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## The Spiritual World of a Hakka Village

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Sharon A. CARSTENS\*

### Abstract

This paper examines spiritual beliefs and practices in the Hakka Malaysian community of Pulai, focusing on the pantheon of deities and spirits worshipped and propitiated; the system of local beliefs in the power and efficacy of these deities; and the manner in which individuals and families have reproduced and altered these spiritual beliefs over time. Unlike my previous writings about religion in Pulai, which have emphasized the sociological components of local religion practices, my goal here is to explore the cosmological system, world view, and system of meanings conveyed through religious practices in this Hakka village.

As with many Chinese communities, the list of spirits who are propitiated in Pulai is rather lengthy. The most visible community deities are those with permanent places in the village temple dedicated to Guanyin (觀音) where the front altar also includes *Mazu* (媽祖) known locally as *Maniang* (媽娘) and represented as three sisters; *Shupoda* (叔頗大), who cares for domestic animals; *Guandi* (關帝); *Tangongye* (譚公爺), a Hakka rain deity; *Dabogong* (大伯公), a territorial spirit; and *Caishen* (財神) Wealth God. During the nine day annual Guanyin birthday celebration in the second lunar month, additional deities and spirits who are propitiated include *Tiangong* (天公), the God of Heaven; *Shuidexianjun* (水德仙君), a water spirit; two Malay *laduk* (拿督公), local earth spirits; a 'festivity' *shen* (神); and the unnamed

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spirits of men who died protecting the community. Ancestors are worshipped in family homes on altars that often include other deities such as *Guanyin*, *Maniang*, *Guandi*, or *Caishen*. Families also propitiate *Zaojun* (灶君), the Stove God, in their kitchens, and *Tudigong* (土地公), the Earth God, and *Tiangong* in appropriate domestic locations. Finally a handwritten book of temple prayers includes petitions not only to *Guanyin* and other temple deities, but also to *Longshen* (龍神), Dragon God; *Dasui* (大歲), a star deity; *Nandou*, *Beidou* (南斗北斗), South and North Pole Stars; *Jigong* (濟公); *Nazha* (哪吒); and *Jitian* (濟天).

The first section of this paper examines the unique characteristics of the spirits included in the Pulai pantheon, and describes briefly how they came to be worshipped in the community. The second section explores local beliefs in the powers of these spirits conveyed through stories of their actions and interactions with community members over time. The paper's third section situates Pulai spiritual beliefs in time and space, and discusses how shifts in local spiritual practices and beliefs have helped new generations of Pulai residents respond to a changing world.

**Keywords** : Popular religion, Cosmology, Religious belief, Ritual change

## 客家村莊的精神世界

柯雪潤

### 中文摘要

這篇論文檢視了客家籍馬來西亞社區在布賴的精神信仰和習俗，焦點放在神明的祠堂、英靈崇拜及平慰；在神明的力量及影響力之下的地方信仰體制、個人及家族隨著時光重現與改變過的風俗；不同於我前一篇較強調布賴在地宗教習俗之社會要素的文章，在此我的目標是探索宇宙哲學、世界觀，以及在客家村莊宗教習俗中所傳遞的涵義體系。

正如許多華人社區一樣，在布賴，人們敬奉的神靈自不在少數。最常見的地方守護神，在村裡供觀音娘娘的廟中亦佔有一席之地：前壇供的是媽祖，在此地稱為「媽娘」，以三姐妹的形象示人；家畜的守護神「叔頗大」；關帝爺、客家雨神「譚公爺」、還有地方守護神「大伯公」。在陰曆二月，為期九日的觀音誕辰慶典中，其他被請出來安奉的神明、英靈還包括「天公」，掌理天界之神；水神「水德仙君」；兩位馬來神明「拿督公」(laduk)，當地的土地神；一位慶典的神，以及在保衛鄉土時犧牲的無名英靈等等。家族中，供奉祖先牌位的神壇也常一道供奉觀音、媽娘、關聖帝君、財神爺等。百姓也會祭拜灶君，廚房中的爐灶之神，土地公；在某些家庭聚會場合也會祭拜天公。最後，一本由廟祝手寫的冊子，寫著對諸神的祈願—不僅僅對觀音和其他廟宇中的神明，同時也對龍神、大歲（星辰之神）、南斗北斗（南北兩極星宿）、濟公、哪吒、濟天等——祈福。

這份論文的第一節為諸神靈的獨特性作了審視，包括布賴的多神廟，並簡要敘述了祂們如何成為鄉裡聚落的崇拜對象。第二節探索地方信仰的力量，是藉著傳奇故事流傳英靈們的豐功偉業、與鄉民的互動等，歷久不衰。第三節為布賴的精神信仰在時空中定位，並探討當地心靈習俗與信仰的轉變，如何幫助布賴居民的下一代面對日新月異的世界。

**關鍵字：**民間信仰、宇宙哲學、宗教信仰、儀式的改變

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## Introduction

Scholarly attention to Hakka religious beliefs and practices has been a relatively underdeveloped topic in Hakka studies, especially when compared with research on Hakka language, historical migrations, gender practices, identity formations, and political issues. A noted exception to this trend can be found in recent publications based on ethno historic and ethnographic research in Hakka communities in northeastern Guangdong, Northwestern Fujian and southern Jiangxi provinces which have provided new data on both the great diversity of Hakka religious beliefs and practices in these areas as well as certain Hakka patterns of honoring deities and celebrating lunar holidays.<sup>1</sup> Many, if not most, of the practices described, however, relate to a society that has long vanished. In a few cases, former temples and rituals are being restored (and sometimes reinvented), but for the most part the Hakka temple festivals and the deities worshipped described in such detail in these volumes have become part of mainland China's irretrievable past.

Yet Hakka religious beliefs and practices have remained alive elsewhere, particularly among the descendants of Hakkas who left China in great numbers in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, settling in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and areas of Southeast Asia. These migrants carried with them Hakka religious traditions that continue to shape their experiences of the world and their responses to it. Although many of these religious practices and beliefs are widely shared among other Han Chinese and have predictably changed in response to local circumstances, it is worth asking, as with other areas of Hakka culture, whether certain Hakka religious patterns or sensibilities

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<sup>1</sup> Volumes in the Traditional Hakka Society Series edited by John Lagerwey that focus particularly on religious beliefs and practices include those edited by Fang Xuejia (1996); Luo Yong and Lagerwey (1997); Luo Yong and Lin Xiaoping (1998); and Yang Yanjie (1996). Lagerwey's prefaces to these volumes summarize both the great variation in religious practices in the different Hakka areas, and patterns found within and across them.

can be identified in contemporary Hakka communities. Answering this question will require detailed studies of Hakka religious beliefs and practices in a variety of Hakka settings.<sup>2</sup>

The following account, based on multiple periods of ethnographic research between 1978 and 1998,<sup>3</sup> provides one such case study of religious patterns in the Malaysian Chinese community of Pulai, a settlement founded by 18<sup>th</sup> century Hakka gold miners whose descendants became rice farmers, rubber tappers and wage laborers. Pulai's central temple, *Shuiyuegong* (水月宮), honoring Guanyin (觀音) and other important deities, has for many generations played a key role in a religious system that is both a central part of community life and an important source of individual belief and action. My previous interpretations of Pulai religion emphasized the links between shifting religious practices, gender patterns, and community structures over time (Carstens 2005:101-126) but paid relatively little attention to the wider pantheon of deities worshipped, their relations to Hakka religious patterns elsewhere, and the system of religious beliefs and practices that has guided community members in responding to ongoing challenges at both the personal and collective levels.<sup>4</sup> My goals in the following paper are thus three fold: first, to document the local deities worshipped, their origins within the community, and the basic structure of Hakka ritual practice in Pulai; second, to explore local beliefs in the

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<sup>2</sup> As noted in my opening sentence, there has been relatively little attention paid to traditional Hakka religion. The two most recent ethnographies dealing with religion in Hakka communities focus on Hakka Catholics (Constable 1994; Lozada 2001). Studies of Chinese religion in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Malaysia have mainly analyzed Hokkien or Cantonese religious practices. The Berkowitz (1969) study of urban Hakka villagers in Hong Kong is one of the few exceptions.

<sup>3</sup> My initial period of research in Pulai spanned 12 months from March 1978 to February 1979, and I returned for further visits and research in July 1982, March 1984, June-August 1989, March 1990, November 1996, and March 1998. This research was funded by a Fulbright Dissertation Research Abroad Grant (1978); Cornell Southeast Asian Program Fellowship (1979); Beloit College Cullister Grant (1982); Fulbright Faculty Research Abroad Grant (1983/84); and Portland State University Faculty Development Grants (1989 and 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Cohen's work on Hakka religion in Taiwan (1993) similarly focuses on the relationship between ritual practice and social structure as does much of the ethnographic research on Chinese popular religion in general.

powers of these spirits conveyed through stories of their actions and interactions with community members over time; and third to situate Pulai Hakka spiritual beliefs in time and space, noting how shifts in local spiritual practices and beliefs have helped new generations of Pulai residents respond to a changing world.

## **The Pulai Religious System: Deities and Other Spirits**

The Pulai religious system developed over time as Hakka migrants, mostly from Meixian and Huizhou in Guangdong Province, brought with them both their systems of belief and the physical manifestations of these beliefs in the form of incense censors and images of various deities. The earliest Chinese settlers in this interior area of southern Kelantan were Hakka gold miners, some of whom eventually married local Siamese and Temiar (aborigine) women, established families, and began to grow rice, thus laying the foundation for a more stable community.<sup>5</sup> The few non Hakka Chinese who found their way to Pulai adopted Hakka language and customs, making them indistinguishable from other community members. In the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Pulai community also attracted school teachers and men with more specialized ritual knowledge who came to play important religious roles in the community. Prior to 1950 and the forced removal of Pulai people from their ancestral lands during the Malayan Emergency, the central temple *Shuiyuegong*, honored *Guanyin*. Most other deities now worshipped in Pulai had their own temples, supported by income from land bequeathed to them by Pulai men who returned to China or who died without descendents. In 1950 all of the Pulai deities were carried to the Pulai Baru New Village in Terengganu where they were placed together on the

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed account of Pulai history, see Carstens (1998).



altar of a new branch temple. In 1972 these deities were returned to a newly reconsecrated *Shuiyuegong* temple in central Pulai.

## Temple Deities

While the timing of the original arrival of particular gods into the community is generally unknown, worship of *Guanyin*, a commonly venerated deity among Hakka and other Chinese, and the principal deity in the central Pulai temple, is believed to predate all others.<sup>6</sup> Over time, an elaborate nine day annual temple festival came to be celebrated in honor of Guanyin's birthday on the 19<sup>th</sup> of the second lunar month featuring large scale formal rituals; processions of deities around the community; five days of communal vegetarian meals; evening entertainment; and numerous other rituals. Smaller temple rituals also honor Guanyin on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the sixth and ninth lunar months.

The second most important Pulai deity, *Mazu* (媽祖) or *Tianhou* (天后) is known locally as *Maniang* (媽娘) and represented as three sworn sisters surnamed *Chen* (陳), *Lin* (林), and *Li* (李). Also known as *Da Maniang* (大媽娘), *Er Maniang* (二媽娘), and *San Maniang* (三媽娘), these images sit to the stage right of *Guanyin* on the *Shuiyuegong* altar. The merging of *Mazu* with the three *Maniang* appears to derive from Hakka areas in Fujian where temples originally dedicated to *Sannai* (三奶) or the Three Ladies (Chen, Lin, Li) were similarly transformed into *Mazu* temples (see Baptandier 1996; Lagerwey 1996a:2). The *Maniang* of Pulai, like the *Sannai* of Fujian, play an active role in guarding against demons and ghosts. In the past, a series

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<sup>6</sup> A *Guanyin* incense censor in the Pulai temple dating from the *Xuande* (宣德) period of the Ming Dynasty (1426-1435) is cited by some as proof of early temple origins. However, censors from this period are fairly common (Chee 1971:32) and there is no way to determine when it was brought into the community. Note also that the name of the Pulai temple, *Shuiyuegong* refers to the *Shuiyue Guanyin* (see Bagyalakshmi 1998).

of community spirit mediums, possessed by the first and second Maniang sisters, directed communal rituals, healed illness, and exerted considerable local power and influence. Temple rituals with large sacrificial offerings honor *Maniang*'s birthday on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of the third lunar month.<sup>7</sup>

A more localized female deity, known in Hakka as *Sukpotai* (叔婆大), is said to have been called down by a *Maniang* spirit medium to take charge of domestic animals. Addressed in formal temple prayers as *Guofufamiaoxianniang* (郭府法妙仙娘), *Sukpotai* is said to be especially fond of liver, and supplicants with lost or sick animals are sure to reward her assistance with thank offerings that include this treat. A smaller temple ritual honors her birthday on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh lunar month.

Three male deities sit to the stage left of *Guanyin* on the altar. The first, *Tangongye* (譚公爺), a rain deity, is also worshipped by Hakkas in Huizhou and Hong Kong (Faure 1992; Siu 1987). In times of severe drought when prayers for rain go unanswered, the image of *Tangongye* is set out in the hot sun to move him to action. His birthday is celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the fourth lunar month.

*Guandi* (關帝), now seated to the left of *Tangongye*, arrived in the Pulai area with a group of Hakka gold miners surnamed Pang in the 1860s or 1870s. Accused of bullying local men and trying to take control of the area, the Pangs were attacked and driven away by the multi-surnamed Pulai miners. The wooden plaque with *Guandi*'s image, burned beyond recognition, was first installed in a small temple near the site of the battle, but was eventually moved with the other Pulai deities to the central temple. Like other deities, *Guandi* is honored on his birthday, the 24<sup>th</sup> day of the sixth lunar month.

<sup>7</sup> Berkowitz (1969:85) notes that Hakka villagers in the New Territories also worship *Tianhou* or *Mazu* as *Maniang*.

The third male deity, *Dabogong* (大伯公) is described as a territorial god in control of the local area, and is mainly worshipped on his birthday, the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of the second lunar month. Although now relatively unimportant in Pulau, *Dabogong* has been an important deity widely worshipped among Chinese in Southeast Asia (Purcell 1967:123).

A fourth male deity *Caishen* (財神), the God of Wealth, appeared for the first time on the Pulau temple altar in 1984. As Pulau men explained to me, although *Guandi* can also assist with requests for aid in business and other economic endeavors, people pray to *Caishen* for lottery numbers and other more crooked (*waiwaide* 歪歪的) financial requests.<sup>8</sup>

## Other Local Deities and Spirits

Most of the deities who sit on Pulau's main temple altar are well known and worshipped by Chinese elsewhere as well. However, during the Guanyin festival a number of more specialized spirits are also invited to participate, many of whom signify historic ties with spiritual beings of particular local significance.<sup>9</sup> At the beginning of the Guanyin festival on the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup>, a noisy procession moves most of the regular temple deities to a temporary altar for the five day vegetarian portion of the festival.<sup>10</sup> This is immediately followed by four torch-lit

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<sup>8</sup> See DeBernardi (1995) for a more detailed discussion of worship of the Wealth God in the context of Penang Chinese religious practice.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Wolf's well known analysis of the ways in which Chinese beliefs in gods, ghosts, and ancestors mirror Chinese perceptions of their social world (1974) not only applies well to the Pulau situation, but also helps make particular sense of the array of locally defined Pulau deities and their powers.

<sup>10</sup> In 1978, Guanyin, the three Maniang, Sukpotai, and Tangongye were moved to an open fronted temple hall that faced the regular temple. Asked to explain this, Pulau people simply said that this was their traditional practice. I suspect this custom may have originated in former times when deities in their own temples were invited in join in the celebration of Guanyin's birthday. Beginning in 1984, with the reconstruction of an elaborate new temple, these deities were no longer moved to another structure, but were carried in a circle around the new temple courtyard and repositioned on the main altar slightly to the left of their usual place.

processions up and down roads and paths to the small shrines of two *laduk* (拿督公) and a local water spirit, who are invited to accompany the group back to honored positions on a side temple altar. Like the Chinese territorial spirits known as *tudigong* (土地公), the *laduk* are identified as spiritual landlords, but in this case they are said to be the spirits of two Malays who died in the area and were identified and given this position by Maniang spirit mediums. The vegetarian offerings prepared in honor of Guanyin are considered especially appropriate for these non-pork eating Malay spirits, whose ethnicity is further signaled with offerings of betel nut.<sup>11</sup> Less well known, the water spirit, *Shuidexianjun* (水德仙君), was called down by a Maniang spirit medium to help guard against the threat of residential fires, which given local construction materials of bamboo and attap must have posed an ongoing danger.

A second set of spirits invited to the Guanyin festival have no permanent shrines in the community but are called down to temporary altars in and around the temple area. Each year their names and titles are freshly written with brush and ink on red paper which is hung above their altar. With the breaking of the vegetarian fast, these spirits are sent back, and their signs are burned with incense and spirit money.<sup>12</sup> Two of the deities so honored oversee core features of the ritual celebration. Seated on a temporary altar in the temple kitchen, *Jianjaiye* (監齋爺) is a strict vegetarian god who supervises the preparation of vegetarian offerings and meals. During the vegetarian portion of the festival, the temple kitchen is considered a sacred space, and

<sup>11</sup> Cheu (1998) identifies the Malaysian Chinese worship of *laduk* as originating with Malay worship of *keramats*. In any case, this is a good example of the localization of Chinese religious practices in a new ethnic setting.

<sup>12</sup> During the first five days of the festival, all temple deities and invited spirits are worshipped twice daily prior to communal vegetarian meals in a ritual known as *baichao* (拜朝) with offerings of the cooked vegetarian food that will be served to devotees. A small group of men, accompanied by local musicians, honor first Guanyin and other deities in the temple before proceeding to worship at a series of four temporary altars outside the temple.

*Jianjaiye* is said to prohibit women, who are potentially polluting, from entering.<sup>13</sup> Next to the temple, on a small table altar inside a specially erected bamboo and attap platform, another deity designated simply as *shen* (神) is worshipped mainly by several male musicians who play the two-stringed *erhu* (二胡) and bamboo flute (*xiao* 簫) for temple rituals. Described by Pulai people as the god of *renao* (熱鬧): festivity, noise, excitement, the couplets written on either side of this red sign also convey an invocation to the realm of the senses.<sup>14</sup> In a room behind the main temple worship hall a piece of an old cannon, said to have been captured in the historic battle against the Pangs, leans against a table that becomes the temporary altar for a god known as *Dajiangjun* (大將軍), a military general said to honor the spirits of Pulai men who died fighting the Pangs. Finally two temporary roadside table altars, one facing north and one facing south, announce the presence of the last group of spirits invited to join in the festivities. There is no written indication of who these spirits represent, but according to several more knowledgeable men they are spirits of men who died while defending the Pulai community. In the past a small shrine called *Wuzigong* (武子宮) was dedicated to their memory and a list of their names was recited during rituals, but over time their names have been forgotten.<sup>15</sup>

Even more anonymous local spirits or ghosts are acknowledged and propitiated in a field out of sight of the temple in two all male evening rituals, on the third day with vegetarian offerings and on the sixth day with meat after the fast has been broken.

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<sup>13</sup> Beliefs in female pollution, widely shared in Chinese communities (Ahern 1975), led to restrictions on Pulai women entering the Guanyin Temple during the first half of the twentieth century (Carstens 2005:112).

<sup>14</sup> The characters to the left: *zhuyu qingfeng mingyue* (竹雨 青風 明月) roughly translate as rain in the bamboos, fresh wind, bright moon. And to the right: *luyan qinyun xiaosheng* (爐煙 琴韻 簫聲) evokes incense smoke, the harmony of the lute, sound of the flute.

<sup>15</sup> The dedication of temples to community defenders, or fallen heroes, is found among Hakka elsewhere. In Taiwan, such temples, known as *Yimin Miao* (義民廟) were common from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Levesque 1969:23-26). The first Chinese temple in Kuala Lumpur in the 1860s, established by the Hakka pioneer Yap Ah Loy, was similarly dedicated to fallen Hakka leaders (Letessier 1893).

Three sets of offerings arranged on rows of banana leaves on the ground and facing different directions mark separate groups of Pulai ghosts. The longest row of offerings is for men described as former opium addicts. A smaller set acknowledges former teachers and village leaders, who are addressed as *Kapitan*, *Ketua Kampong*, and *Penghulu*.<sup>16</sup> The third single set of offerings supplicates a former Pulai penghulu murdered by the communists in 1950. Pulai women, who on the afternoon before these rituals gather together to cut out and assemble the paper clothing and spirit money burned in these rituals, say that these offerings are a gift from Guanyin to local unfortunate spirits who used to plague the Pulai area, but have now been appeased through these ceremonies.<sup>17</sup>

The last major deity worshipped during the temple festival is the Jade Emperor, *Yuhuangdadi* (玉皇大帝), also known as *Tiangong* (天公) or God of Heaven. Worship of *Tiangong* takes place in front of a three tiered altar specially erected outside of the temple on the early mornings of the sixth and ninth days of the festival. The rituals performed for *Tiangong* feature elaborate arrangements of vegetarian and meat offerings, written petitions that are chanted by local experts, and on the final day the burning of a specially constructed white paper horse that carries the names of all contributors to the festival. Rather than comparing the position of *Tiangong* to that of the Chinese emperor, as Chinese do elsewhere (Wolf 1974:133ff), Pulai people transpose this hierarchy to the local setting and are known to remark that *Tiangong*'s powers are much like those of the Malay Sultan.

<sup>16</sup> *Kapitans* were Chinese leaders appointed by the British. *Ketua Kampong* and *Penghulu* are Malay terms for government appointed village heads.

<sup>17</sup> This is the only communal propitiation of ghosts during the year in Pulai. Like Hakkas surveyed in China (Lagerwey 1996b), Pulai people do not celebrate the Hungry Ghost Festival on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the seventh lunar month. Rather, on this day, known locally as *Yinren Jie* (陰人節), individual families worship their patrilineal ancestors on home altars during the day, and *yinren*, who some refer to as their maternal ancestors, outside the house in the evening.

In addition to the worship of deities and spirits in the Pulai temple, local families also engage in an annual cycle of religious activities within their own homes. Patrilineal ancestors, most with permanent altars in the main room (*keting* (客廳)), are worshipped with special offerings on their death days and at lunar New Year, *Qingming* (清明), *Duanwu Jie* (端午節), *Yinren Jie* (陰人節), and *Zhongqiu Jie* (中秋節).<sup>18</sup> Guanyin and Maniang are commonly worshipped at Pulai family altars, some of which may also honor Guandi or Caishen. *Zaojun* (灶君), the Stove God, is generally found on altars in family kitchens, and worship of *Tiangong* (天公), the God of Heaven and *Tudigong* (土地公), the Earth God, on appropriate occasions is also common. One last type of more temporary spirit found on a number of Pulai altars is called down by a spirit medium to help with illness or other serious family problems, and is usually thanked and returned to the spirit world at the end of the year.

## Religious Specialists

Throughout the elaborate annual nine day Guanyin festival, the complex sets of different rituals are organized and led by Pulai men based on conventions and knowledge passed down over many generations. The detailed written petitions to the gods offered on Guanyin's birthday (and other important occasions) are copied from a temple book said to have been composed by Wen Luk, Pulai's first schoolteacher, who arrived sometime in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and claimed to hold a *xiucai* (秀才) degree. Prayers in this book include not only petitions to Guanyin and other temple deities, but also call upon an extensive pantheon of Taoist spirits that include

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<sup>18</sup> Traditional Chinese holidays are often celebrated with larger community oriented displays by Malaysian Chinese in urban areas (Wong 1967), but in the more isolated rural setting of Pulai ancestor worship followed by family meals are the most prototypical activities on these days.

*Longshen* (龍神), Dragon God; *Dasui* (大歲), a star deity; *Nandou, Beidou* (南斗北斗), South and North Pole Stars; *Jigong* (濟公); *Nazha* (哪吒); and *Qitian* (齊天). Rather than relying on Buddhist monks or Taoist priests, religious affairs in the community are handled by local men and women. Certain men have chosen to learn ritual chants, how to direct rituals, and the rules for arranging offerings and caring for temple altars. Others have developed more direct connections with spiritual powers by becoming spirit mediums or *tongzi* (童子).<sup>19</sup>

The Pulai community recognizes two different types of spirit mediums: those called directly by Maniang to serve as her *tongzi* (often against their will), and those who have elected to study the techniques of going into trance to call on spiritual powers. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century up until 1977, three Pulai men served successively as *tongzi* for the first, most powerful, Maniang sister, while three others served the second Maniang. The Maniang *tongzi*, whose public trance performances with swords were said to be both exciting and frightening, had great authority and status in the Pulai community. Maniang spirit mediums not only directed most temple affairs, including the rituals and activities of the annual Guanyin festival, but also used their spiritual powers, derived from their special relationship with Maniang, to heal individual sickness or handle other problems, for which they were paid a small fee.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, many more Pulai men have studied how to go into trance and call on spirits, but because people believe that this type of spiritual power can be used for

<sup>19</sup> The types of ritual experts overlap in Pulai but are not entirely congruent. Thus, many, but not all, ritual chanters and leaders have studied to be *tongzi*. Similarly, many, but not all *tongzi* serve as communal ritual leaders.

<sup>20</sup> The involuntary aspect in becoming a community spirit medium, reflected in Pulai stories about Maniang *tongzi* being called to serve against their will, is a common theme, not only with Chinese spirit mediums (Jordon 1972:70-73; Potter 1974: 226), but also with Koreans (Kendall 1985:57-61). The sense of social control engendered in such beliefs is probably more important in rural areas than in impersonal urban situations. As Elliot (1955:118) noted for Singapore in the 1950s, spirit medium “cultures in the highly urbanized areas indulge in straightforward private enterprise without fear of criticism, while in rural areas, some measure of popular support is essential.” More recent studies of spirit mediums in Singapore (Ju 1983; Tong 1989) and Penang (DeBernardi 2006) do not report distrust of mediums who have voluntarily studied their art.



either good or evil, these men have generally limited their practice to assisting with individual illness. A few Pulai women have also studied to be *tongzi*, but are said to use these powers very rarely.<sup>21</sup>

## Religious Belief and Practice

The first section of this paper has examined the Pulai religious system by focusing on descriptions of the pantheon of spirits who have come to be worshipped over time and the ritual experts who serve these spirits. Among the numerous deities and spirits mentioned, some have clear links to Hakka religious practices elsewhere, while others are identified more specifically with the history and geography of the local Pulai community. The staging of the nine day Guanyin festival, which demands an impressive expenditure of human and material resources each year, suggests a deep commitment to and involvement with religious matters among Pulai community members. However, as with Chinese communities elsewhere, the people of Pulai exhibit a range of belief in, knowledge of, and commitment to spiritual affairs. This section of the paper explores issues of religious belief, knowledge and practice among the Hakka Chinese of Pulai.

Although all Pulai families are expected to contribute some money to the Guanyin festival, as in other Chinese communities, the choice of participating in communal rituals is left to the individual. Having a respectable number of worshippers for temple rituals is important, but not everyone needs to participate for the ritual to be considered efficacious. Thus, even for the most important Guanyin

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<sup>21</sup> Hakka female spirit mediums are known to practice elsewhere in Malaysia. See DeBernardi 1986; Mo 1984.

birthday rituals, active worshippers usually number between 30 and 40 middle aged and elderly men and women, or just a small fraction of Pulai adults.<sup>22</sup> From one perspective, the limited participation of Pulai people in communal rituals suggests what Watson (1988) has argued as the importance of orthopraxy (proper ritual conduct) over orthodoxy (proper belief). However, many individuals who do not participate in communal rituals conduct individual worship with private offerings in the temple on the same day, often combining this with asking their fortune or borrowing lucky money. Rather than focusing entirely on acts of religious worship, one way to understand patterns of local spiritual beliefs is through the stories that are widely told about the powers of Pulai gods. In what follows, I begin by examining the transmission of key religious ideas through local stories and myths that depict the protective powers of Guanyin and other local deities; the channeling of spiritual powers through tongzi; and the karmic rewards and retributions that define the moral order. I then examine some common religious practices that reflect these beliefs, and explore their location within a local discourse that seeks to separate superstition from belief.

With the exception of a few Pulai people who have either consulted religious books or have studied the specialized skills of spirit mediums, most religious knowledge in Pulai has been acquired through oral transmission: from parent to child; from elders telling tales to younger people in the temple during important festivals; or from stories shared between friends.<sup>23</sup> Among the most commonly shared tales are those that demonstrate the miraculous efficacy (*ling* 靈) of the major protectors of the

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<sup>22</sup> In 1978 just over 600 people resided in 100 households in the Pulai community.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that while these stories represent shared cultural knowledge, there is no way of knowing how widely (and in what circumstances) they are believed. See Brown 2007: 93-94. Also see below for further discussion of Pulai discourse on religious belief.

Pulai community: Guanyin and Maniang, often referred to collectively as *Niang Niang* (娘娘).<sup>24</sup> For example, several people told me of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Sumatran jelutong tappers who insulted Guanyin (and the Pulai people) by strewing dead birds around the temple. Although initially censured through appeals by the Pulai community to the Kelantan Sultan, the Sumatrans are said to have been afflicted by a deadly illness sent by Guanyin, which finally drove them from the area. Stories of the deities' protection during the Japanese occupation are also very common. One account describes how the crossed swords of Maniang placed across the path into the Pulai settlement kept the Japanese from entering the community. In another story, the Japanese entered and camped in the temple, while the Pulai people fled with their gods to the nearby jungles. The Japanese, however, could not remain. Haunted by white clothed spirits sent by Guanyin, the confused soldiers began fighting among themselves and were forced to retreat. And in a story from the Emergency, the British plane that bombed Pulai after the takeover of the Gua Musang police station by communist guerrilla fighters is said to have targeted the Shuiyuegong temple after seeing about a dozen men run inside. Although a total of thirteen bombs were dropped, Guanyin reportedly prevented any from striking the temple.<sup>25</sup>

The tales of supernatural struggles against evil spirits and demons said to threaten the area often emphasize the assistance of Maniang spirit mediums. One

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<sup>24</sup> When questioned, Pulai people identify Guanyin and Maniang as separate and distinct deities, and most rituals treat them as such. However, at other times the two appear to be spoken of and treated almost as one. For example, the *fu* (符) issued by the Shuiyuegong temple and pasted on some Pulai family altars lists Guanyin (*Guanyinfo* 觀音佛) and Maniang (*Tianshangshen* 天上神) side by side followed by the single character for mother (*mu* 母). The written prayers in the temple prayer book used for the birthday rituals of the two deities, following opening invocations that identify each deity, repeat the same supplications for the final two thirds of the prayer. Other authors (Irwin 1990: 62-63; Sangren 1983: 8; Thompson 1978:197) note similar parallels in the special characteristics and powers accredited to Guanyin and Mazu (Maniang).

<sup>25</sup> Stories of local deities protecting the community are a common feature of Chinese popular religion. See, for example, Jordan 1972: 23-24. As Sangren (1993:569) so cogently argues (in a most Durkheimian vein), "the magical power (*ling*) attributed to community gods is validated by the miracles it has performed in behalf of the community. Moreover, such miracles are generally linked to historical events in which the community has in reality acted collectively in the face of external threats (attacks by outsider enemies, natural disasters, epidemics). Such events are endowed with miraculous status, and in subsequent public rituals in honor of the deity they serve to legitimate and reproduce community."

legend that has been transmitted orally in Pulai (but is also said to have been performed in plays and to be available in written form), describes the miraculous formation of the Maniang sisterhood, capable of vanquishing demons and saving kinsmen. What follows is my translation of the story as related to me by a Pulai shopkeeper.

A village in China was controlled by a monster (*yaoguai* 妖怪) who demanded that every year the monster be given an unmarried boy and girl to eat; if they did not, trouble would descend on the village. A rotating system was devised where each family in turn was responsible for providing the sacrificial victim, and no family dared to disobey. One year, when the turn came for a certain family to give up its son, an older sister could not bear to lose her younger brother and decided to try to find some way to defeat the monster.

Setting off in search of help, she crossed a river where women were washing clothing. The women asked where she was going and when she explained, one woman volunteered to join her. The two continued on and came across another woman on the road who also decided to join the sisterly cause. The three women decided to look for a Taoist immortal (*xian* 仙) who could help them in their struggle, and heard that they must climb a tall mountain to find him. Coming across an old man along the road, they pleaded with him to help them find the *xian*, for time was growing short. But the old man claimed that the open wound on his chest prevented him from walking far or fast and said they would have to wait until this healed before he could take them to the *xian*. The older sister now pleaded with the

man, saying there wasn't time; if they waited, her younger brother would surely be eaten. The old man replied that the only way he could assist them was if they would suck the pus from his wound; this would heal the wound quickly and he'd be able to help. The older sister, who was the most desperate, agreed, and stepped forward to suck the pus. But she found that instead of it being revolting, it was very sweet. She sucked and sucked and then had the second sister suck, and finally the third sister.

Now the old man revealed himself as a *xian* and told them that the pus would grant them the power to go back and fight the monster. But the older sister despaired of reaching her younger brother in time if they had to go on foot. So the *xian* took grass, wove it together, and blew on it, turning the grass into three horses: black, yellow, and white. He also gave the sisters swords and warned them not to travel too fast. However, the older sister had already mounted her horse, and striking it to speed it on, she ended up going so fast that she rushed past the place where the monster was about to eat her brother. The other two sisters called to her to circle back. Meanwhile, they had followed the old man's directions and began to strike the monster with their swords. Finally the older sister returned to join them and together they killed the monster.

This tale accounted for the origins of the three Pulai Maniang, who in fighting the monster became sworn sisters. The eldest sister, known as *Da Maniang* (大媽娘) became the most powerful because she swallowed the most pus, while the other two sisters' comparative powers were similarly linked to the amount of pus they ate. This also explained the special demon fighting abilities of the Pulai community spirit

mediums or tongzi, the most powerful of whom were possessed by *Da Maniang*, while less powerful community tongzi were allied with the second sister, *Er Maniang* (二媽娘).

Other stories of battles between these Maniang tongzi and threatening evil spirits highlight both the menacing dangers that people perceived in their environment, and their beliefs in effective spiritual responses to these dangers. In one tale, a demon (*yaoguai*) named *Ngai Sai*<sup>26</sup> inhabited the tall hill behind the main Pulai temple and attempted to control all of the area surrounding its mountain retreat, prompting the Maniang tongzi to wage battle with it. The demon and the tongzi fought for three days and three nights, in a type of struggle called *doufa* (鬥法), described as resembling the battles in Chinese traditional stories, where the tongzi hurled his sword up while the demon threw his sword down, and the two swords clashed and fought in mid air. Still, there was no resolution. Finally Guanyin, with her greater powers, called her own tongzi into the battle, and he finally defeated *Ngai Sai*.<sup>27</sup> The struggle was so fierce and the powers involved so great that the entire hill top was destroyed. My informant noted that even now the summit was barren, stripped of trees, bushes or grass.

The Maniang spirit mediums were also capable of predicting when evil spirits would be particularly threatening to the community and of responding to these dangers by decreeing the construction of a large straw soldier that would be burned during the annual ghost worship at the temple festival. These black clothed straw soldiers, with spears poised in hand, were not made every year, but only when conditions were deemed particularly threatening. Called *shandashi* (山大士) or

<sup>26</sup> My informant said that the name *Ngai Sai* must have meant that the demon was Siamese, but when asked about this, another man identified the demon as a *wugong* (蜈蚣), a centipede.

<sup>27</sup> Guanyin did not have regular spirit mediums in Pulai, and the man who fought this battle did not continue to serve as a tongzi after this incident. However, Guanyin spirit mediums did exist in Singapore. See Elliot 1955: 76, 110-113.

mountain soldiers, the straw men were made to look so menacing and frightening that care was taken to keep them from the sight of small children. Speaking through her tongzi, Maniang would dictate the soldier's height and width. If too large, it would be too dangerous and powerful; if too small, it would be ineffective. Stories tell of such a straw soldier being constructed on the instruction of the Maniang tongzi in the early 1970s, but the ritual head (*luzhu* 爐主) of the festival that year neglected to check on its dimensions. The tongzi later warned that the soldier had not been the correct size and that loggers in the area faced particular dangers. As feared, logging accidents killed two men that year, and took the leg of the Maniang tongzi's adult son.

In addition to emphasizing protection against evil spirits, stories about Pulai deities also reveal beliefs in the power of supernatural sanctions to support and enforce the moral order. Many tales speak of karmic justice for past evil deeds, as with the story of a former Pulai Kapitan whose very painful death is attributed to the corrupt practices of his court. Another story tells of a man who tried to illegally take ownership of land that had been bequeathed to Maniang. Those who farmed Maniang land paid rent, and a committee administered the use of this money to pay government land taxes and support Maniang worship. During the 1930s, a man whose family had farmed part of this land for many generations volunteered to serve as the head of this committee. Sometime later people discovered that this "volunteer" had used his position to change the name on the land title from Maniang's to his own. Unable to persuade him to change the title back, they decided to challenge him in court. On the night before the case was heard, spirits are said to have surrounded the man's house, pounding drums and greatly frightening his family. The next day he lost the case in court. The narrator of this story moralized further that the man who tried to steal

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Maniang's land was punished in other ways, becoming deaf and foolish as an old man, a visible object of teasing and ridicule among Pulai youngsters.

Lacking clear evidence of moral misbehavior, unfortunate events can also be interpreted as the product of bad *fengshui* (風水), or the incorrect alignment of natural and spiritual forces. One older Pulai man had studied *fengshui* with a teacher and was hired for formal geomantic consultations from time to time during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. But observations about *fengshui* are not limited to experts, and are well integrated into local interpretations of good and bad fortune. For example, when a number of Pulai children were injured in a school bus accident in 1978, one man suggested that a strange flower, which had mysteriously appeared in front of the temple that year, was a harbinger of bad luck and should be chopped down. Following the reconstruction of the Shuiyuegong temple in 1984, a number of Pulai people worried that the new temple gate, constructed to one side rather than the center, was improperly positioned. Six years later, in response to the perceived suffering of the community in the face of government sponsored gold mining, Pulai men voted to move the temple gate to what they argued was the proper spiritually aligned center.<sup>28</sup>

Active beliefs in the power of deities and other supernatural forces engender certain types of responses, including (but not limited to) consultations with spirit mediums about illness; the dedication of sickly children to local deities; the large scale presentation of thank offerings known as *huanfu* (還福) in response to answered prayers and at the beginning of each year; and the wearing of protective talismans (*fu* 符) by people who feel vulnerable. However, while all of these religious acts are commonly practiced by Pulai people, as with the Hokkien villagers described by

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<sup>28</sup> Aijmer (1968) documents the use of *fengshui* stories to comment on socioeconomic disparities in Hong Kong Hakka communities, while Liu (2003) notes the continuing wide spread belief in *fengshui* among Hong Kong Chinese in general.



Harrell (1977) in Taiwan, individuals within Pulai exhibit a range of responses in their modes of religious belief. Few could be described as intellectual believers who require rational coherence, and few could be categorized as true believers who accept everything on faith. For most, religious beliefs provide means of practical explanation and response based on their knowledge and understanding of past and present events.

Local discourse about belief and superstition suggests some further ways that Pulai people relate to spiritual questions. People told me on numerous occasions that it is belief in the gods that makes them efficacious (*ling*). If gods are ignored, or if people just go through the motions of worship without believing, the deities' spiritual powers will wane. Nevertheless, some people caution that over reliance on the gods, especially in small matters, which they classify as *mixin* (迷信) or superstition, is also unwise. According to one man, if you immediately call upon the gods for any little illness, it is like a lowering of their status. He criticized a very pious old man for his insistence on consulting the temple divination blocks about the auspiciousness of his journey each time he left Pulai to return home to Kuala Terengganu. While some Pulai people describe themselves as *banmibanxin* (半迷半信) or half superstitious, half believers, others emphasize the importance of separating belief (*xiangxin* 相信) from superstition (*mixin*), and warn of the dangers that superstition might bring. For example, the Pulai penghulu told me during an interview in 1989, that if someone in his household were ill, they would first seek medical attention; only if the illness did not respond to repeated visits to the doctor would they consider consulting a spirit medium, who could deal with dirty matters (*zangdeshi* 髒的事). He said that bothering the gods for a simple illness could be dangerous, because the gods could get involved and make things worse.

On another occasion the man who had lost his leg in the logging accident explained the dangers of *mixin* in a slightly different way. Not long before his accident the Maniang tongzi, going into trance at the temple, had warned him that he faced particular danger that year. The tongzi burnt three *fu*, put the ashes in a glass of water in front of Guanyin, and instructed him to drink this. Then the tongzi gave him an additional five *fu* to wear. Because of this, the man said he felt he had extra protection and was not afraid (*danzihenda* 膽子很大). So, although his job as a logging contractor did not require him to fell trees, he continued to operate a chain saw to earn some extra money. In retrospect, having received the warning from Maniang, he said he should have stayed where it was safe, but he didn't. When the tree was falling, he felt a ghost (*gui* 鬼) pulling him away, so the tree fell not on his back, which would have killed him instantly, but hit his leg instead. According to the tongzi, this ghost was a former Maniang spirit medium surnamed Chen who followed him around for protection. He was able to save his life, but not powerful enough to prevent the accident. The man said again that he should have taken more care and paid heed to Maniang's warning.

An awareness of, and sensitivity to potential interactions between deities, spirits, and people shapes the ethos of life in the Pulai Hakka community. Temple fortunes are regularly consulted by many people, and their messages can compel people to alter their activities when necessary. For example, men who are warned of spiritual vulnerabilities will usually avoid the communal ghost worship during the temple festival. Those who attend the second ghost worship after the breaking of the fast compete to steal (*qiang* 搶) the meat offered to the ghosts at the end of the ritual, a show of bravado in the face of threatening spirits. People say that men who do not

manage to steal any meat will be vulnerable to dangerous ghosts in the coming year. Such a prediction was reinforced in 1978 when two young men who had come away empty handed were seriously injured while clearing land a few days later. The idea of actively grabbing for good fortune appears in another Pulai practice that is also commonly featured during the temple festival. As a thank offering for answered prayers, an individual will construct a flower tree of bamboo branches and paper flowers that will be displayed in front of the temple. Red envelopes with small amounts of money and candles are attached to the branches, and after the candles are lit, children are urged to steal (*qiang*) the lucky money from the tree in a wild scramble. Once again, those who end up with nothing are deemed unlucky. The stealing that occurs in both instances suggests an active thrusting against fate and fortune, an attitude that aptly characterizes one mode of Pulai religious response. Rather than the passive acceptance that some associate with *mixin* (superstition), individuals actively respond to ever changing dangers and fortune in a manner that remains attuned to the multiple forces that shape their world.

## **Religious Continuity and Change**

Between 1978, when I first conducted ethnographic research in Pulai, and 1998, when I last observed the Guanyin festival, the Hakka community of Pulai underwent significant socioeconomic change. Families who had relied on a subsistence rice growing economy for many generations shifted to cash crop rubber production, while young people increasingly left the community to take up wage labor jobs in larger towns and cities. These changes were hastened by the Malaysian government's

sponsorship of commercial gold mining in Pulai, which forced most families to move from their ancestral agricultural land to houses in a New Village located not far from the Pulai central area. Demographic shifts brought large numbers of new Malay settlers into the southern Kelantan region, encouraged by government sponsored economic development projects that also supported the building of new roads and infrastructure. By 1998, many Pulai families who twenty years earlier had lived in dirt floored houses that lacked running water and electricity, now had bathrooms, washing machines, refrigerators, televisions, and other modern amenities. Lifestyle changes were also apparent in the new attention that parents paid to their children's education and in the ever increasing scale and crowds of the Guanyin festival. The elimination of local curfews that had for more than a decade hindered people from traveling into Pulai at night, and the building and paving of new roads into the area allowed for easier access by outside visitors to the festival. This occurred at a time of growing support for Malaysian Chinese temples as an important ethnic marker.<sup>29</sup> Although some Pulai men had worried in 1978 about the future of Pulai religious customs, commenting that my intensive note taking, photography, and tape recording during the Guanyin festival might provide a valuable resource for them in years to come, observations of the annual festival in 1984, 1990, and 1998, verified that the complex round of rituals, prayers, music, and ritual chanting clearly remained intact. Nevertheless, amidst continuities in ritual belief and practice, changes in the Pulai community surfaced both in the festival and in the religious responses of Pulai people to their shifting circumstances.

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<sup>29</sup> The growing visibility of Islamic institutions in Malaysia throughout the 1980s and 1990s fueled support for alternative forms of religion. See Ackerman and Lee (1988).

One of the most significant alterations in Pulai religious practice has been the absence of a Maniang tongzi since 1977, something remarked upon repeatedly in 1978 and in the years that followed. Direct communications from Maniang through the tongzi during the Guanyin festival created a sense of excitement that was sorely missed by some Pulai people, who commented negatively on the tepid (*dan* 淡) atmosphere of subsequent festivals. Although people said in 1978 that Maniang might call another tongzi to serve at any time, as the years passed, this seemed increasingly unlikely. Some people connected this to the growing social complexity of the Pulai community. For example, in 1989 the son of the last tongzi compared changes in the political sphere of the community with those in the religious sphere. He observed that while people in previous times had brought their problems to the penghulu, who served as local intermediary, they were now more likely to seek out other connections, often beyond the community. He anticipated similar problems in changing attitudes towards a Maniang tongzi, as people now had a variety of other ways to solve problems, and said it was better that the position remain vacant.

The biggest changes in the Guanyin festival have emerged with issues of festival organization and leadership. In 1978, election of the ritual head, *luzhu*, was restricted to a list of senior male heads of Pulai families; by the mid 1980s this began to change. In the 1990s the list used to elect the *luzhu* and the newly introduced *fuluzhu* (副爐主), assistant ritual heads, included all major contributors to the temple, many of whom were non-Hakka outsiders who operated logging businesses in the area. Increasingly, the men who form the core of worshipers for the complex round of temple rituals are drawn from outside the Pulai community and include many non-Hakka Chinese. This inclusion of outsiders in temple affairs has been accompanied by the increasing

difficulty of persuading sufficient Pulai men to help with the many labor intensive tasks of the festival, such as cleaning the temple altars, preparing ritual offerings, cooking vegetarian meals, setting up the opera stage, and keeping records of contributions. This labor shortage is closely related to the shift from an agricultural economy, where men can more easily adjust their schedules, to increasing wage labor employment outside of the community. Thus, the temple festival that in 1978 had relied largely on voluntary Pulai male labor had by 1998 changed to one where people were paid for assigned tasks: individuals contracted out the job of setting up the opera stage; male temple kitchen workers were paid a daily salary; and women were paid to wash dishes outside of the temple kitchen.<sup>30</sup> Other changes occurred in 1996 when a new group of younger Pulai men in their 30s and 40s managed to wrest control of the temple committee from the older core of men who had managed affairs since the 1970s. While criticized by some of the former committee leaders for certain decisions about spending temple money and for playing recordings of Buddhist chants in the temple during the festival, these younger men, ironically, appeared more inclined to actively participate in ritual worship than many of their elders.<sup>31</sup>

Other changes have occurred in the area of ritual practice. In 1984, the Pulai penghulu and the temple committee chair invited Buddhist monks from Penang to the opening of the newly reconstructed Shuiyuegong temple, and had them conduct a special Buddhist mass in honor of the dead. However, the push to add more formal types of Buddhist ritual to the Guanyin celebration has garnered a tepid response from most Pulai people. Another new practice, the offering of whole roast pigs by

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<sup>30</sup> Jordan (1994: 143-144) notes similar difficulties with labor recruitment for communal religious festivals in Taiwan with the shift away from agriculture.

<sup>31</sup> Pulai women have also increased their participation in festival activities. For an analysis of gender shifts in the festival, see "Gender, Temple, and Community in a Hakka Malaysian Settlement" in Carstens (2005:101-126).

individuals and businesses in the worship of temple deities at the breaking of the fast has been more enthusiastically embraced; the offerings allow visible displays of personal success while also providing additional meat for the communal feast that follows. A third change, the staging of a procession of Pulai temple deities to the nearby town of Gua Musang on the fifth day of the festival, has ignited more controversy. Given the growing support of the Pulai Guanyin temple from Gua Musang residents (many with family ties to Pulai), some people interpret this as symbolic of Guanyin's expanding protective powers. Others, however, have criticized the procession as an unnecessary drain on limited Pulai resources and a possible dilution of local tradition.

Meanwhile, changes in the local Pulai economy have created economic uncertainties, which have prompted other types of spiritual responses. The appearance of *Caishen*, the God of Wealth, on the main Shuiyuegong altar in 1984 coincided with the shift from a padi growing subsistence economy to one based on cash crops, wage labor, and government reparations for land and houses lost to gold mining. Although Pulai's subsistence economy had supported a relatively low standard of living, it was nonetheless seen as dependable: people in the 1970s said that in Pulai you never need lack for food or shelter. New economic enterprises, while potentially more profitable, are also more uncertain. Supplications to *Caishen* appear to be one response to this newly monetized, yet unstable economic environment. The decision to shift their labors from rice cultivation to rubber production was one that Pulai families and individuals made on their own. The arrival of gold mining was a different story: something Pulai people protested against, but could not prevent. Rumors in Pulai in 1989, more than a year after gold mining operations had begun, claimed that very

little gold was being found, and people credited their successful prayers to the local *laduk* or *tudigong* (earth god) for this mining failure.<sup>32</sup> In 1990, a different concern in the form of an extended local drought, which threatened rubber trees and other crops, prompted another course of spiritual action: the statue of Tangongye, the rain god, was set out in the hot sun of the temple courtyard for three days in hopes that this would stir him to action.

To conclude, for the foreseeable future, the older Hakka Chinese of Pulai will very likely continue to rely on many of the spiritual beliefs and practices of their Hakka ancestors, even as they, like generations before, adjust these beliefs to an ever changing world. At present, the traditional rituals of the Guanyin festival that older Pulai men had feared might disappear seem to potentially have a new lease on life in the hands of a younger cohort of Pulai men, who have even constructed a Pulai temple website ([www.shuiyuegong.com.my](http://www.shuiyuegong.com.my)). It is quite possible that the increasing outside influences of secular education, jobs, and travel will make it progressively more difficult for children growing up in Pulai today to accept the traditional spiritual beliefs of their Hakka elders. Alternatively, while certain changes are to be expected, it is also possible that popular religion in Pulai will become a marker of Chinese and perhaps even Hakka cultural traditions that are consciously preserved in the face of massive social change.<sup>33</sup> Given the past social isolation of the Pulai community and its relatively homogenous ethnic composition, Hakka identity within Pulai has never been well developed.<sup>34</sup> While my own research has made links to certain religious

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<sup>32</sup> People said that original government plans had called for mining an even larger area of Pulai, and they hoped that bad returns on the initial operations would discourage further expansion.

<sup>33</sup> Katz (2003) comments on the continued support for religion among educated Taiwanese, including the establishment of temple websites, while also pointing to temples as sites for cultural activities and cultural preservation.

<sup>34</sup> For observations on Hakka identity in Pulai see chapters in Carstens (2005) "Pulai, Hakka, Chinese, Malaysian: A Labyrinth of Cultural Identities"; "Form and Content in Hakka Malaysian Culture"; and "Border Crossings: Hakka Chinese Lessons in Diasporic Identities."



practices in Pulai that appear to have their parallels in Hakka communities elsewhere, many of the beliefs and practices described in this paper are widely found in other Chinese communities. It thus remains to be seen whether Chinese in Pulai choose to highlight their identities and religious practices as Hakka in the future, or whether this ethnic label and the practices associated with it continue to have relatively minor meaning in their lives.

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