INTRODUCTION: THE SURVEY AND ITS MAIN FINDINGS

This volume, and its companion volume, *Ritual Alliances of the Putian Plains, Part Two: A Survey of Village Temple and Ritual Activities*, document the central role of communal rituals dedicated to the popular gods in the villages of one region of contemporary Southeast China, the irrigated alluvial plain of Putian 莆田, Fujian 福建. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the change of official policies regarding religious activity in 1979, thousands of temples have been rebuilt, local ritual traditions have been reinvented, and esoteric rites have been slowly reassembled or improvised across the Putian plain. These volumes demonstrate the importance of these rituals dedicated to the gods by the villagers in this region by showing their distribution and frequency in every village on the plain.

We found that village temples, and ritual alliances they have formed, generate a “second government” which addresses certain local concerns more effectively than the state and its local government officials (Dean 2001). The village temples are at the center of the celebrations of the birthdays and festivals of the gods. They organize processions of villagers that trace the boundaries of their ritual territories and alliances. They hold training sessions for spirit mediums who transmit the blessings of the gods to each household in the village. Village temples also invite Daoist and other ritual specialists to perform rites inside the temple as the processions, spirit medium exorcistic dances, and opera performances go on outside. They are also important centers of local political, economic, social and moral power. The temples are living cultural centers of the villages. During idle moments, they provide a place for the elderly to gather and play cards or mahjong, while individual worshippers burn incense and present offerings to the gods, and children play. Village rituals centered on these temples are continuing to successfully negotiate the forces of capitalism and nationalism while preserving a vibrant space for the celebration of local cultural difference.

This volume is designed to provide an introduction to the survey, and to put the “return of the gods” to the Putian plains over the