you “queens” (bà hoàng hậu) and “imperial concubines” (bà cung phi), right?
Just watch out what kind of gangs you’re hanging out with. Whether or not someone respects you, trusts you, feels compassion for you, or hates you – it all depends on your own conduct, so whatever you do you better not commit a sin!’ (Interview 20.02.2006)

Figure 5.4 Master Nga (front) attends the *lên đồng* of her ‘incense child’, Lâm
As I have shown in this section, gender transgressive males are creatively drawing from and (re)combining a diverse range of “traditional” and “modern” concepts in order to forge their transgender, bisexual or homosexual identities within and across various social and ritual spaces. However, Master Nga's condescending attitude towards the contemporary đồng cô also shows that “‘modern” ways of being homosexual threaten not only the custodians of “traditional” morality, they also threaten the position of “traditional” forms of homosexuality, those which are centred around gender nonconformity and transvestism’ (Altman 2001: 88). The ‘queering’ of Four Palace mediumship can, on the one hand, be attributed to a greater tolerance of gender transgressive behaviour in Vietnamese society at large. On the other hand, there seems to be a felt need to conceive of non-normative gender (and sexuality) in a way that marks it as inherent to Vietnamese culture rather than as a Western-influenced (debauched) fashion. Four Palace mediumship thus becomes a creative liminal space in which non-normative, or transgressive, gender identities are acted out.

### Constructing unique identities

In contrast to the đồng cô, gender transgressive females are much less evident in the world of mediums. However, women, too, carve out alternative identities in the lên đốn world that not only reach beyond the normative boundaries of gender appropriate behaviour, but also exceed the breadth of Four Palace mediumship in its, let’s say, conventional form. At the beginning of this chapter I introduced Master Thiền, the scientific medium, as an ambitious woman who seeks to establish a reputation for efficacy and integrity. This includes offering her followers a diverse range of ritual services outside the established responsibilities of a Four Palace master; for example the ritual cutting of a karmic bond that may undermine a woman’s marriage prospects in this life (lễ cắt tiền duyên), rites for settling karmic debts (lễ trả nợ tào quan) as well as various rites relating to the souls of the ancestors (lễ gia tiên). These rituals require the expertise of other ritual specialists such as diviners, spirit priests and soul-callers (người gọi hồn), i.e people who act as vessels for the souls of the dead.

Let me provide an example of Master Thiền’s networking skills in pursuit of offering ‘need based solutions’ to her followers. Quốc and Tâm are a young couple with three daughters, two of them twins. Both have decent jobs and a
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seemingly good life. Quốc even owns a private car, which is still the exception in Hanoi. Despite all this, there were signs indicating that something was not right.14 Thầy Nhật, the fortune-teller, consulted an areca-nut oracle and reckoned that the couple’s house was haunted by ghost soldiers (âm binh). These malicious and greedy beings are believed to prevent proper contact between the family and their ancestors. Before any further steps were taken, Master Thiền recommended first inviting the female soul-caller Quyên to the couple’s house to let her try to establish contact with the ancestors. During the séance, however, Quyên was only able to invite the soul (gọi hồn) of a very young girl who had died prematurely at the age of five.15 The ancestors, however, were unable to incarnate in the soul-caller because the ghost soldiers allegedly blocked all the entrances to the house. This was proof that something had to be done in order to rid the house of the ghost soldiers and restore auspicious conditions for the family. As a next move, because this was a particularly precarious case, Master Thiền recommended the services of Thầy Khán, a thầy cúng of higher repute than her regular associate Thầy Hiền. One month later, the ritual – consisting of incantations, filing petitions and burning paper offerings – was held in front of the family altar. After Thầy Khán had summoned the ghost soldiers and (symbolically) provided them with (votive paper) clothing and food, it was the soul-caller’s turn again. This time, Quyên was able to call Quốc’s father. His soul confirmed that the ghost soldiers were gone and that the ancestors were now able to receive the family’s offerings meant to ease their life in the otherworld. Two days later, Master Thiền invited Thầy Nhật to her temple in order to have him read some of her followers’ fortunes. Quốc was there and, when his turn came, the fortune-teller spread his deck of cards and exclaimed: ‘It looks very good, nothing more to worry!’

The souls of the dead are in fact a serious concern in Vietnamese society. Mortuary beliefs assume that if not properly cared for, they may become potentially malevolent, hungry ghosts who can cause all kinds of misfortune to the living. This is particularly true if death has occurred under violent circumstances, as this will cause the soul to remain eternally trapped in the traumatic memory of mortal agony, a condition Kwon (2006) describes as ‘grievous death’ (chết oan). This condition entails the precarious possibility for these souls to be unable to make the transition to the Otherworld. Instead, they may ‘angrily roam the earth looking for any food and care they can find’ (Malarney 2002: 180). The vast number of Vietnamese war dead who lost their lives during the so-called American War, estimated by
Hirschman et al. (1995) at one million, suggests that innumerable ‘ghosts of war’ still haunt the country in both a figurative and a literal sense (see Kwon 2006, 2007, Gustafsson 2010). While the official state commemoration of war dead glorifies the dead soldiers’ contribution to the national cause of reunification and independence, it does not resolve the most pressing concern for the bereaved: the fate of the war martyrs’ souls (Malarney 2001). This is where Master Thiền’s most ambitious spiritual project comes in. As the events have been described in detail elsewhere (Endres 2008, Endres and Lauser forthcoming), I shall limit myself here to a brief summary of the most essential points.

In November 2006, Master Thiền mobilised her network of supporters and followers to raise funds for the organisation of a major ritual to be held at Đồng Lộc junction in the central province of Hà Tĩnh. During the American War, this intersection was a strategically and logistically important part of the legendary “Ho Chi Minh Trail” (referred to as the Trường Sơn Road in Vietnam), as virtually every supply truck heading south had to pass it. In their efforts to destroy the logistical network, American aircraft heavily bombarded the area. Among the victims of the carpet bombings was a squad of ten young volunteer girls who had been levelling bomb craters to keep the junction open to traffic. The girls were buried near the place where they had met their premature death. In the early 1990s, the area was declared a historical site (khu di tích) and various memorials in honour of the war dead were constructed. The graves holding the remains of the ten girls were upgraded and currently constitute the most important site of commemoration at Đồng Lộc junction. Because they were ten in number when they sacrificed their lives at one single stroke (the number ten implies completeness) and their bodies were found intact and undamaged by the bombing, the ten girls are believed to possess divine powers that may be summoned for the benefit of the living. The Mông Sơn-ritual organised by Master Thiền (and performed by thầy Hiền and his apprentices) had a twofold purpose. It pertained to the general aim of bringing peace and salvation (in terms of escaping the cycle of rebirth and attaining nirvana) to the wandering souls of Đồng Lộc junction, and it served the specific purpose of smoothing the process of the Ten Girls turning into benevolent deities (biến thành những vị thiên thần). With untiring fervour, Master Thiền collected donations worth 18 million Vietnam Đồng, of which 14 million were used to buy votive paper offerings (e.g. paper shirts with matching ties, paper military uniforms, hats and shoes). The ritual was held at the memorial site and subsequently followed by a series of soul-calling rites
that enabled Master Thiền’s followers to establish direct contact with the girls and ask for their assistance and advice. But the Ten Girls also pursued their own agenda and asked for more rituals to be held at various war cemeteries along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Master Thiền complied with the demands of the girls’ souls and committed herself to raising funds for another ritual dedicated to the liberation of the national war martyrs’ souls. In December 2007, on the occasion of the 63rd anniversary of the Vietnamese People’s Army, she organised an even bigger Mông Sơn-ritual at Trường Sơn National Cemetery, which contains over ten thousand graves of fallen soldiers. Her wealthy supporters had contributed over forty million Vietnam Đồng, most of which went up in flames in order to cater to the war martyrs’ needs in the Otherworld.

Master Thiền’s efforts at healing the wounds of war are timely and seem to meet an urgent need in contemporary Vietnam (see Gustaffson 2010, Schlecker and Endres 2011). During his trip to Vietnam in February 2007, the exiled Vietnamese Zen monk Thích Nhất Hạnh held several ‘reliquary ceremonies to untie the knots of great injustice’ (lễ giải oan). Like the Mông Sơn-ritual, a giải oan-ceremony is intended to liberate the souls of those who died unjustly or whose bodies were never found. Master Thiền, however, is not a Zen Buddhist monastic. As a bà đồng of the Four Palace religion, she offers her followers and supporters a wide range of ritual services and remedies that pertain to her followers’ this-worldly concerns rather than to the Buddhist aim of detachment from the world. Although some of her ‘ritual management strategies’ are certainly entrepreneurial in character (Endres 2010), she is not a businesswoman and therefore depends on her followers’ generous contributions in order to finance her ritual projects. However, through her activities she gives her (predominately female) supporters the chance to reconcile their spiritual needs with patriotic sentiments and to ‘re-moralise their wealth’ (Jellema 2005) by remembering their moral debt (nhở ơn) to those who had sacrificed their lives so that others could live in peace and prosper. Moreover, she constitutes her own identity as a ‘scientific medium’ who is skilful in organisation and efficacious in securing divine benefits for her supporters by exploring (and inventing) new ways of tapping into supernatural powers.

In the previous chapter, I presented the example of Master Tùng’s highly individualised style in ritual performance and pointed out that ‘the spirits’ rules’ are, to some considerable extent, open to creative adaptation and personal interpretation. Whereas Master Tùng is a truly exceptional case, my
interlocutors have often emphasised that ‘nobody is alike’ (không ai giống ai) and that in the world of mediumship it is important to distinguish oneself from another. This difference may manifest itself, for example, in the habitual embodiment of a Four Palace deity that other mediums usually skip in their performances. For an aspiring master in contemporary Hanoi it is particularly crucial to set himself apart from others because he has to outperform a growing number of competitors on the lên đồng scene. When I started comparing the palace-opening rituals of several masters, I found a puzzling variety in details where I had least expected it. But rather than reinventing the wheel, most of them develop their own style by watching other masters’ performances and choosing certain elements over others:

When I started out [as a master] I cast my own mould, I had to find my own unique way (không giống ai), I didn’t learn from anyone particular but I gathered from this man a little, from that woman a bit and I made it my own. When it becomes my own it does not resemble anyone else’s style, it is a little bit different from everybody else. (Interview with Master Cảnh, 22.03.2006)

Figure 5.5 Votive paper offerings for the war dead
(Trường Sơn National Cemetery, 2007)
Master Thiện, besides refining her ritual style, has not only expanded her specialisation as a bà đồng to include other ritual services but also her supernatural network of divine beings that can be approached for favours and blessings. Master Đ. has firmly established his standing as the most skilful (giỏi nhất) master in contemporary Hanoi (if not in the whole of North Vietnam) and tries to integrate his spiritual path as an illustrious đồng cô with his openly gay lifestyle. Master Cành, in turn, builds his reputation on his ‘superior’ masculine qualities and on his moral integrity as a male master medium who enjoys a happy family life besides fulfilling his religious duties. Despite having carved their own niche, however, master mediums carefully watch each others steps. From ritual lapses to scandalous rumours (‘Master X has gambled away all his money!’; ‘Master Y gets high on Ecstasy at the New Century Club!’), the news usually spreads like wildfire in the world of mediums, and everybody is careful not to become the target of criticism and mockery.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the entrepreneurial aspects of Four Palace mediumship can in fact be (re)phrased in market terminology such as ‘consumer profiles’, ‘customer orientation’, ‘service and product quality’, ‘personal business networks’, ‘marketing strategy’, etc. (Endres 2010). It does seem legitimate to perceive of mediums as investing in an enterprise (i.e. their temples, their networks) and designing a product that is marketed (by word of mouth) to a more or less clearly defined clientele who are well aware of what’s on offer. Over time, master mediums may reshape their products (or services) in order to make them more attractive or adapt them to the changing needs of clients, for example by copying from other masters or by creating product innovations. Clients, in turn, shop around for a master who meets their demands in terms of gender, sexual orientation, age compatibility, product specialisation, intensity of customer care, affordability, and quality of service in relation to cost. Yet the attempt to describe Four Palace mediumship in terms of a rational cost-benefit calculation does not do adequate justice to the complex and ‘disorderly’ nature of a religious phenomenon. The contradictory contestations involved in the contemporary fashioning of Four Palace mediumship and the divergent claims to ritual authenticity are not just a matter of fierce competition in the religious marketplace. They also raise the question of whose religious interpretations ultimately acquire authority and legitimacy and under what conditions. The next chapter shall therefore link the various contestations and negotiations in Four Palace mediumship with the discourse concerning Vietnamese national identity and cultural heritage. In particular, I shall examine the changing official attitudes and
policies towards Four Palace mediumship (i.e. expressed by state agencies, scholar-intellectuals, and the media) and how they are received in the world of mediumship.

Notes

1 According to several of my interlocutors, the generally accepted rule actually stipulates that after initiation, a medium must ‘serve the spirits’ for at least ten years before he or she may proclaim him-/herself a master and start conducting initiations, and they criticised Master Thiền for not adhering to this rule.

2 There are several options for an initiation into mediumship. If the destined person for some reason or other does not (or not yet) wish to be initiated as a medium, he or she may be given the option to have a khất căn ritual organised in order to ask for a delay. Another option is to have a tiên căn-ritual that aims at cutting the root, or seeing off the fate of a medium. However, mediums say that that ritual only works if the căn is light (nhẹ) – a person with a heavy căn invariably has to enter into mediumship (ra đồng). For destined mediums who for some reason (e.g. if they cannot afford it) cannot serve the Four Palace deities on a regular basis (by holding 1–2 lên đồng rituals each year), the master medium can also cắt hâu after the palace opening ritual, i.e. ask for an exemption from the ritual duty for a certain number of years.

3 One of Nhất Lang’s stories, ‘The spirit punishes’, relates the story of a male temple master who raped the daughter of one of his rich female followers. The girl had been in his care because she had been sick and the master had recommended the parents to have her initiated as a medium. During her stay at the temple, he forced her to have intercourse with him and threatened that the spirits would punish her if she would refuse. When the parents of the girl found out, the master was brought before court and ended up in prison. Like most of the other stories, The Spirit Punishes aims at illustrating the alleged immorality of Four Palace mediums.

4 Regular (or amateur) mediums also have to follow this rule, but usually only for one day.

5 Master Nga’s attitude is concordant with the view of the colonial-era sources (e.g. Nhất Lang 1952 and Lộng Chương 1990 [1942] who depict Four Palace mediums as women of loose morals).

6 Contrary to what prevailing connotations of the term may suggest, however, transgendering does not in any case entail same-sex relations (Peletz 2006: 311).

7 In the French colonial imagination, however, Vietnam (or rather ‘Indochina’) stood out ‘as a site of homosexuality, and more particularly as characterised by physical androgyny’ (Yee 2001: 270; see also Proschan 2002a; 2002b). In turn-
of-the-nineteenth-century literary texts, the ‘androgy nous young male’ was both a figure of beauty as well as a symbol of moral and sexual depravity. Women, on the other hand, were often portrayed as lacking grace and femininity (see Proschan 2002a). These colonial constructions of Vietnamese genders not only displaced anxieties about gender identity ‘from the imperial centre to the geographical periphery of empire and from the centre of (French) identity to the Other’ (Yee 2001: 279), but also constituted an important part of the rationale for justifying French colonial rule in Indochina.

8 The Vietnamese term for hermaphrodite is ăi nam ăi nữ which literally means ‘love man love woman’. The term is also used to indicate androgyny and bisexuality; see http://vietqueer.net/glossary.

9 Dror (2002: 67) mentions that Princess Liễu Hạnh sometimes disguised herself as an old woman and sometimes as a beautiful young lady. According to popular imagination, however, Liễu Hạnh, during her second life on earth, appeared in many places both as a woman (when she encountered men) and as a man (when she encountered women) in order to ‘tease’ them. While this kind of gender crossing is not mentioned in the Vân Cát Thần Nữ Truyện, Đoàn Thị Điểm’s story relates that Liễu Hạnh crossed the gender boundary in her official deification by the Lê dynasty, when she was conferred the title Chế Thắng Hòa Diệu Đại Vương (Great King who grants victory and peace). Thus, the last part of the Vân Cát Thần Nữ Truyện refers to her not as a female deity, but as a male king (see Dror 2002: 72).

10 According to Thien Do (2003: 133), ‘The meaning of the word tu (Chinese: hsiu – to correct, repair, reform, improve) has long entwined the Confucian trajectory of tu thân (self-correction, perfectibility), or tu tâm (cultivate the heart-mind), with the Daoist tu luyện (training – as in various meditative arts including alchemy and magic) and with the Buddhist tu niệm (perfecting thought and imagination).’

11 There are various terms that indicate homosexuality, and ‘gay’ has been adopted most recently into Vietnamese lingo. The colloquial word pê đê has apparently been adopted from the French péderaste, whereas ăi nam ăi nữ confers the meaning of ‘half man half woman’, or, more literally, ‘love man love woman’, which is also the title of a documentary by Nguyen Trinh Thi (2005). Blanc (2005: 665) mentions the expression lại cái, translated as ‘penetrated by the female spirit’ and most probably used in the south rather than in the north of Vietnam. For official usage, the term đồng tính luyến ái has been adopted. According to Pastoetter (2004), the term is a literal translation of the Chinese word for homosexuality that came into use in the 1930s.

12 In popular usage, this concept generally relates to gender transgressive males. In contrast, women with ‘male characteristics’ are not said to have eight via.

13 Only one of my female interlocutors, a spirit medium in her early fifties named Yên, told me that as a child she had behaved ‘like a boy’, she had her hair trimmed short and wore trousers. When she grew up, however, she said she let her hair
grow and behaved in a feminine way. However, when I tried to press the topic a bit and asked her whether she had felt as if she had been born in the wrong body, like some đồng cô would claim, she explained that only her character is ‘like a man’s’ and that otherwise she was not ‘deviant’ (lệch lạc).

14 I never really found out what it was except that the couple had apparently lost a huge sum to a stock fraudster and was trying to retrieve that money.

15 The souls of those who died young are considered as particularly skilful in circumventing obstacles and finding an entrance to their family’s home.


17 Of the numerous deities in the pantheon, only about fifteen to twenty are regularly performed. To give an example, one of my interlocutors, a professional assistant named Sơn, specialises on the Ninth Prince (Ông Chín Cờn Môn) who I had never seen embodied in any of the lên đồng rituals I participated in. Sơn has a special aptitude for this prince and his invitees say he is the most beautiful spirit incarnation in his rituals. The prince dresses as a Confucian scholar, wears glasses and carries a black umbrella.

18 During a lễ mở phủ, the four palaces are symbolised by four pots that contain water and are covered with paper in the colour of the corresponding palace (red, yellow, white and green). The palaces are very literally opened with a wooden water-dipper by the first four Great Mandarins. However, even though this is an initiation ritual that I had expected to allow for less creative variation, the opposite seemed to be the case. Some masters have the First Mandarin (dressed in red) open the red palace while others have the First Mandarin only read the petition to the deities while the Second Mandarin (green) opens both the red and the green palace. Other masters have the Third Mandarin (green) open the yellow palace and the Fourth Mandarin (yellow) open the green palace. Whereas some masters use colour ribbons to tie the novice’s head after the palace has been opened, others (e.g. Master Cảnh) have abolished this detail in order to save time.
The Heritagisation of Four Palace Mediumship

In October 2006, I learned from the news that a huge event had taken place under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Information in Côn Sơn–Kiếp Bạc, in the precincts of the famous temple dedicated to Saint Trần. Many ‘renowned hâu bọng groups from various provinces’ had apparently participated in what was hailed by the media as the first Lên Đồng Festival (festival lên đồng; lễ hội lên đồng) (N.A. 2006a). The rituals performed on a large stage in front of the temple gate were described as a ‘folk performing art’ (nghệ thuật diễn xướng dân gian) and as a ‘spiritual theatre’ (sân khấu tâm linh) that combines elements of folk art and belief. Whereas the event received a good deal of positive coverage in the press, none of my interlocutors from Hanoi had told me beforehand about the festival. I had participated in many rituals and pilgrimages during the first weeks of October, as this was the occasion of Trần Hưng Đạo’s death anniversary (celebrated in the eighth lunar month) and thus a busy time for master mediums. Although the community of mediums is tightly knit and usually every movement is commented upon, the Lên Đồng Festival had not been the subject of idle gossip – at least not in the circles where I moved.

In fact this was not the first time that lên đồng was performed on stage. In 1993, a stage adaptation of three spirit incarnations known as The Three Spirits (Ba Giá Đồng) was choreographed by the Hà Nam Chèo Troupe and subsequently performed by performance artists in theatres and at festivals in Vietnam and abroad (Norton 2009: 203–212; see also Norton 2002). Initially, it had met with opposition from the Department of Performing Arts and official censors. Norton considers the fact that permission was finally granted as a significant step towards the folklorisation of mediumship. Some
years later, *The Three Spirits* were complemented by another theatricalised version of *lên đồng* ritual. Created by the Nam Định Chèo Troupe and called *The Five Spirits* (Năm Giá Đồng), it apparently featured a truly spectacular show of mystical imagination, described by Norton (2009: 209) as follows: ‘The flashing multicoloured lighting, the booming amplified music, the elaborate costumes, and the vivacious choreography seem more akin to a rock concert than to a conventional *cheo* performance.’ From the extracts of the 2006 Lên Đồng Festival broadcast by the national channel VTV2 in a documentary entitled *The Vitality of Trance Music and Mediumship* (Sức Sống của Hát Văn – Hậu Đồng) (December 2006), it seems that the rock concert analogy may not be too far from the mark in this case either. The significant difference from *The Five Spirits*, however, was that that the Lên Đồng Festival brought ‘the real thing’ to the stage. However, as one scholar quoted by the media remarked, the performing groups ‘had emphasised the artistic quality of *lên đồng* more strongly than its spiritual aspects’. This, he argued, had been possible because ‘a cultural phenomenon can bring different aspects to the fore’ (N.A. 2006a).

It has in fact been a long journey from the condemnation of Four Palace mediumship as a wasteful superstition to its glorification as a folk performing art. From there, it may be only a small step to its appropriation, and reification, as part of Vietnam’s national cultural heritage. This chapter will look at the changing official discourses and attitudes towards *lên đồng* ritual (articulated by state authorities, intellectuals and the media) and analyse to what extent these discourses have informed ritual practice and discourse in the mediums’ world. Ritual competition among spirit mediums and religious commodifications are a particular hot topic of debate, and accusations in this vein are not entirely unfounded. I shall therefore discuss the possibility of Four Palace mediumship becoming a religion for the rich and outline different attempts to tame and streamline its unruly aspects.

**From ‘superstition’ to ‘beautiful tradition’**

We have to distinguish between superstition and belief. The state law protects the freedom of religion, but it prohibits fortune telling, reading horoscopes, face reading, soul-calling, mediumistic trances (*lên đồng*), casting divinatory sticks, making amulets, worshipping ghosts, the đội bát nhang ritual of carrying incense holders on the head, buying and selling
votive paper offerings, or curing illnesses by magical means (Directive 214-CT/TW, 15.1.1975).

In the late nineteenth century, the European concept of superstition was incorporated into the vocabulary of modernity produced by the Japanese modernising elite of the Meiji era. Translated and ideographed as meishin, deluded faith, the term quickly spread to other regions in Asia as mixin (China), misin (Korea), and mê tín in Vietnam, where it came into use after 1945. Akin to its meaning in the post-Enlightenment West, the category of superstition would henceforth serve as ‘modernity’s subversive alter ego, connoting things irrational, invalid, and consequently harmful’ (Kendall 2009: 4). It is important to note at this juncture that – contrary to what modernisation theory postulates – the ‘decline of magic’ in Europe had not been a natural or automatic consequence of industrialisation. Quite the reverse – as Anagnost (1994: 224) notes, it had been ‘a process accompanied by great violence in the retooling of a proletariat for the disciplines of labor in a capitalist reorganization of production’. Only in retrospect had the disenchantment of the world, the erosion of the belief in magic, been declared an inevitable product of historical progress (see also Styers 2004). In a related vein, Prasenjit Duara (1991: 74) points out that in the twentieth century modernisation basically served as a pretext for the expansion of state power into all aspects of social life, ‘in the claim that it is a political form that is radically different from previous states in its ability to represent all of the people and, through the mastery of the true nature of reality, bring progressive material growth’.

In Republican China (1912–1949), the campaigns against popular religion launched by the Nationalist state thus primarily aimed at asserting power in local communities ‘by defining legitimate believers in such a way as to exclude those whom it found difficult to bring under its political control’ (ibid.: 80), including sorcerers, ritual specialists and healers. The Maoist state continued the campaigns of the Republican period on a different level of discourse. In the early years of the socialist state, the crusade against the ‘feudal heritage’ strongly emphasized class struggle with the aim of transforming the ideology of the masses ‘by rooting out practices identified as tools used by the ruling classes . . . to blind the masses to their own oppression and to encourage them toward political passivity though a blind acceptance of “fate”’ (Anagnost 1994: 227). With the consolidation of Maoist state power, however, the struggle against ‘feudal superstition’ took on a more educational tone that ‘aimed at refashioning a backward peasantry whose ideology lagged behind the historical development of China’s progress towards socialism’ (ibid.).
Although the similarities in rhetoric and ideology between Chinese and Vietnamese campaigns against popular ritual are striking, it is worth taking a closer look at how the ‘politics of ritual displacement’ (Anagnost 1994) evolved in revolutionary Vietnam. In the 1943 Theses on Vietnamese Culture (written by Trường Chinh, Secretary-General of the Vietnamese Communist Party from 1941 to 1956), culture was declared to be one of three fronts – alongside economic and political fronts – in the revolutionary struggle.1 The three principles dân tộc hoá, đại chúng hoá and khoa học hoá – nationalisation, popularisation and scientification – introduced in the Theses constituted the guiding concepts for the project of building a new culture and a new life. The principle of dân tộc hoá deserves particular attention. As carefully observed and discussed by Kim Ninh (2002: 29), the phrase has a much wider connotation than the concepts of nationhood and patriotism: ‘It demands an active return to what is uniquely Vietnamese, or, simply put, it asks for Vietnamization.’ Accordingly, the new culture promoted by the Communist leadership was envisioned as representing simply the best of Vietnam’s cultural heritage. The stance towards tradition that was taken by Party ideologues like Trường Chinh was equally selective. By advancing the ‘fine Vietnamese traditions and customs’ while excluding only their ‘obsolete, corrupt and feudal characteristics’, it was assumed that a people with ‘pure and beautiful customs’ (phong thuần tục mỹ) would emerge (Trường Chinh 1994: 250–251).

After the French had been defeated in 1954, the revolutionary authorities took power in North Vietnam and embarked on their ambitious project of socialist renewal. Certain components of popular religion figured prominently on the blacklist of cultural reform. The need for measures in this vein became all the more pressing when the desire for rituals and entertainment returned with a vengeance after the turbulent and violent land reform in North Vietnam (1953–1956). A conference summary of the Ministry of Culture reported that in 1956 the Kiếp Bạc Festival and the famous Perfume Pagoda Festival (Hội Chùa Hương) had attracted ‘tens of thousands of people’.2 The fact that these important religious festivals had been held, so the report continues, ‘strengthened public confidence in our system, the Party and the government with regard to the policy of religious freedom’.3 Furthermore, chairman Đào Duy Kỳ asserted that a policy of abolishing superstitions (mê tín dị đoan) and beliefs (tín ngưỡng) was not justifiable because this would be ‘against the spiritual and ideological interests of the masses’. Rather, the report stresses that new contents needed to be developed in order to ‘adapt the existing practices to objective reality and make them part of a healthy way of life’. 
In October 1956, the Ministry of Culture issued a detailed circular (thông tư) about the organisation of popular festivals (hội hè của nhân dân). Most significantly, the circular argues that mediumship (đồng bóng) and different forms of soothsaying should not be forcibly restricted or prohibited. Instead, the authorities should rely on the effects of educational measures aimed at raising the people’s level of consciousness. This circular clearly expresses the educational intentions of the Party. By stressing the importance of a strict work discipline and an economical use of resources, labour and time, the rural population was to be guided towards a better and more practicable way of life and work.

The ministry’s activities, however, had to be coordinated with the work of the land reform teams who, at that time, held absolute power in the countryside. Their first and foremost task was to overturn the former elite, break up land holdings and redistribute land and property in a more equitable fashion (Malarney 2002: 23). Lands endowed for ritual purposes were likewise confiscated and divided among the peasants. Sacred spaces associated with the former village elites (i.e. the village communal house, đình) were desacralised, and many pagodas, temples and spirit shrines were vandalised or even destroyed. The revolutionary zealotry of the land reform cadres posed a stark contrast to the Ministry of Culture’s policy regarding the preservation of historic sites and its rather sympathetic stance towards popular religious practices.

In 1958, however, the Communist Party took a hard-line turn in cultural policy. The ministry was criticised for failing to see that ‘culture was first and foremost a weapon in the ideological struggle’ (Ninh 2002: 185). In the realm of popular ritual, its ‘ideological laxness’ had allowed ‘the revival of village festivals, which interfered with production and marked the return of vices like gambling, excessive eating and drinking, and superstitious beliefs’ (ibid.: 186). In the years that followed, the ‘ideological liberation’ of the ‘new socialist person’ was pushed ahead through cultural reforms that were zealously implemented on the local level. These reforms sought to implement a New Way of Life (nếp sống mới) or a New Life (đổi sống mới) by asserting a new moral authority devised by the state (Malarney 2001). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, little standardised booklets on the Conventions on the New Way of Life were published by the central government as well as at province and district levels. Besides political ideology and practical instructions on proper socialist morals and conduct, these booklets contained detailed guidelines for the rational and economical organisation of funerals, weddings and death anniversaries.
One particular aim of the New Life campaign was the liberation (giải phóng) of the people from the bondage of retrograde ideas and customs by the application of science and rationality. Rather than just prohibiting practices defined as superstitious, the policy against superstitions (chính sách chống mê tín dị đoan) was dedicated to uprooting depraved customs and superstitions from the minds of the people by educational means. In several provinces, the cultural offices organised exhibitions that aimed at exposing spiritual practices as a means of the feudal imperialists (đế quốc phong kiến) to enslave and exploit the people by taking advantage of their anxieties. The exhibitions featured ritual items confiscated from spirit priests, sorcerers (phù thủy) and other ritual specialists and tagged as tools of the ruling class, photographs, picture stories (e.g. about the natural causes of infectious diseases and scientific ways of curing them), as well as panels with the texts of relevant laws and regulations. These exhibitions, one report states, made the masses aware of the fact that they were ‘poor and miserable’ not because fate or some spirit willed it, but because the ruling class policy of dumbing down and disheartening the people had used superstition in order to poison their minds and hide them from truth. Moreover, the report continues, the exhibitions helped people to better understand that the causes behind illness and high infant mortality were not evil spirits but a lack of hygienic conditions in the sick-room or a lack of protective measures during pregnancy and birth. The message conveyed was that happiness and well-being did not depend on fate or the will of spirits, but on the people’s own agency (sức người quyết định).

Another part of this strategy of persuasion was that ritual specialists were systematically discredited and villainised as professional charlatans. Special re-education courses (lớp cải tạo) were instated in order to educate them about the harmfulness of their activities and urge them to give testimony of their cunning ploys, some of which were publicised in New Life booklets or in the local press (Lào Cai 1964; Hà Nam Ninh 1976). Finally they had to pledge themselves to henceforth abstain from superstitious activities. Those who did not oblige were sentenced to forced labour. Some of the reformed specialists were subsequently employed in the anti-superstition campaign. The cultural office of Hà Bắc province (a merger of the two provinces Bắc Ninh and Bắc Giang in the time of 1962–1996), for example, used former diviners in order to generate awareness among the masses about the dishonest tricks (bịp bợm) and harmfulness of fortune-telling.

Although these efforts had a considerable diminishing effect on ritual activities, they ultimately did not prevent the people from seeking the advice of
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diviners or the help of supernatural forces. Abridged lén dòng rituals were held in strict secrecy at night and without any music that would have betrayed them. Four Palace mediums also continued to travel to the mountainous areas to perform their rituals despite the rigours of the trip during wartime. For a small bribe, the police in these remote places were apparently more willing to turn a blind eye to ‘superstitious practices’ than their comrades in the Red River Delta. Moreover, temples renowned for their supernatural efficacy (thiêng) continued to be a favoured destination for pilgrims from the lowlands. Notably, the end of the 1960s saw an intensification of ritual practices that was closely linked to the escalation of the war and the consequent bombing of North Vietnam. The cultural office of the Việt Bắc region (comprising several provinces in the northern mountainous area) mentions one particular temple (đền) in Phổ Yên district (Thái Nguyên province) that became famous because no death notification had ever been made to the families of soldiers from the region. This had apparently led to the assumption that, so far, none of the combatants native to the region had fallen during the war. The report continues that the ‘clique of spirit traders’ (bọn buôn thần bán thánh) had spread rumours saying that the spirit worshipped at the temple would grant special protection to the young

Figure 6.1 Rural dwellers praying in front of a shrine
The heritagisation of four palace mediumship

men. Consequently, pilgrims from all over the North flocked in droves to this temple in order to hold divinatory rituals and ask for the spirit’s protection.

The ritual intensification in the last years of the American War is also reflected in numerous government directives and circulars issued in the early 1970s. In a directive issued in 1971, the Ministry of Culture disapproved of the fact that people from all over the country were flocking to major places of worship in order to attend religious and ‘superstitious’ rites (Nam Hà 1971: 5–12). After the war, it became even more difficult to control the rising religious fervour of the people. A circular issued in 1975 as a reaction to the ‘revivification of superstitions and depraved customs’ by the Buddhist Association of Hanoi nicely describes the situation that unfolded in urban and rural pagodas. Besides burning votive paper offerings and shaking divinatory wands, the faithful were inciting each other to rent cars and go on pilgrimages to the provinces, ‘thereby misusing the freedom of religion and the freedom of travelling to solicit donations, embezzle donation money, revive heretic trances (đồng bóng tà giáo), and bribe the driver into smuggling illegal goods’.

The circular required all items used for performing superstitious acts to be removed from Buddhist pagodas and their adjacent shrines dedicated to the Mother Goddesses (nhà mẫu).

The cultural office of Hà Bác took even more drastic measures. In several districts, the Cultural Committee, the Fatherland Front and the Buddhist Association allied in order to completely dismantle the Mother Goddess shrines of 178 pagodas. In order to prevent the occasional, spontaneous resurrection of village festivals in the first half of the 1970s from becoming a mass movement, the government issued a new decree in 1975, maintaining that ‘village festivals which for a long time had not been organised are prohibited from being restored now’. Even worse, festivals considered as closely related to superstitious practices, such as the Phú Giây Festival, were to be erased (xóa bỏ). In a little brochure entitled Here! The Real Essence of the Phú Giây Festival (Đây! Thực Chất Hội Phú Giây), the cultural office of Hà Nam Ninh admits that although the festival had not been organised for several years, ‘ten thousands’ of pilgrims would still travel to the site in the third lunar month instead of being industrious in production and practising thrift in order to ‘preserve the fruits of the revolution, the building of socialism and the struggle for peace and reunification’ (Hà Nam Ninh 1976: 29). The booklet thus argues that:

The Phú Giây Festival, a product of the old society, an instrument of the ruling class, most certainly does not have a basis in modern society. [We
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must] abolish a superstitious festival that has caused great misery and harm in the lives of many people; we must zealously sweep clean the evil of superstition on the glorious and victorious road of the revolution (Hà Nam Ninh 1976: 30).

The ‘real essence’ of the festival is basically revealed by pointing out its superstitious traits. However, the author of the first chapter, Tuấn Cầu, also hints at another aspect directed against the principal goddess worshipped at the site: Princess Liễu Hạnh. He argues that there are two contradictory views concerning the character of the goddess. One is that she had lived an exemplary life during her human existence that led to her posthumous deification. Yet others believed that she had been an immoral (lằng lơ) woman who enjoyed fooling men and became a demonic spirit after death. Because of the latter view, so Tuấn Cầu argues, no person of decent morals would have ever visited, or allowed their daughters to visit, the Phủ Giầy Festival (ibid.: 15). Interestingly, this interpretation resonates with a brief version of Princess Liễu Hạnh’s story recorded by the Italian missionary Adriano di St. Thecla in the eighteenth century. According to this legend, she had been murdered and thrown into the river because ‘she had sung, as [people] say, disgracefully and impudently’, thus hinting at the possibility that Liễu Hạnh may have been a woman of easy virtue during her earthly existence (Di St. Thecla 2002: 145; see also Dror 2007: 66). Rather than speculating on the decency of Princess Liễu Hạnh, pre-revolutionary literature had often emphasised the loose morals of female spirit mediums. In the same vein, a booklet issued by the cultural office of Thanh Hóa province in 1975 draws from folk poetry (ca dao) that centres on the sexual prowess of the bà đồng and their alleged illicit affairs with chầu văn musicians and male mediums:

In the third month there is a festival at Phủ Giầy
I’ll tell you a story, believe it or abstain
The bà đồng beats the drum like rippling rain
She dances up and down until she gets stung by a bee
The bee stings her and she cries, ‘Wee!’
The ông Đồng wants to know just why?
The bà đồng says, ‘It’s nice, oh my!’
Only three days later the ông Đồng feels the ripple again!12

At the local level, government resolutions like the ones mentioned above were publicised through various channels, for example through clubs (câu lạc bộ) established in the villages for this purpose. These extended arms of
the state drew on the ubiquitous booklets published by the cultural offices in order to organise lectures and discussions for the masses. Like government resolutions and circulars, these educational pamphlets now serve as a valuable resource because they not only reflect the political mood of the time, but also provide, if carefully read, an insight into the real situation. Seen from this perspective, the flood of directives and booklets concerned with fighting unsound customs (hủ tục) published in the 1970s must be viewed as part of the Party state’s effort to assert its power vis-à-vis certain elements of traditional culture that continued to challenge state authority by their persistent defiance of prohibition. In his work on the decollectivisation in Vietnam, Ben Kerkvliet (1995: 415; see also Kerkvliet 2005) has shown that ‘local practices and arrangements can create pressures on higher official circles to take notice – which can result in the state trying to curb those local activities or to take them into consideration and revise national programs’. This not only applies to agrarian production. As I have argued in my work on village festivals, continuous pressure from below had also been a decisive factor in the rethinking of state policies towards Vietnamese ‘traditional culture’ (Endres 2000; 2001).

When đổi mới came fully into effect in 1986, it allowed the doors of shrines and temples to swing open wide and let a fresh breeze blow away the dust that had accumulated during decades of (forced) neglect. Sacred sites which had been used as storehouses or administrative units by the state cooperatives were reclaimed as communal places of worship. Once again, village communal houses, lineage halls and Buddhist pagodas became, to borrow the words of Ann Anagnost (1994: 223), ‘the vehicles of local memory that restore to local communities a sense of place marked by the singularity of their history and their ritual traditions’. In the course of this movement, the government recognised the need to assign a more appropriate role to Vietnam’s cultural heritage. In 1987 the politburo passed a resolution that characterised Vietnamese culture as ‘the quintessence of the soul, the intellect, the productivity and ethics of our people’, as ‘a spiritual force in the thousand-year-old history of building and defending our country’ (Nguyễn Văn Linh in Nhân Dân 5.12.1987). The resolution called for an intensification of research on the values of traditional culture and emphasised the continuous need to introduce new cultural values (giá trị văn hoá mới). In a way, thus, the new cultural policy of the đổi mới era tied in neatly with the essential goal of the Vietnamese ‘cultural revolution’, which was to advance beautiful customs and traditions while at the same time creating a new socialist person. This time, however, the people were to have
a strong voice in deciding which elements of the cultural heritage were to be deemed as worthy of preservation.

The reassessment of Vietnamese culture was further influenced by the United Nations ‘Proclamation of the World Decade for Cultural Development 1988–1998’, which promoted the work of preserving and developing cultural heritage and emphasised the role of cultural identity (Pham 2009). Moreover, the adoption of an open door policy heightened the political leadership's concern about the need for a strong national culture in order to protect the country against 'destructive cultural forces from outside'. In this context, the preservation and promotion of Vietnamese folk culture were advocated as a remedy for possible 'social evils' that were perceived to potentially threaten Vietnam's social and moral order. This suggestion was eagerly seized upon by the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (now the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences). In the years that followed, a variety of research projects and conferences carried out by the Centre's various research institutes dealt with issues of culture, popular religion and identity.
The Heritagisation of Four Palace Mediumship

A stage for the performance of spirituality

In the early 1990s the role and function of village ritual festivals were prominent among the topics of investigation (see Endres 2002). Social scientists agreed, on the whole, that village festivals not only fulfilled a basic spiritual need of the people, but also advocated traditional concepts of morality. One of these concepts was particularly emphasised: the grateful commemoration of the ancestors’ achievements, expressed in the proverb ước nước nhớ nguồn (when drinking water, remember the source). The worship of meritorious exemplars – for example as village guardian deities – became an important element in the reification of a national cultural identity through scholarly discourse. Đặng Nghiêm Văn (1996: 46), a leading scholar in the Vietnamese anthropology of religion, considered the worship of guardian deities as an extension of the cult of the ancestors which he defined as the national religion of the Vietnamese. Cleansed of obsolete concepts and superstitions, so he argued, its important past and future function was to consolidate the people’s attachment to their native land: ‘This religion . . . has brought to the Vietnamese a collective consciousness and patriotism capable of sustaining the war for independence and assimilating foreign civilisations without losing their identity.’ In the same vein, Nguyễn Duy Hinh (1996: 41) affirmed the cultural value of guardian deity worship and concluded it should be advanced in order to build a rich and strong nation. On a general level, scholars agreed that ritual festivals (lễ hội) held an important place in modern cultural life, especially in the education of ‘noble thoughts and feelings’ such as patriotism, communal spirit, aesthetic sense, as well as in the promotion of cultural and artistic activities (Lê Hữu Tầng 1994).

In contrast to village ritual festivals, the reassessment of lên đồng rituals was a much more ambiguous endeavour.14 While the Vietnamese countryside was already reverberating with the sound of festival drums, spirit possession rites were still conducted secretly behind closed doors or in a discreet and guarded fashion (see Norton 2009). They were, apparently, more difficult to integrate into the canon of beautiful customs. Yet along with the reassessment of village festivals, scholarly attempts to re-evaluate spirit possession had been underway since the early 1990s. One of the most prominent scholars who argued against the then dominant view of Four Palace mediumship and instead advocated a new approach to its understanding was Professor Ngô Đức Thịnh, then vice-director (and later director) of the Institute of Folklore.
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His first subtle step was to approach the **hậu bóng** ritual and the **châu văn** music that accompanies it from the angle of folk performing arts by arguing that this ‘folk culture phenomenon’ (**hiện tượng văn hóa dân gian**) was a communal cultural activity (**sinh hoạt văn hóa cộng đồng**) and a spiritual theatre (**sân khấu tâm linh**) (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1992: 5–6; see also Phạm 2009: 179f).

In 1992, the Institute of Folklore, in collaboration with the Institute of Literature, hosted a conference in Hanoi entitled ‘Mother Goddess Liễu Hạnh from the Perspective of Legends and Spirit Hagiographies’. As Phạm Quỳnh Phương notes (2009: 181), this was ‘the first collective intellectual attempt to engage with this sensitive issue, albeit cautiously’. In the years that followed, Ngô Đức Thịnh apparently struggled hard to raise the status of the Four Palaces ‘worship’ to that of ‘đạo’ (**religion, Way**) in order to give it greater legitimacy. Despite apparent disagreement within the Institute, he finally settled on the designation **Đạo Mẫu** (**Mother Goddess Religion**). His edited book **Đạo Mẫu ở Việt Nam** (**Mother Goddess Religion in Vietnam**), published in 1996, was the first attempt to situate spirit possession in the ‘indigenous tradition of Mother worship’. Moreover, Ngô Đức Thịnh stressed the role and historical importance of certain Four Palace spirits in building and defending the nation during their lifetime on earth. While he does not completely deny the superstitious aspects of **lên đồng**, these are treated as correctable aberrations of an otherwise valuable cultural practice (Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996: 317).

Owing to the efforts of scholars from the Institute of Folklore (**renamed Institute of Cultural Studies in 2004**), together with petitions from the local population, in 1995 the Phú Giầy Festival was allowed to organise an experimental festival for the first time in nearly forty years (Vasavakul 2003, Norton 2009). After a three-year trial period – during which all ‘superstitious activities’ were banned with the exception of **lên đồng** rituals – the festival was officially acknowledged by the Ministry of Culture and Information in 1998. Three years later, in 2001, Ngô Đức Thịnh organised an international workshop entitled ‘Mother Goddess Worship and the Phú Giầy Festival’. One important aim of this conference was to contextualise the Vietnamese Mother Goddess Religion within the framework of shamanism. In addition to international participants and representatives of government offices, prominent master mediums from different parts of the country were ‘invited to speak, air their views on **lên đồng** and publicly identify their needs’ (Phạm 2009: 182). The Mother Goddess Religion was officially considered an ancient indigenous folk religion of Vietnam, a living museum of Vietnam’s cultural heritage, and an important expression of patriotism owing to the military con-
tributions of various (male) Four Palace deities. Lên đồng possession rituals were treated respectively as the principal ritual (nghi lễ chính) of the Mother Goddess worship, as a folklore health care pattern that brings true therapeutic effects, and as a genre of folk performing arts (see the conference proceedings edited by Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004).

The performance aspects of len đồng ritual had already been emphasised in earlier publications. In an article entitled ‘Some reflections on the theatrical aspects of mediumship’, theatre researcher Trần Việt Ngữ (1993) refers to the ritual of serving the spirits (hầu bồng) as a stage for the spirits’ legends (sân khấu thần tích), which synthesises various dramatic elements such as music, song, dance and storytelling in order to create a vivid image of divine presence. In particular, he stresses the importance of the dynamic interplay between the chầu văn musicians, the performing medium and the ritual participants, and argues that the success of a hầu bồng ritual in instilling a sense of being connected to the spirit world largely depends on the spiritual concentration of all persons involved. Some years later, Ngô Đức Thịnh (1999: 59) again picks up on the theatre analogy and writes: ‘In fact, all the components of hầu

Figure 6.3 Creating divine presence
bóng make it a specific theatre performance where the leading part is played by the medium and the spectators are the cult faithful’ (see also Đỗ Hương 2000; Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2002). As I have illustrated in Chapter 3, Four Palace mediums also draw upon the theatre analogy when they talk about their practice. Many of my interlocutors have been keenly aware of the intellectual discourse of the past decades on their ritual tradition. The most reputed and influential among them, such as Master Dương and others who have worked both with Vietnamese and foreign researchers, have possibly even shaped this discourse. On the other hand, Four Palace mediumship also reflects and reproduces these discourses. The mediumship-as-performance discourse, for example, nicely exemplifies this point as it coincides with a growing emphasis on the performance aspects of lèn đồng ritual practice at the expense of its divinatory and healing functions. Rather than highlighting their supernatural efficacy, contemporary spirit mediums tend to emphasise the meritorious deeds of the Four Palace divinities in defence of the nation and are quick to add that their religion is thus akin to the worship of national heroes. Fortune-telling, although still widely practised, is critically reflected upon and even seen as harmful to the reputation of lèn đồng mediumship among the general public. Whereas its divinatory functions once represented the most crucial aspect of mediumship (see Durand 1959: 12), Master Dương’s plea to ban fortune telling in lèn đồng rituals (cited on page 114) seems to yield to the Party-state’s persistent appeal to eliminate the ‘negative’ aspects of Vietnam’s traditional culture.15

Despite the partial success of scholarly efforts in creating a more positive image of Four Palace mediumship, many neo-Marxist intellectuals in the ministries and other governmental bodies in charge of culture and religion still uphold the distinction between religious belief (tín ngưỡng) and superstition (mê tín) and are wary that the relaxation of state control will lead to a reassertion of the latter. Some scholars still associate Four Palace mediumship with superstition. Along this line, the scholar of religion (and former folklorist) Lê Trung Vũ, in an article titled ‘Superstition – Manifestation and Conception’ (2001), describes lèn đồng essentially as an irrational, pretentious and superstitious religious practice that attracts devotees first and foremost because it is more animated and luxurious (sang trọng) than rites performed in the solemn atmosphere of a Buddhist pagoda. Moreover, in the general population, many people still regard lèn đồng as a superstitious practice, ‘one that reflects the ignorance of its adherents and the lack of competence of the local authorities to control it’ (Phạm 2009: 186). In a survey my assistant
conducted in 2006 among 200 households in Hanoi, 44 percent of the interviewees denied that lên đồng was a ‘spiritual activity imbued with cultural value’ (một sinh hoạt tín ngưỡng có giá trị văn hóa), instead arguing that it was just a form of superstition and commercialisation.

A religion for the rich?

Meanwhile, in their coverage of Four Palace mediumship, the press has turned their attention away from the superstition issue and instead stresses another phenomenon that has (re-)surfaced in the context of the economic development of the past decade: the explosion in ritual expenditure, accompanied by a growing commodification of spirit mediumship. An article written by Ngọc Linh and Vân Anh (2005) is typical in this respect. It points out that master mediums who started out from a humble economic background do not have to worry about material comfort any more as soon as they have enough followers to support them. Furthermore, the authors criticise those master mediums who have turned a ‘spiritual activity’ into a business in order to extract money from the people, as a consequence of which many lose their houses and capital. This view is corroborated by Nguyễn Thuận Thành (2005), who states that many people go bankrupt in their attempts to spoil their masters and to compete in holding sumptuous initiation rituals that cost ‘a minimum of thirty million Vietnam Đồng’ (appr. 1.500 Euro/2000 USD; see also Hà Tâm 2004, Văn Phúc Hậu 2005). Although rumour has it that certain mediums have spent such high amounts of money on their initiations, it is certainly hugely exaggerated to take this sum as the minimum expenditure requirement. Lên đồng rituals are generally described as extremely lavish in terms of luxurious ritual robes for the medium, generous offerings for distribution among the ritual participants, expensive votive paper offerings that are sent to the deities by burning them, and exorbitant fees for the ritual musicians. For Đặng Nghiêm Văn (1998: 250), the ‘marketing of gods and saints’ reflects the depraved morality of adherents to ‘this sort of belief’, which he claims is ‘in full conformity with the pragmatism advocated by a group of traders engaged in illegal business, belonging to circles of dealers, smugglers and corruption’.

Religious commodifications are not unique to Four Palace mediumship, nor are they restricted to Vietnam. The ‘conspicuous convergences between religion and the market-economy’ (Kitiarsa 2008a: 2) have produced simi-
lar (though not identical) impacts all over the world, including Asia. The Thai anthropologist Pattana Kitiarsa, for example, explores the religious commodifications that have occurred in Thailand over the last decades. Subsumed under the term phuttha phanit, they comprise the sale of pricey amulets, the commodification of so-called magic monks as media superstars, as well as the commercial greed of certain Buddhist monks and monasteries and their involvement in dubious financial dealings. However, Kitiarsa argues that these manifestations of an occult economy do not merely result from the impact of market mechanisms. One important reason why these commodifications have come to flourish is to be sought in ‘the interplay of the domestic religio-cultural forces and values that have nurtured ‘Thai popular religious life’ (Kitiarsa 2008b: 132). Popular religious beliefs and practices generally seem to display a more accommodating attitude towards the market than institutionalised scriptural religions or official state cults. With regard to local community temple cults in China, Robert Weller (2008: 18) writes, ‘Typically run as share-holding corporations, these temples raised funds from a combination of donations, informal taxation and selling services’ (see also Lang et al. 2005). Besides, exchange relations between the human world and the supernatural have always been central elements of both Chinese and Vietnamese popular religious practice. The realm of gods and ancestors is imagined as a reflection of the human world (‘dương sao, âm vây’), which is why divine beings are thought of as having the same needs and desires as mortals (Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2006). They are thus presented not only with food offerings, but also with votive paper money (issued by the Bank of Hell, and most recently available in various other currencies besides the U.S. dollar; Kwon 2007), clothes, houses and modern luxury consumer items such as televisions sets, mobile phones, motorbikes and cars. While edible gifts are usually taken back for consumption after the act of veneration, the paper offerings are sent to the spirit realm by burning them. These transactional sacrificial practices are a constitutive part of the reciprocal relationship between humans and spirits. In the contemporary era, they have been ‘flexible enough to be adapted to the symbolization of capitalist relations’ (Taylor 2004: 85).

Excessive ritual spending is, however, nothing new in Four Palace mediumship, nor in Vietnamese ritual practice at large. Elderly mediums who remember with a touch of nostalgia the simplicity and sincerity of ritual practice in the olden days (ngày xưa) tend to overlook the fact that most of them received their calling during times of severe restrictions imposed
on spirit mediumship by both legal prohibitions as well as by economic hardship (Larsson and Endres 2006). In contrast, the lavish ritual practices of the rural population during the French colonial period (which, in the eyes of the modern urban elite, epitomised backwardness and ignorance) raised particular concerns and were regularly pilloried in the press. Phan Kế Bính, for example, declared the practice of ritual feasting responsible for the deplorable economic situation of the rural population and called for an immediate reform of village customs:

How can we reform village customs so that they become more bearable? I think we should abolish all nonsensical traditions and delimit ritual practices and feasts so that rural folks can focus their energies on their work; if they don’t have to carry the burden of these expenses they can probably even become rich (Phan Kế Bính 1995 [1915]: 105).

Although the critics of village ritual practices never provided actual figures or (except for the literary endeavours of Ngô Tất Tố) cases of people going bankrupt because of soaring ritual expenditures, the French colonial administration seized upon some of their suggestions and tried to reduce the burden of ritual obligations by decreeing a tax payable in cash to the village administration in lieu of feasting (Großheim 1997: 90). Yet this well-intentioned project only poured oil onto the fire: on top of their obligation to feast, villagers now also had to pay the tax. Meanwhile, wealthy urban women in the 1930s fuelled a boom in Four Palace mediumship that pushed prices up considerably. The writer Nhất Lang (1952) claims that master mediums were basically working for their own benefit by ‘trading in spirits’ (buôn thần bán thánh) and wheedling unfortunate and desperate people into spending large sums of money on rituals that – in his opinion – had no effect whatsoever except from leaving the misled believer indebted and thus in even deeper despair.

The religious effervescence of the past two decades has in fact widened the existing avenues for generating a decent income from mediumship. Many masters derive their primary income from their religious work and may, with an increasing number of followers, even become quite prosperous. Not surprisingly, therefore, a debate has emerged among Four Palace mediums (as well as in the media) that addresses the ‘commercialisation’ of Four Palace mediumship. Their critique mainly targets master mediums who are felt to take advantage of their disciples for their own financial gain, for example by prescribing expensive rituals, by extracting large donations, or by overcharging for their ritual services. The latter is the case when the followers do
not feel they get good value for their money (e.g. in terms of the quality of offerings), or when the services offered become increasingly unaffordable for the followers. Mediums generally acknowledge that no master can carry out his or her duties as a work of charity (làn phúc), but masters who appear to be greedy or don’t provide good value for the fees they charge may be accused of ‘trading in spirits’ – and this may damage their reputation in the world of mediumship quite significantly. It is for this reason that master mediums almost stereotypically stress their moral integrity by expressing their own contempt for mercenary materialism and by emphasizing that they often use their own money or their profit from ritual services to help poor destined mediums cover the costs of their rituals:

I help whenever I can. If you should come to my house and ask if I would lend you some money for rice or for gambling, I would refuse outright. But if it were for ritual purposes, like for example you had very little money for buying offerings, then it’s another story. If I organise a ritual for a well-to-do follower I sometimes have a profit of some 100,000 Đông, so if a person is poor I use like 500 to 700,000 Đông to supplement the costs, that’s a normal thing. This is how I can balance out the difference between the rich and the poor followers. From the rich ones I can earn some 100,000 Đông and use it for the poor. I don’t take this money for my own use. (Interview with Master Cảnh, 22.03.2006)

With the transition to a market economy, lavish expenditure in ritual has once again become a conspicuous feature of contemporary urban and rural life. An often-cited adage says ‘wealth gives birth to ritual form’ (phú quí sinh lễ nghĩa), which in common usage means that the amount spent on rituals depends on each person’s economic means. According to the tenets of Vietnamese traditional morality, generosity in ritual spending is an important part of the obligation to repay the (moral) debt one owes to the ancestors and divinities. If, for example, a wealthy man does not celebrate his father’s death anniversary (ngày giỗ) with proper sumptuousness, he would be looked upon as lacking filial piety (bất hiếu) and heart (tâm) (see Malarney 2002, Jellema 2007). Needless to say, that the moral debt to one’s parents also entails the obligation to take proper care of them during their lifetime, particularly during their old age. This line of thought becomes apparent in Master Cảnh’s justification of the soaring expenses of lên đồng rituals in the present post-dổi mới era:

[Ritual expenditure] adapts to economic circumstances: If the country prospers, mediums spend a lot on rituals, but if the social economy...
drops, then ritual expenditure also drops. [Spending a lot on rituals] does not necessarily mean that a medium competes (đua). It all depends on the heart (tâm) of the medium. I never assess a ritual according to the amount spent. But just like for my parents, I have to buy beautiful clothes for the Holy Ladies and the Great Mandarins, because who would buy ugly clothes for their parents? Or talking about offerings, would you present your parents with rotten meat or a burnt chicken? [Buying beautiful robes and offerings] means I respect the spirits like my parents, and it is the heart of the person that counts, not the money (Interview 24.03.05).

On the other hand, however, Master Cảnh argues that a heavy fate and a sincere heart alone do not qualify a person for entering into mediumship. In addition, a fated medium must dispose of the financial means that enables him or her to conduct the prescribed rituals properly and up to the contemporary standard set by the overall economic conditions:

Talking about mediumship, the fate goes together with the financial means. [Before the revolution], mediumship only prevailed within the bourgeoisie. The workers or the poor could not do it, even if they knew they had a heavy fate.

As Larsson and I have argued elsewhere (Larsson and Endres 2006), Master Cảnh’s last point is difficult to verify, but it is nevertheless revealing because he basically argues that only the affluent should consider becoming initiated as Four Palace mediums. This statement particularly delegitimises rural spirit mediums who, besides being considered as ignorant (u mê) and crazy (điên) because they don’t subscribe to the rules of proper performance advocated by their urban counterparts, are often too poor to afford the splendid offerings and sumptuous ritual costumes that have become near standard in urban Four Palace mediumship. Unfortunately, the high pressure among mediums to conform to and even exceed this ever-increasing standard has also invoked the spirit of competition, and lavish displays of ritual generosity have become a widespread (and highly contested) means of demonstrating wealth and claiming social status:

[The issue of competing in the display of prosperity] has become something really important, it even occurs among those people who have a truly sincere heart. Many people [put on big displays] because they are very much in awe of the spirits or even fear them, they want to pour out
their hearts with all their strength to be close to the spirits, but there is also a large number of people who just want to compete. (Interview with Master Đượng, 08.04.2005)

In order to keep up the high standards, it is not uncommon that mediums borrow money for their rituals. Among my interlocutors, Hằng is a case in point. Since I was able to follow her life for five consecutive years, in the course of which she borrowed deftly sums of money from various people including myself (and even went into hiding from her creditors for some time) while continuing to hold generous lên đồng rituals that each cost about 350 EUR/450 USD (which corresponds to the average expenses for a lên đồng ritual sponsored by urban spirit mediums in 2006), I feel safe to conclude that these incidents are not out of the ordinary. Masters generally warn against the dangers of incurring debts and advise their followers to plan their rituals economically according to their own financial means:

If you only have enough money to buy one areca nut you should not borrow more money and buy four or five areca nuts lest you become indebted. [...] Nowadays many people borrow money in order to perform. What for? To compete, to vie with each other. They see their friend gives one piece so they have to give ten pieces! But this is so dangerous; it can hurl the family economy into crisis. [...] They get drawn deeper and deeper into this vicious cycle of competition until they are bankrupt, crushed. Then they have to ask themselves: do we still believe in the spirits? (Interview with Master Đượng, 08.04.2005)

The last point Master Đượng raises, the question ‘Do we still believe in the spirits after we’ve gone bankrupt?’, touches upon an important aspect of Four Palace mediumship, that is the deities’ perceived efficacy in granting this-worldly benefits to their petitioners. In this context it should be noted that the intensification of ritual cannot be explained entirely as a result of the economic prosperity Vietnam has witnessed in the past decades. Instead, it may also be interpreted as a response to increased feelings of powerlessness, anxiety and uncertainty sparked by the country’s rapid integration into the global economy. For many petty traders and small-scale entrepreneurs, transacting with the spirit world has thus become ‘one of the key means through which the path to success and avoidance of disaster have been imagined’ (Taylor 2004: 87). Whereas divinities associated with the ‘Buddha-side’ (i.e. Buddhas and bodhisattvas) are primarily addressed for spiritual well-being, it is the deities on the ‘spirit and saint-side’ that are perceived as responsive to human requests for material well-
being (Phạm 2009: 130). Consequently, many adherents of the Four Palaces have come to believe in lèn đồng ritual practice as an effectual path to economic wealth and prosperity. Spirit mediums engaged in market activities (such as

Figure 6.4 Master Dương embodies the First Mandarin during a palace opening rite
Hằng, quoted in Chapter 3) often feel that they receive lộc in terms of increased business profits as a direct consequence of their ritual service to the deities. Like many others, Huynh, the cháu văn musician, sees this trend with critical eyes:

In the olden days, only people with chronic illnesses or people who felt deeply indebted to the spirits had to enter mediumship. But now people believe they just have to enter mediumship and they’ll have lộc, or they think as mediums they just have to wish for something and they’ll be blessed with riches and honours. So it is not like in the olden days, nowadays it has become too immoderate.

The likeness of sacred and secular meanings, of divine and human desires, of this world and the otherworld (‘dương sao, âm vậy’) is a distinctive feature of Vietnamese popular religion that allows ample room for individual agency and empowerment in dealing with the vicissitudes of life. It has, however, also become a contested conceptualisation, rejected by some in favour of a more ‘rationalised religion’ (Geertz 1973) that is marked by an increased distance between the human world and the realm of spirits and untainted by this-worldly, material interests:

We say that without money, religion cannot exist; [...] the two things are interrelated. But if you put money and religion on a scale it should become clear that religion has to be considered as a lot more important than money, as it purifies the human spirit and soul. However, nowadays people think the opposite, many believe they just have to lên đồng and they will have a lot of money, right? Money is [the result of] my labour; so how can this [idea] be considered as religiously proper (đúng đạo), this cannot be right. (Interview with Master Đương, 08.04.2005)

The future of mediumship

With regard to Thai popular religion, Pattana Kitiarsa (2005: 467) states that ‘the spirit-medium cult is the place where the most dynamic and articulated religious beliefs are put into practice by mediums and followers’. Drawing on Bakhtin’s linguistic notion of hybridisation, he describes the current rise of ‘prosperity religion’ in Thailand as ‘a complex utterance where many beliefs and practices converge and produce new forms of amalgamation and sets of meaning relevant to the present sociocultural and economic situation’ (ibid.). In Four Palace mediumship, this hybridisation is characterised by
ongoing contestations, competition, and constant debates about what is right and what is wrong according to the rules of the deities. Many mediums thus describe the current state of Four Palace mediumship as unruly (lộn xộn), chaotic (lung tung) and excessive (thải quá), in particular with regard to its increasing function as a prosperity cult. Master Đường sees his religion (đạo) drifting (thả nổi) towards boundless chaos (hỗn loạn vô biên) and expresses the need ‘to distinguish between right and wrong, so that it becomes purified and respected by everybody’. In order to organise the messy reality of Four Palace mediumship, he even calls for official state recognition of the hitherto non-institutionalised belief and demands the establishment of an umbrella organisation (tổ chức) that safeguards guiding principles and educational standards for master mediums: ‘I very much want this religion to be granted the status of a national religion (quốc đạo), to be granted state recognition, to have general guiding principles, dogmas, an organisation, [religious] leaders and learning, examinations.’ Although his rank of a master endows him with a huge responsibility, he says he has no legal power to enforce the spirits’ rules among his disciples:

Therefore I very much would like to request the state to take an interest in this religion. [We need to] have an organisation established that provides master mediums with legal authority and spiritual principles to guide [our disciples] towards doing it right, we just have to make them do it right. Otherwise I see this religion getting exceedingly chaotic (hồn loạn vô cùng).

Such an organisation would allow certified masters to ‘expel’ (khai trừ) those ‘immoral individuals’ who, in Master Đường’s view, ‘smear the reputation of this religion by their irresponsible behaviour’. He passionately concludes, ‘This is why we have to work single-mindedly on [the task of establishing] an organisation. Only then can we distinguish what is wrong and harmful, and what is right and fruitful!’ Religious organisations (tổ chức tôn giáo) are defined by the state as ‘groups of believers in the same system of religious tenets, principles and rites, which are organized according to a certain structure recognized by the State.’ In Central and Southern Vietnam, an attempt to unify the Mother Goddess worship under the umbrella of an association was staged in 1953 under the name of Thiên Tiên Thánh Giáo (Nguyễn Hữu Thông 2001: 56–57). Before it was banned following the reunification of the country under communist rule in 1975, it apparently consisted of over twenty branches (chị hội), each grouping together 10–40 different temples (Tran Van Toan 1966).
Although the association’s main temple still operates in Huế, its original purpose apparently failed because local and individual practices were too diverse to cohere (Dao 2008: 72).

Many mediums have in fact expressed to me their wish to gain official state recognition as a religion (đạo) rather than just being classified as a (folk) belief (tín ngưỡng). A standardisation of Four Palace mediumship, as suggested by Master Dương, however, is seen as an impossible task by most. It would just be too difficult to streamline such a diverse and localised religious practice. The reputable spirit priest Ông Chính puts it in the following words:

In my view, there is nothing wrong and also nothing right. What is right for some may be wrong for me, or what is right for me may be wrong for others, because there is no law – how can anything be right or wrong? These spiritual practices of the common people have their likenesses, but they also have many variations – that’s all.

The news report on the lên đồng festival cited at the beginning of this chapter ends with the words: ‘The lên đồng folk performing art is still alive, but it will be faulty if functional organisations do not pay proper attention to it’ (N.A. 2006a). One such way of ‘paying attention’ could be through ‘heritagisation’. By this term I intend to capture, first and foremost, the instrumental aspects of officially declaring cultural practices, expressions, skills etc. as heritage. A heritage is commonly understood as a valuable legacy from the past that needs to be ‘safeguarded’ and ‘preserved’ for future generations (Smith and Akagawa 2009; Hemme et al. 2007). In Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), safeguarding is defined as ‘measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage’ – measures that under certain circumstances can also be adopted to essentialise certain aspects of that ‘heritage’ while excluding others. It is tempting to speculate that this may have been a contributing factor in the endeavour of a group of scholars when they began collecting material in order to nominate lên đồng (or hầu đồng, the currently preferred term) for inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

This endeavour coincided with the staging of another major lên đồng festival in June 2009, this time at Lành Giang Temple (Hà Nam province), that
led to a major controversy over the positive and negative implications of a popular ritual-turned-modern-arts performance spectacle. The festival was prepared in close cooperation with the Institute of Culture and Arts Studies (VICAS) as a conscious fusion of ‘folk festival’ and modern art forms. Lên đồng rituals were performed on an open stage and enhanced by art video projections, sound effects, background dancers and spear carriers whose bodies had been painted in mysterious designs by contemporary artists (Trang Thanh Hiền 2009, Cúc Đường 2009, Hoàng Nguyên 2009, Hồng Minh 2009, Lê Nguyên 2009). In a comment published by VietNamNet, 28 July 2009, Ngô Đức Thịnh aired his concerns, ‘If we’d present photographs of this festival to UNESCO, what would they think of our traditional culture? Can we still claim that len đồng is a living museum of traditional culture, as some experts have suggested?’ (Khanh Linh 2009).

With regard to ritual masquerades in Morocco, Pnina Werbner (2001: 142) asks: ‘What are the limits of such hybridities? When are they part of the revitalizing process of social renewal […] and when are they experienced as an unacceptable attack on all that is sacred?’ In Four Palace mediumship, hybridisation must essentially be conceived as a double-sided, dialogic process. On the one hand, besides highlighting regional differences in ritual performance, adherents emphasise that ‘nobody is alike’, thus celebrating the creative potential inherent in spirit mediumship. Its fluid and polysemic qualities allow for individual appropriations that constitute an important arena for the articulation of an alternative Vietnamese modernity. On the other hand, the essential openness of ritual practice that results from this imaginative force has been subject to critical reflections and contestations by which divergent claims to ritual authority, proper ritual and moral conduct and interpretative authority are asserted. Master Đường’s critical assessment of the explosion in creative endeavour in the world of mediumship – to which he has himself greatly contributed – and his call for streamlining Four Palace mediumship epitomise these claims just as nicely as Ngô Đức Thịnh’s critique of the 2009 Lành Giang festival. The inherent contestability of ritual practice has a certain regulating effect, as it almost (though not entirely) rules out a radical break with ritual conventions by defending the spirits’ regulations against ‘illegitimate’ innovations that stray too far from the established norm. But the contestations over proper ritual (and moral) conduct discussed in this book also underscore the overall success of the Party-state’s modernisation project, in that a former rite of healing and divination is now on its way to being cleansed of its ‘superstitious’
elements and 'unscientific' functions and turned into an aesthetisised folk performance of spiritual music and dance, worthy of being preserved as part of Vietnam's cultural heritage.23

Notes

1 In his treatise *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* (1948), Trường Chinh defines culture as ‘a very vast domain that encompasses literature, art, science, philosophy, customs, religion and more besides’ (see Trường Chinh 1994: 203). However, Ninh (2002: 168) points out that in subsequent documents of the Ministry of Culture, the construction of a new culture was increasingly emphasised. For a discussion of the Vietnamese debates on culture see also Pelley 2002, Chapter 3.

2 Đào Duy Kỳ, Summary of the conference on pilot cultural houses in rural areas. National Archive III, File of the Ministry of Culture, Dossier 5.


5 The policy of preservation harks back to Hồ Chí Minh who had issued a presidential decree in this regard (sắc lệnh) as early as 1945. I was not able to read the decree (Presidential Decree 65-SL issued 23.11.1945) in the original, but reference to it was made in other ordinances, e.g. Công Báo [Government gazette] 1973 (6): 97 [Directive 91-VH/CT issued 4.10.1973 about reinforcing the protection of historical and cultural sites]. However, not long after the war against the French had ended, a government circular bemoaned the sad reality (see Công Báo [Government gazette] 1956 (20): 189 [Decree 954-TTg issued 3.7.1956 about the preservation of historical sites]. In addition to the damage caused by the enemy, the circular deplores, many buildings worthy of preservation had been classified as ‘feudal heritage’ and been destroyed by the population. In order to correct these errors and to protect these cultural monuments, awareness of the value of these sites needed to be raised among the cadre and the population alike. Moreover, the Ministry of Culture is instructed to conduct an assessment of historical sites and sites of resistance, and to plan their reconstruction. In 1957, this decree is reinforced by a government ordinance that outlines the tasks of the policy of preservation in further detail; see Công Báo [Government gazette] 1957
The Heritagisation of Four Palace Mediumship

(46): 801–805 [Government ordinance 519-TTg issued 29.10.1957, Regulations for the preservation of the ancient heritage].

6 National Archive III, Files of the Ministry of Culture, Dossier 957, containing reports of the cultural offices of Hà Đông, Nam Định, Ninh Bình and Vinh Phúc about the elimination of superstitions in 1960.

7 This was stated in a report of the Party Committee of Hà Bắc province summarising the work of the years 1978–1982 (made available by the Museum of Bắc Giang).

8 Administrative Committee of Hà Bắc; Summarizing report about the reform of debauched and corrupt customs and the implementation of the New Ways of Life in the time of 1968–1971; National Archive III; File of the Ministry of Culture, Dossier 118.


12 I have tried to match the rhyme scheme of the poem while being as literal as possible in my translation.

13 See http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/41/a41r187.htm, accessed 17 February 2008. The project’s four main objectives were the following: acknowledging the cultural dimension of development; affirming and enriching cultural identities; broadening participation in cultural life; and promoting international cultural cooperation.

14 Phạm (2009: 178) makes an important point in stating that ‘intellectuals have never in fact shared one voice’ and reminding us that intellectuals in Vietnam (as elsewhere) are ‘individuals who, in different ways, have struggled to make sense of the complex reality confronting them, including internal disputes and competition for academic and cultural authority.’ Thus, not all of them joined in advocating the new assessment of traditional culture.

15 See Article 8/2 of the new Ordinance on Belief and Religion issued in June 2004 (see Pháp lệnh tín ngưỡng, tôn giáo 2004), which lays down that, ‘It is prohibited to abuse the right of belief and religious freedom to [...] conduct superstitious activities or other acts of law violation.’ In an even more menacing manner, Article 199 of the Vietnamese Penal Code (passed in 1985 and last amended in 1992) stipulates that, ‘Any person who engages in fortune-telling, acts as a medium or pursues other superstitious practices, entailing serious consequences, shall be subject to re-education for a period of up to one year, or to a term of imprisonment of between three months and three years.’

16 In the years 1919–1922, the magazine Nam Phong (Southern Wind) published a whole series of articles about the particular circumstances in rural
areas and the necessity to reform village customs (see Großheim 1997: 92–93).

17 A similar appeal is found further down: ‘Alas! Outside of their village the people know neither heaven nor earth [that is, the peasants’ horizon is limited to the village], there is no other activity except feasting, and if this is so, how can the people not be cowardly and the country not weak? You intellectuals, please introduce reforms quickly!’ (ibid.: 107)

18 On the other hand, a master medium who apparently sells his or her services too cheaply may be blamed by other masters for applying dumping prices in order to attract more followers.

19 A similar idiom is ‘offerings depend on the financial means’ (tuỳ tiền biện lễ), which is in fact a more literal rendering of the same content.


21 In this context, it is important to note that the categorical term tôn giáo (religion) is used to designate institutionalised doctrinal world religions, i.e. Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Spirit beliefs and practices, in turn, have never been considered as tôn giáo and were therefore not subject to the state’s religious politics. Instead, they were subsumed under the category of ‘folk belief’ (tín ngưỡng dân gian), defined as an aspect of ‘traditional culture and customs’ and therefore placed under the authority of the Ministry of Culture. The term đạo, on the other hand, literally translates as ‘way’ or ‘path’ and has commonly been applied to Buddhism (Đạo Phật), Confucianism (Đạo Nho/Đạo Khổng) and Taoism (Đạo Giác).


23 The last word on the subject has clearly not yet been spoken. In July 2010 the government issued a decree on punishing violations in the administration of cultural activities that stipulates in article 18/2 that performing lên đồng rituals, soul-calling (gọi hồn), fortune-telling (xem bói) and other kinds of divinatory practices deemed superstitious will be penalised with a fine of 1 to 3 million Đồng (Nghị định số 75/2010/NĐ-CP quy định xử phạt vi phạm hành chính trong hoạt động văn hóa; see http://www.luattriminh.vn/pho-bien-phap-luat/van-ban-phap-luat/hanh-chinh/1059-nghi-din; last accessed 15 September 2010). According to an official in the Ministry of Culture, this ban does not apply
to ‘hậu đông performances with music and dance,’ but only concerns lên đông rituals in which a medium transmits prophecies and ‘propagandises superstitions’ (see Đỗ Huyền 2010). The decree, however, had not been explicit about this differentiation.
Epilogue: Return to the Realm

The Youngest Prince hurries his horse across the river, He carries his bell-batons to recruit mediums from all over the country. First, he prostrates himself before the Mother of the Heavenly Realm; Second, he prostrates himself before the Mother of Mountains and Forests; Third, he prostrates himself before the Mother of the Water Realm; Fourth, he prostrates himself before the assembly of Four Palace deities... (Songlines of the Youngest Prince’s song, adapted from Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2002: 307)

The Youngest Prince (Cậu Bé) is dressed in a green, sleeveless brocade vest, with a green satin scarf tied into a neat bow above his forehead. In a clumsy and childlike manner, he hobbles a few steps back and then forth again before he gets down on his knees and bows deeply in front of the altar. This is repeated several times. He then takes the two bell-batons and, following the rhythm of the music, breaks into a dance, frantically hopping up and down like an imp. All the while, he swings and claps the bell-batons and teasingly threatens to throw them at uninitiated ritual participants in order to ‘recruit them’ into the service of the Four Palace deities. The Youngest Prince is usually the last deity incarnated during a lên đồng. Some of the participants slowly prepare for leaving. Some already tie up their plastic bags full of blessed gifts; others clasp their hands together in prayer and bow towards the various altars in gratitude. After the dance, the Youngest Prince sits down, sips from a cup, drags on a cigarette and cheerfully ‘witnesses’ the bags of chewy candy offered to him before handing out shares to the participants. He then signals the assistants that he is about to leave the world of humans and return to his
return to the realm. Just like the other spirit incarnations, Cậu Bé ends his brief interlude on earth when the medium’s head is covered with the red scarf and the musicians close with the line: ‘The deity’s chariot returns to the palace’ (xe giá hồi cung).

From the field to the text

After a full year of being ‘possessed’ (or shall I say obsessed?) by the Four Palace mediums and their rituals, I finally had to leave the world of medium-ship and return to my ‘realm’ – Germany, the university, my writing desk. To fieldwork may in fact be attributed an ecstatic quality not unlike possession, inasmuch as it confronts the performers – the anthropologist as well as his or her interlocutors – with their unbounded selves (Hastrup 1992: 118). Crapanzano (1977) has described the process of returning home and writing ethnography as a wilful ‘act of exorcism’ that purges the anthropologist from the self-transforming ethnographic confrontation with ‘significant others’ (Handler 2004) through objectivation and consequent alienation. Through
the process of textualisation, then, anthropologists try to construct and re-construct coherent cultural others and stable interpreting selves (Clifford 1988: 112; Moore 1994: 115).

Centring on the problematic nature of anthropological authorship, the 1980s Writing Culture debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and the ‘crisis of representation’ in the human sciences (Marcus and Fischer 1986) have problematised, first and foremost, the asymmetry of power in the relationship between the anthropologist as author and the ‘informant’ as contributor. Yet despite its asymmetrical character, this relationship is also of a peculiar creative nature (Hastrup 1999: 143). Both interlocutors, ethnographer as well as informant, are enmeshed in a process of dialogue through which they actively negotiate a shared vision of reality (Clifford 1988: 43). However, in ‘writing it down’, the rich complexity of communication in the ethnographic encounter is sadly diminished (Fernandez 1985: 16). In the end, it is the anthropologist who translates and edits the statements, selects the quotations, and organises the stories into a single master narrative (Hastrup 1992, Moore 1994). This is why Hastrup (1992: 122) cautions against blurring ‘this major responsibility of ours by rhetorics of “many voices” and “multiple authorship” in ethnographic writing’.

With almost forty transcribed interviews and two hundred typed pages of fieldnotes, not counting the over 50 rituals I participated in, it ultimately remained my choice to whom I gave a voice and which of my interlocutors’ stories I included in this book. In writing these stories down, I had to accept the fact that it ‘froze’ my consultants in time and space since their opinions, judgments and beliefs might no longer be the same at a later moment in time; that it inscribed their narratives into academic discourse, whereas they might not have been told in the same way in different contexts to different people. Moreover, I acknowledge that many stories have been left untold: I did not convey the story of the stock fraudster who was given an emergency initiation before she went to prison. I did not comment on the male master who verbally abused his ritual participants and dashed cups of rice wine into their faces. I did not relate the incident when a master medium took a chewed-on betel quid from her mouth and gave it to a follower, signalling her to put it in her mouth for good luck. I also did not reconstruct from my fieldnotes the hilarious evening when musicians and assistants roared with laughter sharing gossip and exchanging stories about ‘crazy mediums’ and all sorts of mishaps in ritual performance. There was, I felt, simply no space for it in the ethnographic narrative. In the following section, therefore, I will try to
weave in some of the untold stories and loose threads I have left dangling in different chapters of this book.

**Stories left untold**

With only a few exceptions, the Four Palace mediums I met in the course of my research welcomed the opportunity to tell their stories and air their views. Some argued that a foreign anthropologist’s voice – in its published form – would most probably reach a wider audience than the works of native researchers and raise awareness about the religion in the wider academic world. These assumptions were inextricably intertwined with the hope that the scholarly attention of a foreigner would bestow moral and scientific legitimacy on their religious belief and ritual practice. For Master Thiền, ‘scientific’ meant, first and foremost, that I should prove the efficacy of Four Palace mediumship by gathering stories from master mediums on the positive changes in their own lives and in the lives of their followers after initiation:

> You have to go deeply into people’s lives, into their family backgrounds, into the period before their initiation, and then look at their situation now. You must go deeply into one successful case, an efficacious case, one that didn’t take too long. For example you study the case of a master medium: for which reasons did she become initiated, what kind of things was she able to do after initiation, for example to organise rituals that cure the diseased, that cure the mad; what kind of things changed in her personal life and what kind of things she is able to effectively change in the lives of other people? Just focus on this and don’t ramble on, because this is what is taking shape now. (Interview with Master Thiền, 23.02.2006)

My understanding of anthropological research of course differed a bit from that of Master Thiền, and my quest led me into many of the lanes and alleyways that criss-cross the world of Four Palace mediumship. As one would expect, not all of the life-narratives I collected were showcases of divine efficacy. Among them is the story of Vượng, a well-groomed, slender woman in her mid-fifties when I first met her in 2002. Her jaunty appearance did not indicate that she had, according to her own perception, led a hard life full of privations. Wartime conditions had prevented her from realising her youthful dream of studying for a medical profession. Instead, she started working in the Hanoi-based, state-run Thăng Long garment factory at the age of
eighteen. Five years later, she married a war veteran and subsequently gave birth to three children. Vượng worked ceaselessly and uncomplainingly:

I was happy with what I had, I worked continuously, meanwhile I bore my children and took care of them, and my husband advised me to continue working so that later on I’d be entitled to a pension. I was very ambitious in those days. Production capacity had to be increased at all times, and we workers were competing for working points. Even on the day after I had had an abortion I went to work in order to keep the production standard. During that time I was in good and sturdy health, I worked day and night. (Interview with Vượng, 13.08.2002)

After twenty-five years of labour in garment production, Vượng felt completely worn out and decided to stop working in the factory. A friend arranged for her to work as a kitchen helper in a Korean hotel. Soon after she had taken up her new job, however, she started having problems. First of all, Vượng started suffering from severe back pain and eventually had to undergo a spine operation. Eight months later she had to be hospitalised again because of acute appendicitis. In the same year, her daughter had an accident in which she lost one finger. Because medical care was no longer free of charge since đổi mới had taken effect, the costly treatments put a great strain on the household budget. Simultaneously, Vượng started to worry about her eldest son who had taken up participating in illegal motorcycle races and most probably also took hard drugs. Although she had so far always spoken positively about her husband, the following statement makes clear that her marriage was obviously not very happy: ‘I saw that my life was too miserable (vất vã), I felt that ever since I got married to my husband everything I did was doomed, my emotional life (tình cảm), my domestic life, and my communal life – everything was just miserable.’ Vượng had long felt that she was destined for mediumship. Until then, however, she had shied away from the commitment because of the costs entailed in becoming a medium:

I have been destined [to become a medium] for a long time but I kept it secret because of my financial situation, I was very afraid because each ritual is so expensive, so I was pondering how I could manage to follow [the call of the spirits] – I would commit a deadly sin if I didn’t follow, but then again, where would the money come from?

When Vượng’s problems became increasingly unbearable, she finally decided to follow the advice of her old foster mother, cụ Dân, and get initiated. Cụ Dân
had been a practising medium for over forty years, and she recommended that Vượng become a follower of an acquaintance of hers, Master Cảnh. In November 2001, Vượng had her initiation organised. When I talked to her nine months later she felt that this had been the right decision:

I feel untroubled (thanh thản) and light [...]. My health is better now, at work everything is going smoothly, and my family life is much happier than before. [...] I should have become initiated ten years ago, because then I wouldn’t have fallen so ill. But in those days I did not believe it was necessary for me to become a medium, I thought it was enough to just worship and pray (đi lễ). I thought it would be beyond my financial means and I would need to have a lot of money in order to become initiated. But now I feel very light, because after all it does not really require that much.

Vượng was among Master Cảnh’s first group of followers after he had set up his private temple in 2001. In the years that followed, his flock of disciples grew into a sizeable community. Whereas at first he only initiated some ten to fifteen new mediums each year, in December 2006 he recounted having opened the palaces for approximately 70 new initiates since the beginning of the lunar year. Accordingly, he was constantly busy and no longer seemed to have that much time for leisurely gatherings in the homely atmosphere of his temple as he used to. When I had my ‘debt-repaying-ritual’ at his temple in January, I learned that Vượng’s son had died very recently as a consequence of his drug addiction. Soon after, I paid her a visit of condolence and told her that I pitied her: ‘You still have to suffer so many difficulties in spite of your initiation!’ ‘My debt with the four palaces is so heavy,’ she reasoned. ‘The fortune-teller said my life will only start improving six years after the palace-opening. That means I still have to suffer two more years of difficulties before everything gets better.’

Although I joined in quite a few of Master Cảnh’s rituals and pilgrimages in the following months, Vượng was never among the group of participants. It wasn’t until July that I scheduled another appointment with her. Together with Cường (see Chapter 2), another member of Master Cảnh’s first generation of followers, we met in a little café in the outskirts of Hanoi. After the usual pleasantries, our first topic of conversation was my debt-repaying ritual. ‘How did people actually perceive that ritual?’, my colleague Bình wanted to know. Vượng growled, ‘I talked to many veteran mediums (đồng cựu) about this issue and they said it was completely wrong (sai hoàn toàn)!' A thanksgiving ritual (lễ tạ) with prayers and a salty meal (cỗ mạn) would have been perfectly
‘Why do you think Cảnh suggested the ritual – in order to get money out of me?’ I asked. Vượng jumped on her feet and shook my hand, ‘That’s it! See – there weren’t even enough blessed gifts for everyone!’ She went on airing her disappointment about her master:

When I had my shadow-widening ritual (hậu tỏa bóng; i.e. the first ritual in a temple other than that of the medium’s initiation), Cảnh witnessed my ritual (hậu chứng) by incarnating [not only the first six deities, but] all the deities up until the Third Prince, so when he handed the scarf over to me, there weren’t enough blessed gifts left because he had already used them up! And later his wife complained in front of everybody that he had to distribute gifts worth 500,000 Đồng from his own pocket!

Moreover, the two assistants had quarrelled throughout the ritual and called each other ‘prostitute’ (con đĩ), which made the whole affair a real mess. ‘Afterwards, my life started to get worse. My husband got sick, my son got sick and finally died . . .’ Vượng felt that Cảnh had wanted her to increase the amount of money spent on rituals, and although she was willing to do that gradually, she felt it all came too fast and she could not keep up with it. ‘But Cảnh always says that he helps poor mediums,’ I argued. ‘What help?,’ Vượng hissed. ‘Poor mediums also have to pay. But I cannot spend my whole income on that.’ Master Cảnh’s perceived greed, for which she gave many more examples in this talk, was the main reason why Vượng finally decided to give up ritualising. Worse even, she lost her faith in spirit mediumship. ‘I realised it is all an illusion (ảo tưởng), it has no real effects (không thực tế), and masters are dishonest,’ she concludes. ‘Now I just pray at home to the Buddha and the ancestors.’

As for Vượng, life didn’t improve much for Cường either. Although he felt much more confident after his initiation, he kept changing jobs. ‘Whenever it gets difficult, or I feel bored, I quit once and for all. I just can’t help it!’ Besides, despite his jolly and cheerful appearance, he feels sorrowful (bi đất) and weary of the world (chán đời). Concerning Master Cảnh, he thinks that it is quite normal that children leave the house when they grow up, and that a parent’s attention shifts to the younger ones. But he, too, is disappointed with his master, albeit for different reasons than Vượng. ‘I had the feeling’, he confided, ‘that Cảnh wanted more from me than I was willing to give. Cảnh was always jealous of my good relations with other people. Men and women, they all like me, but I just keep a distance, I don’t want to get into trouble, I just want to have a stable family. Before, he always called me whenever he
had some special food, but he has stopped doing that now.' Unlike Vượng, however, Cường has not lost his faith in the deities: ‘I still believe in the religion with my full heart!’

The reason why I tell this story is not to refute Master Thiền’s claim that scientific proof of divine efficacy is possible. Rather, Vượng’s case is compelling because it shows that the commodification of Four Palace mediumship also causes adherents to reflect on their religious beliefs and practices in terms that go beyond conceptions of fate, karmic debts and divine agency. Whereas Four Palace mediumship has thrived on the transformation of Vietnam’s economy from a centrally planned to an open-market system, it seems that the efflorescence that emerged from the creative interaction between market processes and religious renewal now causes a backlash that may eventually diminish the appeal of Four Palace mediumship and prompt a search for alternative forms of religious expression. Since the proliferation of popular beliefs and practices in contemporary Vietnam coincides with a pluralisation of spiritual options provided by transnational or world religions and their various sub-divisions as well as by so-called new religious movements, these alternatives have in fact become more numerous and varied (see Taylor 2007). At the same time, however, Four Palace mediumship itself diversifies and offers alternative or complementary spiritual frameworks as it expands across ethnic and national boundaries.

Crossing boundaries

Spirit possession is practised not only by Vietnamese lowlanders but also by the different ethnic groups in the central and northern highlands (see La Cong Y 2003, Ngô Đức Thịnh 2004, Culas 2005). Possession practices include, besides shamanic rituals, communicating with or acting as a vessel for the souls of the dead (gọi hồn; nhập hồn). Depending on their skills in channelling the voices of the deceased, mediums may acquire fame that spreads far beyond the bounds of their locality, and clients take it upon themselves to travel long distances in order to get in contact with a dead family member or with the soul of a missing person. In a recent article, Phan and Salemink (2007) discuss the case of a female, ethnic Dao spirit medium in Hòa Bình province who has been attracting clients from all over the country, including an increasing number of urban dwellers. From their interviews and observations, the researchers conclude that this practice of
spirit possession has undergone a number of ritual transformations that can be attributed to the influence of Four Palace mediumship. This influence includes not only reference to the Four Palace pantheon on the medium’s altar and its invocation in chants preceding the soul-calling, but the medium is also possessed by Four Palace deities with increasing frequency. Moreover, the practice of soul-calling seems to have changed from a rather personalised and informal event that had previously neither required particular preparations and religious objects into a more formalised, ritualised event that follows a certain prescribed procedure. This formalisation includes the setting up of an altar and its maintenance in the form of offerings and burning incense as well as the ‘scripting’ of the spirit possession into a clearly structured ritual event. Phan and Salemink refer to this process as ‘Việt-ization’, that is a thorough transformation of localised, ethnic minority religious practices by their integration into mainstream ethnic majority religious traditions. Four Palace mediumship has thus not only been hybridised in the experience of modernity, but also plays an active part in the continuous hybridisation of ‘other’ popular religious practices.

In the course of Vietnam’s turbulent history, Four Palace mediumship has also crossed several international borders and reached the United States, Canada, Australia and Europe. Lên đồng rituals have been held in France since the repatriation of French nationals in the aftermath of the Vietnamese anti-colonial war. Among these repatriates were also a number of Vietnamese women who brought with them their devotion to the Four Palace deities. Their rituals, described by Simon and Simon-Barouh (1970, 1973), were held in a Buddhist pagoda established in 1962 in one of the former military barracks in Sainte-Livrade-sur-Lot used as a camp for the refugees. Besides the Buddhist altar, the sanctuary contained altars dedicated to the Four Palace pantheon and to the mountain deities (bàn thờ sơn trang), represented in wall-paintings or by little makeshift figurines, e.g. blue-eyed toy dolls clad in self-tailored brocade costumes (Simon and Simon-Barouh 1973: 23; ph. 10).

The next wave of diasporic spirit mediums reached France after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and contributed to the continuation of the cult in different regions of the country (Wadbled 2000). With the large exodus of Vietnamese ‘boat people’ seeking refuge in other parts of the world, Four Palace mediumship also spread to Australia, Canada and the United States (Fjelstad 1995, Fjelstad 2006, Dorais and Nguyên 1998). In Silicon Valley, California, the first private Four Palace temple was built by a female spirit medium named Ba Thuong in the early 1980s (Fjelstad 2006: 96). Unable
to obtain ready-made ritual items, the medium embellished the temple with objects she could find in San Francisco’s Chinatown. As a substitute for wood-carved statues, she purchased factory-made dolls to represent the deities and sewed clothes for all of them. Đổi mới and the subsequent normalisation of trade relations between Vietnam and the United States finally opened avenues for the transnational exchange of ritual goods. These items include statues, votive paper offerings, musical instruments like drums, bells and gongs, as well as spirit costumes for use during lênh đồng rituals. In the past ten years, spirit mediums in the United States have also started relationships of cooperation with master mediums in Vietnam. Groups of young, second-generation Californian spirit mediums travel to the country of their roots in order to hold rituals and have special initiations organised by Vietnamese master mediums, thus transforming their return to their parent’s homeland into a sacred journey and rite of passage. Very recently, the first white Americans have embraced the veneration of the Four Palace deities and even established a temple of their own (Fjelstad, personal communication).

In the process of transnational identity formation, ‘religious place-making emerges from the ways in which migrants transport and introduce religious
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ideas, practices, and sacred objects from one place to another, while simultaneously changing or redefining their ideas about belief, ritual, locality and sacred space’ (Hüwelmeier 2008: 132; see also Hüwelmeier and Krause 2010). The spirits who have followed their mediums into these new realms likewise adapt to new situations and modify their behaviour and attitudes. Generally, Four Palace mediums are said to share certain characteristics with the deities who possess them and determine their individual dispositions (see Chapter 2). Most spirit mediums in Vietnam trace their spirit root (căn) to a mandarin, prince or princess deity. In contrast, Fjelstad and Maiffret’s (2006: 119) findings in Silicon Valley suggest that many mediums feel their fates are intimately connected with Cậu Bé, the Youngest Prince. Moreover, he may express different sides of his personality depending on the medium in whom he incarnates. According to Jenny, an attractive spirit medium in her thirties, ‘Cậu will play exactly who you are,’ which means that he holds a mirror up to each individual and exhibits both their strengths and weaknesses in order to teach them lessons. The flexibility of Cậu Bé, whose personality, as a little child, is even more malleable and fluid than that of the ‘adult’ deities, thus seems to address specific concerns among Silicon Valley mediums that are less prevalent, or dealt with in different ways, in Vietnam. Another interesting point that sets Silicon Valley mediums apart from spirit mediums in Vietnam is the frequency and intensity of spontaneous possession in their daily lives. During her visit to Hanoi in 2004, Jenny was possessed by Cậu Bé in various situations. In one of these incidents, the Youngest Prince expressed his excitement about being in Vietnam (!), and in another, he showed his dissatisfaction when the group had forgotten to buy some new outfits for him. Such spontaneous possessions in everyday situations are not common among contemporary spirit mediums in Vietnam and may be met with confusion and bewilderment. During their visit to a Hanoi temple, another member of the group was possessed by a tiger spirit, causing her to drool and jerk in an uncontrollable fit. While the incident shocked the caretakers of the temple, the Californian mediums were surprised to learn that spirit mediums in Vietnam did not seem to be prone to such intense bouts of spontaneous possession. One of the group members explained: ‘They looked concerned, but they didn’t know the trance that we have. I don’t know what kind of trance they have, I think they have trance too. Our trance is completely out. Their trance is more like dancing beautifully, that’s it!’ (cited in Fjelstad and Maiffret 2006: 118)

On either side of the globe, Four Palace mediumship has changed in different ways over the last decades and emerged as an important strategy of
performative construction through which adherents seek to redefine, position and express their identities and incorporate new experiences and meanings. Increased mobility, displacement, and deterritorialisation have expanded the boundaries of the four realms across oceans and continents. Riding their chariots back and forth between their palaces and the world of humans, the Four Palace deities have thus become cosmopolitan travellers in the tranethnic and transnational spiritscapes of the modern, globalised world.

Notes

1 The camp was established in late 1955; for a brief historical review, see http://framespa.univ-tlse2.fr/71384812/0/fiche_pageslibre/&RH=cahiers, accessed 15 June 2009.

2 I am grateful to Karen Fjelstad for inviting me to participate in such a ritual in 2005.
Glossary

ái nam ái nữ    ‘half man half woman’, literally ‘love man love woman’; hermaphrodite, homosexual
âm binh    ghost soldiers
ăn uống trả nợ    exchanging debts through eating and drinking
miệng nhau    hero/heroine
anh hùng    female spirit medium
bà đồng    to provide a seat (for the deities to sit upon)
bác ghê    to bestow reputation and face
ban danh ban diện    to extend praise to someone
ban khen    national identity
bán sắc dân tộc    ‘seized’ by the spirits as a medium
bắt đồng    see bắt đồng
bói ra ma, quét nhà    adage: ‘Fortune-telling stirs up ghosts like a broom stirs up dust’
ra rác    divination, fortune-telling
bới toán    to ‘trade’ in spirits (in the sense of ‘marketing the gods’)
buôn thần bàn thành    ‘root of mediumship’, predestined aptitude for spirit mediumship
căn đồng    fate
căn mệnh    fate
cần số    adage: ‘A dry tree is always dry even if soaked in water’
cây khô xuống nước cùng khô
chầu văn  musical genre of devotional songs played during lên đồng rituals
chêo  popular opera
chết oan  grievous death
Chủ Vị  ‘assembly of spirits’
chứng  to witness; here often used as chứng tâm, ‘to witness the (sincere) heart of a medium’
cô hồn  wandering soul
cô  festive meal, banquet
con nhà thánh  ‘children of the spirits’; i.e. devotee of the Four Palace pantheon
con nhang  ‘incense child’; i.e. devotee of the Four Palace pantheon; con nhang đệ tử ‘incense child’ and disciple
cung văn  chầu văn musician
diện  here: face (in the sense of dignity)
dương sao, âm vậy  adage: ‘Like the Yang world, so the Yin world’
Đạo Mẫu  Mother Goddess Religion
Đạo Thánh  ‘spirit religion’
Đạo Tứ Phủ  Four Palace Religion
dễ tâm  to pay attention
dệ tử  disciple of a master
dep  beautiful
Địa Phủ  Earth Palace
diện  private temple or shrine established for the worship of deities
dịu  mannered, affected (way of behaving)
dở lề  offering
dội bát hương  literally ‘to carry an incense holder on the head’; ritual submission to the Four Palace deities
dội mới  literally ‘change for the new’; policy of renovation or renewal that was promulgated at the sixth national congress of Vietnam’s Communist Party in December 1986
dồng bói  diviner-medium
dồng bóng  literally medium-shadow; translated here as ‘mediumship’
donald cô  a male medium with the ‘root’ of a female spirit
donald cốt  derogatory term for a female spirit medium
đồng củu  'veteran medium', i.e. an experienced, long-term spirit medium
dồng dên temple medium, i.e. a spirit medium who owns a private temple (diện)
dồng mê state of (unconscious) trance during a possession ritual
dồng thầy master medium (literally medium-teacher)
dồng tính luyến ái homosexual
dồng tính state of alertness during spirit possession
dức hiếu filial piety
cô là effeminate
ghen vợ vo ghen popular saying: ‘The jealousy of husband and wife cannot compare with the jealousy of mediums’

giá spirit sequence during a lên đồng; e.g. giáng Ông Hoàng Bảy, the sequence of the Seventh Prince
giáng to descend into a human being
giờ thiêng 'sacred hour'
gọi hồn soul-calling
hầu to serve (here: to serve the spirits/deities by performing a lên đồng)

hầu bóng literally ‘to serve the shadow’; spirit possession ritual
hầu dâng ritual assistant in a lên đồng
hầu đồng see lên đồng
hầu tạ thanksgiving ritual
hầu thánh literally ‘to serve the deities’; spirit possession ritual

(→ hầu bóng; lên đồng)
hầu vo possession ritual without music
hiển thánh to achieve sainthood, deification
hồn soul, spiritual soul (in contrast to → via)
hợp tuổi compatible in age (according to the horoscope)
hủ tục ‘unsound’, ‘retrograde’ customs
khăn phủ diện red scarf used during possession rituals
khăn xếp ready-to-wear turban
dân học science, scientific
không ai giống ai nobody is alike
kiếp trước previous life, previous incarnation
lễ hội village ritual festivals
lễ mở phủ  literally ‘rite of opening the palace’; initiation ritual for spirit mediums of the Four Palace deities
lễ tiễn căn ritual of ‘cutting the root’, or ‘seeing off’ the fate of a medium
lễ trả nợ bốn phủ rite of paying back the debt one owes to the Four Palaces
lễ trả nợ tào quan rite for settling a karmic debt
lên đồng literally ‘to mount the medium’; ritual spirit possession
linh đồng hiền bóng efficacious performance of a lên đồng
linh hồn soul
lộc ‘blessed gifts’ from the deities, i.e. the offerings taken home for consumption after their ritual presentation to the deities
ma ghost
mê tín dị đoan superstition
mê to be mad/crazy about something, to lose consciousness
miệng trần bóng literally ‘human mouth, deity’s shadow’; indicates the deceitful behaviour of a spirit medium who employs the deity’s voice to speak out personal concerns
mở phủ see lễ mở phủ
mồi rope-candles used during a lên đồng
một đồng nam bằng popular expression: ‘One male medium equals one thousand and female mediums’
nặng căn a ‘heavy’ spirit root
nếp sống mới ‘new way of life’, campaign launched to create a ‘new socialist person’
nếp sống văn minh ‘civilized life-style’
người gọi hồn soul-caller (a person who can call the souls of the dead)
người gọi hồn chính cultural origin, cultural roots
người gọi hồn chính of human origin
nhân duyên predestined affinity between two persons
nhân thần deity of human origin
nhẹ căn a ‘light’ spirit root
nhớ ơn remembering one’s moral debt
nợ debt (without ‘moral’ connotation, in contrast to ơn)
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on  moral debt of gratitude
ông à ông eo  to walk or behave affectedly; here used in the sense of effeminate mannerisms
phách  see via
phát lộc  to distribute ‘blessed gifts’ among the ritual participants
phép thánh  ‘rules of the spirits’
phúc quý sinh lệ nghĩa  adage: ‘Wealth gives birth to ritual form’
phủ  palace
quê hương  ‘native land’; in German: Heimat, usually associated with rurality
ra đồng  to become a medium, to enter mediumship (‘ra’ means ‘to enter’)
sắc phong  imperial certificate of investiture by which a deity was assigned a rank in a three-tiered divine hierarchy
sân khấu cung đình  imperial stage (in the sense of: a stage for imperial imaginaries)
sân khấu tâm linh  spiritual theatre (in the sense of: a stage/an arena for the performance of spirituality)
số mệnh  fate
tái khóa  to re-enlist; here: to have another initiation ritual as a medium
tâm  heart; not in the sense of the physical organ, but as mind-heart, heart-soul
tâm hồn  ‘heart-soul’
tâm linh  spirituality, spiritual
tâm lý  psychology, psyche, psychological
tay hương  ‘incense hand’; assistant sitting to the left-hand side of the medium during a lên đồng
tay khăn  ‘robe hand’; assistant sitting to the right-hand side of the medium during a lên đồng
than  spirit, deity
thần tích  spirit legend
thanh đồng  general term for medium (previously restricted to male mediums of the Saint Trần cult)
thánh  saint
Thanh Mẫu  Mother Goddess
thầy  teacher, master (also used as a polite form of address)
thầy cúng  spirit priest, ritual specialist
thế giới đồng bóng  ‘world of mediumship’, as spirit mediums refer to their ‘scene’
Thiên Phú  Palace of Heaven
thiên thần  deity of heavenly origin
thiêng  sacred, supernaturally efficacious
thinh thành  to invite a deity by whispering the appropriate incanta-
tion into the medium’s ear
thờ cúng ông bà  ancestor worship
thời bao cấp  state subsidized period (from 1945 to 1986)
thủ nhang  temple keeper, e.g. of a public temple (đền)
thuốc chữa được  adage: ‘Medicine can cure an illness, but it cannot change fate’
bệnh, chẳng chữa được  adage: ‘Life and death are matters of fate, riches and honours depend on Heaven’
Thủy Phú  Water Palace
tiên  heavenly fairy
tín ngưỡng dân gian  folk belief, popular belief
tín ngưỡng  (popular) belief (in contrast to tôn giáo, religion)
tinh  alert/aware state of consciousness
trình đồng  to become a medium, to enter mediumship (see ra đồng)
trình giầu  to ‘introduce’ a follower to the temple deities by bal-
cancing a tray of areca nuts on his or her head
truyền phán  to speak words transmitted by a deity (also: phán truyền)
tu thân  self-cultivation
tuồng  Vietnamese adaptation of the Chinese opera
tuy tiên biện lề  popular expression: ‘Offerings depend on the financial means’
tử sinh hữu mệnh, phú quý tại thiên  adage: ‘Life and death are matters of fate, riches and honours depend on Heaven’
Tử Vi  horoscope based on a localized version of Chinese astrological charts
uống nước nhớ nguồn  adage: ‘When you drink water, think of the source’
uy  prestige, authority
văn hóa  culture
văn hóa dân gian  folk culture, popular culture
vàng mã  votive objects made of paper; burnt after offering
vi  ‘material soul’, of which a woman possesses nine and a man seven; also called phách
việc âm  ‘affairs of the yin-world’; in contrast to việc trần
việc nắn đồng  ‘work of molding the medium’
việc trần  ‘works of the human world’ (or: human affairs); in contrast to việc âm
xe gia hồi cung  ‘the deity’s chariot returns to the palace’; songlines sung when the deity leaves the body of the medium and returns to the spirit realm
xem tướng  face reading (a form of divination)
xin âm dương  ‘to consult the yin and yang’, form of divination in order to determine whether or not the deities agree to a request or accept an offering
xin lộc  here: to ask (the deity) for blessed gifts during a lên đồng
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