In Vietnam’s postreform era, religious beliefs and practices that were once attacked as wasteful and superstitious have (again) become a conspicuous feature of contemporary urban and rural life (Malarney 2003; Taylor 2007). Four Palace mediumship, an intrinsic part of the so-called Mother Goddess Religion, Đạo Mẫu (see Ngô Đức Thịnh 1996, 2004; Fjelstad & Nguyen 2006; Endres 2011), is one case in point. Whereas in the heyday of socialist construction, most notably during the 1960s and 1970s, spirit mediums had to conduct their ritual possessions in secluded privacy for fear of being arrested by local authorities, they have gradually managed to reassert their place in the public realm since the launch of the reform policy in the late 1980s. Besides being performed in private temples established by individual master mediums, as well as in public temples recognized and managed by the state as “historical and cultural vestiges” (di tích lịch sử văn hóa), in the past ten years Four Palace possession rituals (called hầu đồng, “a medium’s service” or lên đồng, “mounting the medium”) have even been performed on open stages on festival occasions and enhanced with video, sound, and lighting effects (Endres 2011, 158, 182–3). In January 2012, the Vietnamese Women’s Museum launched an exhibition entitled “Worshiping the Mother Goddess: Pure Heart—Beauty—Joy” aimed at raising public awareness of the religion’s key values and cultural significance. Representatives of various government and academic bodies even debated the prospects of the Mother Goddess Religion receiving official state recognition, as well as the nomination of hầu đồng possession rituals for inscription on the UNESCO world Intangible Cultural Heritage list (Phạm Gia Khánh 2012).

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 (Nhạc Phủ)—that are “supervised” or governed by the Mother Goddesses. Associated with these palaces is a

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hierarchically ranked pantheon of male and female deities with different characteristics and powers (Figure 7.1). During a possession ritual (called lên dông, hâu bóng, or hâu thánh), a select number of these deities are invited to descend from their palaces to the world of humans and “mount” their mediums in a prescribed order while a group of chầu văn musicians chant their legends, composed in poetic verse (Norton 2009).

Just like in other possession religions, the initiation into Four Palace mediumship often relates to critical moments in human life. A “yin illness” (i.e., an illness perceived as caused by spiritual powers; see Nguyễn Thị Hiền 2008), a continuous streak of bad luck in business or personal affairs, or haunting dreams may all be an indication that the deities (or spirits) are calling a person into a life of service as a medium. It is important to note that a person qualifies as a ritual practitioner not because of his or her free will, but because that person has a “spirit root” (căn), meaning that he or she is fated for mediumship. This spirit root is often associated with one or several deities of the pantheon. A person can have the root of, for example, the Seventh Prince (căn Ông Hoàng Bảy) or the Third Princess (căn Cô Bơ). This root is believed to have 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 and becoming a medium. As a minimum requirement,