## Return of the Gods: How Putian’s Religious Institutions Evolve to Govern the City in Times of Need

(Mouse over for Chinese characters)

## Introduction

This is Pútián 莆田, a city in Fújiàn 福建 province of China. Most of the citiy’s 2.7 million residents modern city lives on the Putian Plain located at the mouth of the Mulan 木兰River. Putian Plain, however, is not a natural formation.

This is the ancient shoreline of Putian. The modern Putian Plain was reclaimed from Xinghua 兴化 Bay in a process which took over a thousand years. Reclaimation first began during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The ocean was slowly filled in with landfill, while lowland mudflats were drained with irrigation canals, sea dikes, and weirs.

The process of reclaimation accelerated during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) Dynasties as greater numbers of Han Chinese migrated into the Putian Plain. The pre-industrial limits to reclaimation were reached during the Qing dynasty (636–1912), even though reclaimation projects continue in the twenty-first century.

## Putian’s Hydrological Conundrum

Newly drained land took the form of barren mudflats. A system of irrigation canals and weirs developed concurently to transform mudflats into productive rice-growing agricultural fields, and to reclaim new land from the ocean.

Putian’s irrigation system is extraordinarily complex and interconnected to meet the challenges of its distinct hydrological challanges. Salt water enters deep into the plain on the rising tide, pushing up the Mulan river to the Mulan Weir, located southwest of Putian city. The irrigation system is used as a reservoir of freshwater and requires constant operation to be effective. Several weirs divert freshwater from the moutains into the region’s irrigation canals, while sluice gates are opened and closed twice daily in time with the tides of the sea. Water is refilled into these temporary reservoirs during high tide. During low tide, water is released to mitigate saltwater intrusion.

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INSERT: Putian City is itself is located inland on the Mulan River. The River is not named after the female soldier of Chinese folklore, but after the Magnolia flower which the shieldmaiden was also named after.

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Such a system requires cooperation and maintenance all along the length of its major channels and secondary and tertiary canals, and at each of its sluice gates. This irrigation system is also extremely sensitive to excess rainfall and to surging tides brought on by storms or typhoons. There are frequent floods along many sections of the irrigation system, which in fact restore some nutrients to the soil if they are not too long lasting or extreme. Thus the system had to be well coordinated enough to respond rapidly to changing weather conditions—from typhoons to floods—and to take systemic decisions about responses to changing conditions.

# The Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plain

Look at nothing in defiance of ritual, listen to nothing in defiance of ritual, speak of nothing in defiance or ritual, never stir hand or foot in defiance of ritual.” (Confucius, Analects)

To manage the hydrological infrastructure, the residents of the Putian Plains developed **Ritual Alliances**. Although ritual alliances and lineage clan exist throughout China, Putian’s ritual alliances developed elaborate forms to run the hydrological management system, managing conflicts and the distribution of resources.

The ritual alliances of the Putian plains are groups of villages which perform regular everyday rituals, share a higher order temple with a temple committee made up of representatives of each village in the alliance, and organise annual (or longer temporal cycles) processions of the gods through each of the villages in the alliance. These alliances are based in higher order temples. The gods of these temples are borrowed by smaller temples for rituals held there, or else they are formally received by these temples when they are carried in processions around the villages of the alliance.

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INSERT: During the Qing Dynasty, they were also para-military organisations with formal militia units, who fought over land rent and the control of markets, and who could form military allegiances between alliances. Click here to find out more about the territorial milita of the Putian Plain.

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Ritual Alliances are often multi-lineage defensive alliances, and as para-political organisations that settle local and cross-boundary disputes with a formal legal code. Their functions were primarily defense, insurance, crop patrols, and irrigation maintenance. These alliances were also based in higher order temples, often in open country, which offered a more extensive range of ritual services than smaller, village temples. Large collective rites were held on the birthdays of the main gods of these temples, and every ten years a great Daoist Jiao 醮 ritual would be held. These rituals featured fighting over firework displays.

These Ritual Alliances generate a “second government” which addresses particular local concerns more effectively than the state and its local government officials. Operated from the thousands of temples which dot rural and urban Putian, village or urban temples, Ritual Alliances and temples are important centers of local political, economic, social and moral power. Often, when one visits a village temple, it is a leader of the temple’s governing Ritual Alliances which greets you.

The imperial governments of China proved too distant to micromanage Putian’s water resources. Historically, the Chinese government has adopted a distant supervisory attitute to the public works of Putian. Imperial governments may have played an initial role in marshalling funds and corvée labour, but would subsequently hand off most construction and management tasks to local institutions who were more responsive. A robust imperial system is, however, still needed for the effective management of water resources. Imperial governments punished sabotuers of public infrastructure, mediated disputes between local factions, and protected the region from the devastation of open warfare.

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INSERT: During the late 1800s, the declining imperial bureaucracy of the Qing Dynasty proved unable to mediate conflicts. Law and order broke down, and the Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plain divided themselves into feuding factions. Competition between factions often turned bloody. Click here to find out more about the feuding banners of late-1800s Putian.

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The Temple Committees of Ritual Alliances raise considerable funding by collecting a set small amount from every household on a per capita basis – except for Christian households who abstain. Wealthy individuals are expected to contribute substantial funds to display their wealth and status and to reinvest in the community. All funds collected and dispersed are posted on the temple walls for all to see. The main expenses are for opera performances, ritual specialists, and the costs of the processions and rites. Extra funds are spent on many projects, such as sponsoring local infrastructure work, laying roads, building toilets, providing electric lighting, sponsoring cultural events (rituals invariably include operatic performances), sponsoring scholarships, dispensing charity, medicine, food and clothing, and providing a cultural center for the community.

Opportunities for leadership and management training are provided by the rotation of (primarily male) members of the temple committees, usually based on age and marital status in the village.

# The Durability of Ritual Alliances

Putian’s unique Ritual Alliances has withstood periods of intense persecution. During Mao’s leadership of China, Ritual Alliances went underground, and rituals were performed in secret. Many village temples were impounded as warehouses or village administaration headquaters during the Socialist Education Campaign of 1963. All open ritual activity ended during the Cultural Revolution.

Nevertheless, Ritual Alliances rebounded in strength during the tenureship of Deng Xiaoping. Throughout the 1980s, the vast majority of temples were restored, rebuilt, and often enlarged – as new temples are being built in smaller numbers. The Central Government once again adopted a distant, supervisory attitude towards Ritual Alliances.

There were other periods in history during which Ritual Alliances were attacked by the state. The Kuomintang government of the 1920s sought to secularise and “modernise” China as part of the New Life Campaign. During this campaign, Ritual Alliances took efforts to disguise local dieties as more politically acceptable dieties which espoused virtues such as filial piety.

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INSERT: READ: Zhang Qin 張琴, Putian’s last *Jinshi* (Metropolitan Candidate of Imperial China‘s Confucian Examinations), defends Ritual Alliances as institutions of self-government and self-suffiency.

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Even earlier, the Hongwu Emperor sought to centralise control of religion as part of his all-encompassing reforms during the founding of the Ming Dynasty. The patron dieties of Ritual Alliances, which often adopted local dieties drawn from local folklore and local history, were unsanctioned by the imperial government. From the Ming Dynasty onwards, Confucian and Daoist purists often found support from the imperial bureaucracy in waging campaigns to destroy “demonic” and excessive shrines. Nevertheless, these efforts failed – a testament to the institutional strength of the Ritual Alliances.