It was early morning. Quán Sứ Pagoda, the most important pagoda in Hanoi, was crowded. Because it was the fifteenth day of the lunar month, middle-aged and elderly women were everywhere, wearing the brown robes and the Buddhist prayer beads that marked them as lay Buddhists. In the large main hall there were nearly two hundred devotees sitting on grass mats that flowed out the doors and onto the balcony that surrounded the pagoda. They were waiting for the sutra recital to begin; some of them had been waiting for as long as an hour in order to get a good place, close to the altar. Gently waving their purple fans to cool themselves in the stifling heat, they chatted to their neighbors, or quietly counted on their prayer beads: “Nam-mô A-Di-Đà Phật . . . Nam-mô A-Di-Đà Phật . . . Nam-mô A-Di-Đà Phật . . .” Then, as now, women made up the vast majority of people in Hanoi who consider themselves devout Buddhists.

There was also a scattering of men sitting in the first two rows, directly below the large multitiered altar that held gilded statues of the most important figures of the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon. The men, also wearing brown robes, were mostly over sixty years of age, and some of them had long goatees in the fashion of Hồ Chí Minh. Unlike the women, the men did not chat. They sometimes greeted other men who arrived, but they did so in a quick and quiet manner, after which they resumed sitting silently and waiting for the service to begin. They did not come to the pagoda early, because their place in the front was assured. Some of them looked at Chinese characters written on a paper. One of them, younger than the others (perhaps in his mid-fifties), sat with his legs crossed and eyes closed as if in meditation.

These people had assembled for the ritual called the Sám Nguyên—the Buddhist version of a penitence ritual—that takes place four times every lunar month. It consists of chanting particular sutras in unison, and was led that day by one of the old men in the front, who used a microphone. Near the end of the ritual an official document in Chinese characters called a sớ, printed to look like an imperial petition, was read by another layman who had made himself a religious specialist by studying how to read Chinese characters for ritual purposes. The petition identified the group, the date, and the location, so that the buddhas would know who the supplicants were.

During the chanting, chatting, vying for seats, and making room for friends
Before the ritual began, there was another activity taking place—not by a group but by individuals acting on their own behest. Mostly young and middle-aged women, they brought offerings of fruit, flowers, and incense; spirit money (vàng mã) to be burnt as offerings; and a few small bills of Vietnamese currency that would be left as offerings and donations. After placing the offerings on the altar and praying for the well-being of their families and themselves, or maybe for a special favor, they went to the back of the hall and talked with their friends or waited silently. After about five minutes, they reclaimed their now spiritually charged offerings, called lộc. They then left the pagoda and returned home, where they distributed the lộc to members of their families and sometimes their friends to pass on the Buddha’s blessings.

Outside the main hall, but still in the pagoda compound, there were other activities in progress. In the library there were a few men reading books about Buddhism. In the offices upstairs a team of monks and lay Buddhists were working on the next issue of the magazine published there, The Research Journal of Buddhist Studies (Tạp chí nghiên cứu phật học). In the store run by the pagoda, there were women buying books and tapes of Buddhist chanting, and in the alcoves and corners of the pagoda complex, still others were engaged in different activities: chanting sutras, counting prayer beads, talking with friends, or bartering with vendors who sold religious books and votive items. Beyond the front gate there were others who passed by, giving no credence to Buddhism or to religion in general.

This book is about all of these people—from the most cynical to the most devout. It explores some of the reasons why they were here on this day, whether or not they were engaged in the different activities. It particularly looks at the way people’s life positions—especially age and gender—shape their attitudes towards Buddhism. Their religious practices play an important part in the construction of their identities, and have repercussions that extend well beyond the pagoda walls. Their practices are rooted in their social lives and are integral to their attempts to navigate the vicissitudes of their lives as successfully as possible. Thus, their religious practices also shape their relationships with others.

**BUDDHIST IDENTITIES**

In Vietnamese Buddhism, there is no systematized, formally imposed, orthodox practice that is required of all devotees. Devotees participate in religious activities that correspond to their social situations, to some extent. Even within one form of practice (e.g., chanting sutras), many interpretations across a wide range are given...
to its significance and objectives. All of the practices described above, and more, are legitimate ways of interacting with Buddhism, and no one is ever accused of not being Buddhist for lack of participation in a specific activity. These practices are not randomly chosen, however. Rather, they tend to be gender specific, with some activities practiced by women and others by men. The significance of the practices is often interpreted differently by each, though most devotees are women. (Based on my observations of pagodas in northern Vietnam, attendance at most pagoda events is around 80 to 90 percent women.) Implicit in these variations are complex gender dynamics related to the family, age, and historical circumstances of living in Hanoi at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries. Thus, the people engaged in their various individual activities at Quán Sứ Pagoda represent complex interplays of gender and religious practice that reverberate through lives and that have an impact on the significant relationships with families and others.

The different ways that people engage with Buddhism presents a challenge to determining who we can call a Buddhist. Many practice without taking part in any formal initiation that categorically distinguishes them as Buddhist. Most approach Buddhism by paying respect to members of the Buddhist pantheon and perhaps asking for assistance when circumstance demands. They usually will give offerings equally to the Buddhist and non-Buddhist supernatural, making little distinction between buddhas and non-Buddhist deities, other than perhaps saying that the buddhas are more potent. Other Hanoi Buddhists will say that these practices and the belief in their efficacy are useless (and potentially dangerous) superstition. They say that the effect of making offerings is only to offer respect to the Buddha and that supplicants should not expect their actions to bring benefit. This doctrinally minded minority, who insist that the Buddha does not have supernatural efficacy, often describes the majority of people who show up to make offerings and ask favors of the buddhas and bodhisattvas as deluded, and not true, Buddhists. Nonetheless, there is an overall tolerance for all activities, even on the part of the most doctrinal individuals, with the reasoning being that misguided actions also may bring about an increased dedication, and perhaps a deeper understanding with time.

People who have encountered Buddhism in the West may well agree with the doctrinal opinion of this minority of religious “elite” who believe that being Buddhist has little to do with making offerings, but instead is about achieving a level of understanding of the nature of existence and living life accordingly. Many Western Buddhists might even believe that being an active Buddhist must necessarily involve meditation. However, in a Vietnamese context, meditation is an
exceptional practice that very few people who consider themselves Buddhist actually do, including monastics. Nor is there any consensus in Vietnam over which other activity is essential for Buddhists, other than moral behavior. Most of the fervent devotees chant sutras, but chanting is not perceived as essential, even by those who participate regularly in this activity.

What, then, constitutes appropriate practice for a Buddhist and what must one do to be considered a Buddhist? It has been suggested by Holmes Welch that the criteria for determining whether or not someone is Buddhist should be whether they have taken the Three Refuges or Five Precepts (1973 [1967], 358). In the Vietnamese context, however, such criteria do not usually hold true. The question of what is required for a person to be considered a Buddhist is largely unproblematic and seems to concern scholars and Western Buddhists more than it does Buddhist practitioners in Vietnam. In Vietnam, the equivalent term of “Buddhist” does not even exist in the same sense as the English term. The closest approximate term is “phật tử” in Sino-Vietnamese (Hán-Việt), meaning “child of the Buddha.” That term is used to designate someone who identifies himself as Buddhist, but self-definition does not need to be ratified by an initiation ritual. More often, people describe themselves as following the Buddha rather than declaring themselves as belonging to a category identified as “Buddhist.”

Charles Prebish offers a reasonable solution to the problem of defining who is a Buddhist by stating that we cannot seriously study Buddhism unless we are prepared to accept that if a person makes a recognizable claim to being Buddhist, then that person’s claim has to be accepted, regardless of whether their practices and conceptions of Buddhism comply with “orthodoxy” or instead constitute what some have problematically called “syncretism” (Prebish 1979, 188; Prebish 1999, 56). Following his lead, I take Buddhist practice to include any activity that is regarded by practitioners as Buddhist. I do not dwell on the incongruities between these practices and Buddhist texts, but instead look closely at the differences between individual practices and individual conceptions of what these practices mean in order to explore their relations to social positionality. This approach is methodologically imperative in order to take into account conflicting claims of legitimacy and illegitimacy, and to understand the discourses from which such claims emerge.

Many Vietnamese define themselves as Buddhist, but it is not necessarily because they unfailingly participate in Buddhist activities such as chanting sutras. Nor does that self-definition mean that they exclusively engage in Buddhist actions, and that they refuse to interact with spirits outside the Buddhist pantheon, enter into non-Buddhist spaces, or engage in ritual practices that are
not regarded as Buddhist from a doctrinal standpoint. It is common in northern Vietnam for people to pray to the buddhas, recite sutras, and listen to Dharma talks at famous pagodas while practicing ancestor worship, consulting fortune-tellers, going to spirit possession rituals, hanging magical paper talismans above their doors, and participating in a host of other activities. In fact, these practices sometimes occur at the same location. Furthermore, most practitioners do not view these various activities as belonging exclusively to one religion or another. Indeed, many of these activities may not even be regarded as “religious,” they are so inextricably part of the everyday.

While those who participate fully in this array of activities do not necessarily (or even usually) experience a conflict between the Buddhist and non-Buddhist, those who maintain a doctrinal, “orthodox” understanding of Buddhism see this set of “non-Buddhist” practices as contradicting the teachings of the Buddha. However, both of these views need to be seen as discourses grounded in particular social positions rather than understood as inherently “true” in any sense.

People engage in Buddhist practice at various levels, with some making offerings while not necessarily identifying themselves as Buddhist, and others making Buddhism central to their identity projects. Motivations for engaging in Buddhist practice, therefore, are variable, but can include personal interest, spiritual impulse, a desire to have a certain need met (such as wishing for supernatural assistance to pass an exam), as an activity to alleviate boredom, out of a desire for inclusion and community or conformity to social expectation (or even resistance to social expectation), and as a complement to broader projects of identity construction and performance. These motivations are complicated, particularly because they are not mutually exclusive.

Buddhist practice is more than what goes on inside the pagoda, and cannot be isolated from the overall lives of those who practice. Engagement with Buddhism, and religion in general, provides avenues through which people not only provide meaning, but also wrestle for control of their lives. As Kapferer has stated, religious practice is concerned with “fundamental processes by which human beings construct and transform their life situations” (1997, xii), rather than with abstract philosophies, discrete cosmological systems, or vague soteriological goals.

This book is primarily concerned with gender and Buddhist practice. For reasons mentioned above, though, this subject cannot be discussed without also describing many practices that readers may consider non-Buddhist, because these practices are interconnected. For example, spirit mediumship is not separated from Buddhist practices by most women with whom I spoke and often takes place in Buddhist pagodas. There was no sense that these activities were fundamentally
opposed or distinct. Instead, people spoke about them as being complementary and necessary to maintain the spiritual vibrancy of the pagoda, though most male Buddhists would nonetheless avoid participation in them.

**KEY INFORMANTS**

The gendered nature of religious practice has direct methodological implications, for men’s ways of being often lead them to set themselves up in positions of power by assuming (or performing) leadership roles and authoritative positions that resonate with their own worlds. This positioning is tied to the overall hegemonic structure of gender in Vietnam that subjugates women to men by maintaining inherently unequal social structures, which nonetheless appear “natural” to those who participate in their reproduction. The relationship between these structures and religious practice goes two ways: men’s authority in the Buddhist space draws on the overall construction of gender in order to maintain power, but the enacting of gendered dispositions in Buddhism also contributes to the overall reproduction of gender structures in Vietnamese society.

The fact that all those who are seen as authoritative within the Buddhist field are men is not incidental, and presents a particular challenge for researching Buddhist practice. Performances of expertise should not be accepted at face value as “truth” because the (male) experts’ authority is very much a part of the reproduction of gender hegemony, and therefore need to be regarded as an integral part of social practice. These experts’ authority to speak is a manifestation of their cultural capital, which stems partly through signifiers (such as social position, gender, and education level) but also through the way that they present themselves (i.e., their cultural fluency). Key informants or ritual specialists have a vested interest in providing the anthropologist with explanations of ritual symbolism, but the valuing of a particular kind of authoritative knowledge by the anthropologist ignores the social contexts and dynamics from which the explanations emerge. There also are other kinds of knowledge, other interpretations that are not voiced as loudly because of the lack of authority or the lower status of their bearers.

It is not surprising that many anthropologists seek out and rely on ritual specialists. Often in my own research the problem of the existence of “experts” was an obstacle, a situation also noted by other ethnographers (e.g., Ortner 1989, 7–8). People who are not “experts,” particularly women, would redirect me to an authoritative figure when I questioned them about the religious practices in which they were engaged. It was not that they did not have their own understand-
of their religious practices, but that women were muted by their feelings of inadequacy and lack of authority. As Gal writes, “Some linguistic strategies and genres are more highly valued and carry more authority than others. In a classic case of symbolic domination, even those who do not control these authoritative forms consider them more credible or persuasive” (1991, 177). Those who were considered to be experts (inevitably men) eclipsed others’ opinions. Women, however, still framed their practice within their understandings of their worlds, even though they were reluctant to speak of the meanings behind their practice because of a lack of cultural capital that would allow them to do so. Their silence was a statement about the feelings they had regarding their position rather than a statement of ignorance. This study, therefore, will endeavor to give equal credence to these different voices.

RELIGION, RENEWAL, AND THE STATE

The state has always had a close but ambiguous relationship with religion in Vietnam. Keith Taylor (1986) has demonstrated that the Lý Dynasty kings (1009–1225) drew legitimacy from the supernatural. Buddhist monks were close advisors to the king during the Trân period (1225–1400), after which Confucianism took over as the state religion (Ho Tai 1987, 119–128). The southern Nguyễn Lords (1558–1777) turned to Mahayana Buddhism while the northern Vietnamese Trịnh (1545–1787) maintained the primacy of Confucianism (Li Tana 1998, 103). Relying on religion for authority meant that religion also could pose a threat, which is the primary reason for the state repression of religion. The concern about the subversive capacity of religion can be seen in the position that the Communist state took towards religion in Vietnam after independence in 1954. At that time, the state sought to transform Vietnamese society through land reforms, collectivization, and manipulation of the social structure of Vietnam. Religion was targeted as being a vestige of the feudal past that needed to be discouraged, and a threat to the Marxist–Leninist state orthodoxy.

Today, Vietnam is formally a Socialist country founded by Hồ Chí Minh and based on Marxist–Leninist ideas, but is economically and socially capitalist. The country’s economic shift towards free-market capitalism has led to a rapid growth of the urban centers, increased industrialization, and expanded international ties. The economic policy under which this transformation has occurred is called the Renovation (Đổi Mới). Since its initiation in 1986, state-owned enterprises have increasingly been privatized, foreign investment has been encouraged, and people have, at least economically, been given free rein. There also has been a
substantial decrease in social welfare and subsidies. Control over the economy has been loosened and the Socialist ethic of equality largely abandoned, but the Communist Party still remains in power, and guards its power by controlling the press and repressing dissidents. Concurrent with these economic changes and abandonment of isolationism, the state has adopted a new stance towards religion. While it is still careful not to let religious groups engage in activities that could be politically threatening, the state has largely allowed people to resume their traditional religious practices. It even makes use of some aspects of religion for fostering nationalism and building a national narrative that provides legitimacy.

Religion is now flourishing; new pagodas, temples, and communal houses are being constructed; old buildings are undergoing major rebuilding projects; and increasing numbers of people are filling them. Traditional religious festivals and religious sites are inundated with pilgrims traveling from all parts of Vietnam and abroad. Sites such as the Perfume Pagoda (Chùa Hương) and the Temple for the Lady of the Storehouse (Đền Bà Chúa Kho) in the north and the Shrine for the Lady of the Realm (Đền Bà Chúa Xứ) in the south are seeing more visitors than ever (Marr 1994; Soucy 2003; P. Taylor 2004). Village festivals, centered on their tutelary gods and the village communal houses, are well attended and prospering (Choi 2007; Endres 2001, 71; Malarney 2002). Fortune-tellers, spiritual healers, and geomancy experts service a steady stream of clients. Vendors of religious items such as spirit money and votive objects are evidently doing good business on the streets of Hanoi, with merchandise stacked to the ceiling. Even items for the more controversial spirit possession rituals are openly displayed in shops on Hàng Quạt Street in Hanoi. In fact, without knowing the history of the last fifty years, one would think it had always been this way.

Although the Renovation in Vietnam has brought an improvement in the living standards of most people, it also has produced a sense of uncertainty. The Asian financial crisis that began in 1997 underscored the volatile natures of global economics and business in an open market. Decentralization has removed most of the social safety nets that had existed, leading people to seek out alternative avenues for succor, especially supplication of the supernatural. Conjecture on the tie between religion and economics is not limited to academics, but was also made by some of my informants in Hanoi, who pointed out that business owners are more likely to seek supernatural assistance, through geomancy, fortune-telling, and the burning of spirit money on the first and fifteenth of every lunar month.

Overall, the state still holds a very ambiguous position towards religion, perhaps because the state itself is a social manifestation and is therefore informed by broader discourses in society at the same time that it shapes those discourses. In
particular, state attitudes towards religion feed off masculine positions and have an impact on the way that religion is viewed and practiced. The state provides a discursive framing of religious practice and gender in the differentiation between “religion” (tôn giáo) and “superstition” (mẹ tín di đoan). While freedom of belief is guaranteed under the Vietnamese constitution, superstition continues to be targeted by the Communist Party as feudal, backwards, and a social evil. What constitutes religion as opposed to religious belief in Vietnam, however, remains unclear. This means that various organs of the state, or even different members of the police in different areas, act on very ambiguous and conflicting criteria, resulting in uneven enforcement. The recent trend to give more freedom to religious practice is legislated to some degree, though there remains a lack of clarity in definitions of what constitutes religion as opposed to superstition, the legislation is not always clear. Media reports on superstition, however, continue to negatively target such activities as expensive weddings and funerals, burning spirit treasure and other votive objects, fortune-telling, séances, spirit possession rituals, and so on.

The differentiation of religious practice from superstition should be seen as a fundamental part of the gender-religion nexus in Vietnam because it is primarily women who are viewed as superstitious. Consequently, women’s religious practice is devalued and made illegitimate while male rituals are valorized. This is especially the case in recent years when there has increasingly been a return to valuing Vietnamese culture and tradition, of which men’s religious practice is seen as emblematic. I make no claim that religion is a major site of domination, legitimation, or resistance to a political or gender order (although all of these are indeed present in the practice of religion in Vietnam). Instead, religious practice is largely tied to a way of living gender that is enmeshed in, and reproduced through, social practice. The conjuncture of state, gender, and religion is directly relevant to an understanding of how religious practice ties in with the lived experiences of practitioners in Hanoi.

RESEARCH

The summer of 1994 was the first time that I traveled to Vietnam. I had only just finished two years of research in Montreal for my master’s thesis on Vietnamese Buddhism, and had gone in search of the homeland of the people I had come to know. During my master’s research I noticed the gender discrepancies in attendance and participation at the Montreal pagoda where I had done my work. The Sunday service was typically attended mostly by women, with a few elderly men sitting up front by the statue of Địa Tạng (Kṣitigarbha), the bodhisattva most
deeply associated with the cult of the dead in Vietnam. Other men attended only periodically, usually because of a special ritual for a deceased relative, and would not usually go to the pagoda. My travels in 1994 gave me an opportunity to confirm that the preponderance of women was also typical throughout Vietnam. My original intention was to go to Huế to conduct my research, but I instead remained in Hanoi for a number of reasons, not the least of which was meeting my future wife.

The main part of my research took place over a period of eighteen months in Hanoi, from January 1997 to August 1998. I spent another period there from 2000 to 2001 at which time I continued research part time, returning again in 2004 for six weeks of intensive fieldwork, and most recently in 2010 for five weeks to clarify some points for this book. For this study I regularly visited a number of different Buddhist pagodas and participated in the activities there. I also took part in activities that were not located in the pagoda, but that were part of being religious in Vietnam. I went on pilgrimages in dilapidated buses jammed with old women who undertook the excursions not only out of piety, but also because they enjoyed the chance to get out of the house. I went on pseudo-pilgrimages to a variety of religious sites with groups of young people who also had varying purposes, ranging from piety to what participants described as “entertainment.” I sat and chanted sutras with the most devout of the pagoda community. I joined the rehearsals of an all-male ritual group, and learned to play the drum rhythms used during the rituals they performed. I sat and studied Chinese characters with the nun of one pagoda and had long discussions with old men about a variety of subjects pertaining to Buddhism and Vietnamese culture. Other religious activities I attended included rites of passage (weddings and funerals), village festivals centered on the communal house, séances, fortune-telling, and spirit possession rituals, in which a succession of spirits enter into a spirit medium who then distributes.LOC. It could be said, then, that while my research focused on Buddhism, I also spent a great deal of effort trying to understand the full range of religious practices in Vietnam.

Hanoi, though not large by Southeast Asian standards, has a substantial population of around 3.4 million. The population density is the highest in Vietnam, with 2,161 people per square kilometer, and with housing space of 1.2 square meters per person in 1992 (Li Tana 1996, 15). However, official figures are notoriously inexact because of the large number of unofficial residents and nonresident migrant workers who come into Hanoi from the surrounding countryside in order to find employment.

The people with whom I worked were mostly permanent residents of
Hanoi. Some of them were from families who had lived in Hanoi for several generations, while a number were more recent migrants. Many of the young people were university educated and currently hold positions in joint-venture companies, state-owned enterprises, or private Vietnamese companies. In terms of the overall population of Vietnam, many of the younger people I met can be understood to be privileged. I also spoke at length with a number of young men who had come to Hanoi as itinerant laborers from villages to find work, who planned eventually to return home to marry and settle down after they had accumulated sufficient capital to do so. They invited me to their home villages on a number of occasions, and I became acquainted with their families and friends. I returned to one particular village in Hà Tay province numerous times, and came to know a few of the inhabitants quite well. I met many of my older informants at pagodas in Hanoi. In general, they were not university educated. Those few who were not yet retired made their living through unskilled labor and petty trade. Many of their children had significant advantages and had been able to receive university educations. Some of the older people with whom I had contact had held middle-management positions and a select few represent the new wealthy minority.

The research for this book was mostly done at two pagodas in Hanoi, though I have visited and chanted sutras in many others throughout Vietnam, as well as Vietnamese pagodas in Canada and Australia. These two pagodas were chosen for specific reasons. Quán Sứ Pagoda, as the pagoda housing the Vietnamese Buddhist Association (Giáo hội phật giáo Việt Nam), is politically the most important pagoda in Hanoi. Research at Quán Sứ Pagoda gave me insight into state-sanctioned Buddhism and normative practices and ideas. This pagoda also had the advantage of always being busy, with plenty of people I could observe and with whom I could speak. By contrast, most other pagodas were usually empty, except on specific days and for special rituals.

The second, named “Phúc Lộc Pagoda” (a pseudonym), was located beside a bustling market. It was a peaceful sanctuary from the tumultuous life surrounding it, offering a stark contrast from the world outside its gates. I chose this pagoda because, in contrast to Quán Sứ Pagoda, it was much smaller and attracted only local residents. Because of the smaller scale of Phúc Lộc Pagoda, I was able to get to know a closed group of people from the neighborhood in which I lived, and therefore experienced how the pagoda fit into the community. For this reason, I write as though the information recorded here is specific to Hanoi, though much of it is also applicable throughout the north, in other parts of Vietnam and among the diaspora. Nonetheless, as my data are not sufficient to make this claim, I will be writing specifically of Hanoi throughout the book.
OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS

The following chapters are intended to draw out some of the threads of Buddhist practice as they relate to gender and age in Hanoi. They will describe how men and women live as Buddhists in different ways, participating in different activities. As practices differ for men and women so do men’s and women’s interpretations of what they are doing, reflecting the different ways that men and women construct their identities and negotiate their lives.

Chapter 1 provides background of the Vietnamese religious landscape and different conceptions about how the supernatural relates to people’s lives. It starts off with descriptions of some of the ways that people approach religion and religious practice in order to illustrate the widely different interpretations of being religious in Vietnam. It then discusses the Vietnamese religious landscape that I most frequently encountered in the speech and actions of nonspecialist interlocutors with the supernatural. The chapter ends with the opposing, elite view of religion, and how it has played out in recent history.

Chapter 2 looks more closely at the relationship between the state and religion during the last century. It starts with a description of the Buddhist Revival that began in the first part of the twentieth century, and how the state has promoted the view that Buddhist reformers put forward. The way that these state discourses play out on the ground is illustrated through an introduction to the two primary pagodas where I conducted my research: Quán Sứ Pagoda, which is the state-backed representation of Buddhism, and Phúc Lộc Pagoda, which is unremarkable, politically marginal, and architecturally and artistically embodies a more holistic cosmology that recognizes a range of potent and imminent supernatural actors.

The masculine position towards religion is further explored in Chapter 3. Rather than focusing on religious practitioners, it instead focuses on young men, which is the segment of the population most critical of religion. Their skepticism is taken as performance directed towards their masculine gender projects—called “projects” because gender is not a fixed structure, but is constantly being built and changed to suit the environment. It is a part of the way they situate themselves in society and attempt to influence important aspects of their lives. Their attitudes towards religion are in some way a form of religious practice, and need to be taken into account in a discussion of the relationship between Buddhism and gender. In many ways, this chapter is a continuation of the discussion of state power and religion that was started in Chapter 2.

In order to flesh out the holistic way in which the Vietnamese typically
interact with the supernatural, Chapter 4 looks specifically at practices and meanings of lộc. These supernaturally charged items are part of a practice that is a central activity of all religious expressions, crossing them and uniting them. It starts with a description of the meanings and manifestations of lộc before turning to a discussion of the implications of lộc for understanding the overall worldview of religious Vietnamese.

Chapter 5 continues with the practice of making offerings and reclaiming lộc for distribution to family and friends. It is a practice that is performed especially by women and is by far the most common form of Buddhist engagement. In opposition to the skeptical performances of young men, making offerings is integral to the way that femininity is constructed. This chapter explores the way that young women practice Buddhism as part of an enactment of a sexually desirable femininity that emphasizes qualities such as reliance and weakness. It then looks at how the distribution of lộc by married women is also an opportunity to create sentiment and moral debt in the family.

The next two chapters go deeper into the pagoda by looking at the older women who become increasingly engaged in pagoda life. Their practice usually includes supplications and lộc, but is intensified through additional activities, such as chanting sutras. Chapter 6 starts by looking at the life changes that bring about this intensification. It then looks at the specific activities of these devout women as part of a religious practice that becomes centrally important to their identity. Chapter 7 looks at a darker side of this increased involvement. While one of the motivations for becoming more involved is the sense of community that involvement in the pagoda provides, there is also competition within the field that manifests itself in what I call “conspicuous devotion.” This latter comprises performances of devotion and the collection and display of objects that signify their level of commitment as a way to create distinction and gain status within the group.

Most Buddhist practitioners are women, but there are a small number of older men who become involved at the pagoda. This participation presents something of a dilemma: as I show in Chapter 3, masculinity is partly constructed through performances of skepticism and strength, in opposition to women’s reliance. Older men who become involved in Buddhism, therefore, rephrase Buddhist practice in a way that adds to a masculinity more appropriate to older men, and avoids the feminine aspects that are usually associated with Buddhism. The change in perspective towards Buddhist involvement is discussed in Chapter 8 by looking at the way that Buddhist rituals (and practice in general) are interpreted differently by men and women. Chapter 9 looks at how the practice of many male
Buddhists is rooted in a concern for knowledge-based self-cultivation, a pursuit with thoroughly masculine connotations that resonate with Confucian ideals. This chapter focuses on the performative aspects of masculine participation in the Buddhist field that are intended to gain greater status and authority.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

A few notes need to be made about language. I have kept all of the diacritics on Vietnamese words. I have done this principally because Vietnamese is a tonal language and dropping the diacritical accent marks may change the meaning of some words. I also maintain diacritics on Sanskrit names and include Chinese characters where applicable for the sake of consistency. I do, however, omit the diacritics on “Ho Chi Minh City,” “Hanoi,” and on “Vietnam.” All other place names do have the proper diacritical marks.

All individuals have been given pseudonyms, with the exception of public figures like Thích Thanh Từ. Furthermore, the name of one of the pagodas where I did my work, “Phúc Lộc” Pagoda, is a pseudonym. I have continued to use the real name for Quán Sứ Pagoda because it is politically important and its stature is relevant to the points being made, and other incidental religious sites, where their inclusion is of no consequence.

Referencing authors is a particularly sticky problem because Vietnamese names are written with the family name first. However, many overseas Vietnamese scholars change their name order to suit their Western environment and some Vietnamese scholars drop the diacritics on their names when publishing in English. I retain the form under which they published. For references, there will be a comma after names that publish using the Western name order (e.g., “C. T. Nguyen, 1995” rather than “Nguyen Từ Cuong 1995”). I also will use the full name in citations for authors who follow the traditional name order (e.g., Ngô Đức Thịnh 2006) and will follow the authors in the use of diacritical markings. Therefore, some Vietnamese names will appear with them and some without. For works written by authors who use the traditional Vietnamese name order, they are listed in the bibliography under their family names (e.g., Ngô Đức Thịnh will be listed under “Ngô”).

I use the words “gods” or “goddesses,” and “spirits” interchangeably to refer to all supernatural beings except ancestors, ghosts, and members of the Buddhist pantheon (buddhas and bodhisattvas). Thus, tutelary genii and deified national heroes (thần), as well as mother goddesses (thánh mẫu) will all be called gods and goddesses throughout. Finally, the historical Buddha, Siddhārtha Gautama, who
lived and died in India and is credited as the founder of Buddhism, will be referred to as “the Buddha” or in the Vietnamese form as Thích Ca Mâu Ni, or Thích Ca for short. All other buddhas and bodhisattvas will be referred to by name. For the names of buddhas and bodhisattvas, I will use the Vietnamese forms and the index will include both Vietnamese and more common names for reference.