This work is an ethnographic account of pilgrimages and popular religion in Vietnam. It is about a goddess known as the Lady of the Realm, whose shrine near Vietnam’s border with Cambodia attracts one of the biggest pilgrimages in the country. Part of a revival of religious activity in Vietnam, the pilgrimage to this goddess is an example of the phenomenal growth of interest in recent years in feminine spirits. Addressing aspects of this phenomenon in the southern parts of the country, this work opens a window onto the effervescence, creativity, social complexity, and interpretive ferment of popular religiosity in present-day Vietnam.

The research for this book was completed following Fragments of the Present, a work that explores shifting and contending notions about the cultural identity of southern Vietnam. Set in a postconflict cultural landscape of lingering enmities and new emerging inequalities, that work traces the history of reinventions, repudiations, and exclusions effected in the name of modernist ideals. Many of these attempts to remake Vietnamese society in the name of some universalistic vision of modernity failed to secure broad-based support because they attempted to enshrine as a national charter a partial experience of what it meant to be Vietnamese. The ideas and images addressed in that work are largely the products of an educated elite and, despite the influence of the political projects that have endorsed them, are somewhat removed from the ways that many others in Vietnam have experienced and made their history.

On completing the research for that book, I was motivated to explore other aspects of Vietnamese society that had wider appeal and deeper resonance. On consideration of the possibilities, I decided on my focus: the pilgrimage to the Lady of the Realm, a religious gathering that was big,
spontaneous, variegated, and deeply absorbing to its many participants. I had dropped into the Ho Chi Minh City pilgrimage scene in 1995, when fascination with this goddess was at its peak among the people of that city and had attended the festival to the goddess on the sacred slopes of Sam Mountain. In 1998 I was drawn back to this site by its popularity, color, deep resonances, and the breadth of its attraction to different people. The pilgrimage appeared to be a significant social and cultural movement that was growing and transforming rapidly despite and perhaps also because of efforts of the government to regulate it and of my learned friends in Ho Chi Minh City and in Hanoi to impose a nationalistic or moralistic spin on the phenomenon.

As one who first visited Vietnam in 1991, when tourists who sought to travel domestically had to submit detailed itineraries to the police, I was fascinated by the quality of unrestricted movement and the apparent freedom of rites and interpretation that seemed to be in play not only at the biggest pilgrimage sites but at smaller temples as well. The circulation of ideas, bodies, and offerings in and out of these shrines very much cut against the grain of the world of bureaucratically mediated travel and scholarship to which I had been exposed while doing my Ph.D. research in the early 1990s. The single-minded dedication shown by some pilgrims, constant reporting on the powers manifested by this or that spirit, and animated airing of itineraries were as compelling to me as an observer of pilgrimages as they seemed to be to participants themselves. To track such practices would present a methodological challenge as well, requiring an approach that could address their evident complexity and diffuseness.

For six weeks I trooped around the south with busloads of pilgrims, milled around in the precincts of pilgrimage shrines, chatted with pilgrims at their homes, hung out in pagodas, and engaged Buddhist monks and nuns in debate. I spent all my time with religious travelers and their proximate observers: people who like myself were engrossed in an immense variety of ideas and practices. I frequented the market stalls and credit circles around Dakao, Tân Định, and Bà Chiều markets, sat around in urban back alleys, street corners, noodle stalls, buses and boats, and all sorts of cool and tranquil interiors. I became acquainted with a rich symbolic world and came into repeated contact with a handful of goddesses around whom many people’s lives revolved.

I had a marvelous time drinking endless sweetened coffees with pilgrims, smoking cigarettes, eating durians, and chatting endlessly about all manner of religious topics. Most of my fellow pilgrims were women. They included market traders, ferry operators, pilgrimage guides, nuns, hotel receptionists, cigarette vendors, photographic saleswomen, smugglers, landladies, farmers,
credit dealers, gold traders, purveyors of religious wares, sex workers, retirees, teachers, Buddhist laywomen, hairdressers, students, and grandmothers. Among my principal male cultural guides on this trip, motorcycle and cyclo drivers, market vendors, porters, bus drivers, and conductors featured prominently, as well as a significant number of temple custodians, monks, and mediums. I am grateful to the many pilgrims, religious specialists, critics, and curbside observers of everyday religious practice whose engaging explanations brought the world of popular religion to life. I am especially indebted to my sisters Thuyê, Dung, Hai, Tư, Như, Hanh, and my three sisters Nga; my two aunts Chin; my brothers Phong, Dung, Bây, and Mươ. Their comments are cited in this text, but they are referred to using pseudonyms.

I visited the shrine to the Lady of the Realm in Vĩnh Tế village six times in all and spent two months over many trips in the village and in the river port of Châu Đốc. The members of the cult committee at the shrine in Vĩnh Tế were terribly busy on the occasions of the annual festival, yet generously shared their perspective with me and invited me to the ceremonies in 1995. Some of the most informed observers of the mobile religious world described in this book are people who make a living from the pilgrimage: bus drivers, café and restaurant proprietors, pilgrimage leaders, people who sell religious paraphernalia—those whose livelihood depends on their knowledge about trends in practice and belief. My thanks go to Nga, Chín, Mươi, and Sở for sharing with me their insights as well as to many other drivers, guides, and interlocutors whose names circumstances did not permit me to record. I learned a great deal from the many works by Vietnam-based scholars about these practices. In addition, my discussions with Huỳnh Ngọc Trang, Đỗ Thái Đông, and Lê Hồng Lý were particularly rewarding.

The anthropology and Asian studies departments at the University of Western Australia and the Department of Anthropology and Department of Political and Social Change at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, each provided financial support and conducive environments in which to work on the manuscript. Many people read my drafts and made useful comments; among these I thank Keith Taylor, Do Thien, Edwin Zehner, Mandy Thomas, Pham Thu Thuy, David Marr, Kim Ninh, Alex Leonard, Catherine Earl, Alan Rumsey, Francesca Merlin, and Andrew Kipness. Chapter 2 draws in part on an article published in the journal Asian Ethnicity (P. Taylor 2002) and I thank the editor, Colin Mackerras, for permission to use this. Grant Evans’ critical review encouraged me to improve this work, as did that of an anonymous reviewer for University of Hawai’i Press. The work evolved under the editorial guidance of Pamela...
Kelley, Ann Ludeman, and Joanne Sandstrom of the University of Hawai‘i Press.

The world and the memories this book evokes were part of my interior landscape for more than four years as I moved from place to place and job to job. Over time, aspects of my life, the life of the writer, began to seep into the work and color the phenomena I was describing. The experience of contract-based research work, the social wear and tear from many moves, a political environment of economic deregulation and reduced commitment to the public sector, the rise of entrepreneurialism in the academy, and the resurgence of exclusivist culturally essentialist identities in Australia influenced my image of the world I was describing and led me to emphasize certain themes. Given the somewhat parallel social and economic transformations under way in Vietnam these experiences if anything brought me closer to many of the concerns that have motivated the renewed emphasis on goddesses in that country.

Hence, the symbols and rites described in this book, while distinctive and spectacular, are not culturally otherworldly. Moreover, they are not so far from home. There are shopkeepers from Vietnam in my own suburb in Canberra who believe in the Lady of the Realm and speak her name with care lest they give offense. Members of my own family come from quite different religious traditions, yet they have been interested in my findings and have supported me in every turn of this work. While in Vietnam too I have found that my immersion in this topic has opened up fruitful channels of communication with a great many people and has allowed me to deepen my appreciation of that society. Others I hope will share my appreciation of the creativity and excitement of the world of religious practice that I have attempted, however imperfectly, to recount within these pages.

My thanks go to the families of Bảo Đại, Ngô Thị Ngân Bình, Phan Ngọc Chiên, and Phúc Tiến as well as to Dung Hanh, Phương and Thào, who sustained me with their valuable friendship during the period of writing this work. I dedicate this book to my mother and two sisters and to my fellow pilgrims with whom I conversed and traveled during my six-week journey in 1998 through Her Ladyship’s realm.