

CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEMPORARY RITUAL EVENTS IN THE PUTIAN PLAINS: THE RITUAL EVENT

Celebrations on the birthdays of the gods or at the *Yuanxiao* festival of the first full moon of the year are marked with rituals at the village temple conducted by a range of ritual specialists. Processions of the gods are made up of a retinue of villagers and led by the village headmen who rotate into the role of keeper of the incense burners of the gods. In many temples, spirit mediums are possessed by the gods. There are also performances of opera or marionettes on stages in front of the temple, performances of ritual music by traditional musical ensembles, performances by visiting musical troupes such as *shiyin bayue* 十音八樂 ensembles, cart and drum female ensembles, military brass bands and marching bands, and visiting delegations from allied villages. The processions can be as small as a dozen children bearing banners and a gong, along with their mothers, escorted by a temple elder with the incense burner, another with a statue of the god, and a third older man with a loudspeaker mounted on a bicycle playing ritual music. Or a procession of a large village can stretch for over two kilometers, and include motorcycle units in police costumes, dozens of costumed troupes representing the Eight Immortals, the Journey to the West, operatic troupes, martial arts troupes, historical vignettes, ethnic minorities, women in beautiful traditional dresses, floats with children dressed as gods, several musical ensembles (traditional instrumental groups as well as modern marching bands), disco dancers, cross-dressed youths, traditional performance artists like stilt walkers, the man in a boat, the old geezer and his ugly wife, the giant-headed toddlers, and many more. At the center of the procession are the sedan chairs of the gods. These are immediately preceded by banners and placards and lanterns announcing the god, then by groups of ghostly demons with masked faces carrying chains and signs warning of their powers, who dance a mute demon dance in front of each temple they pass. Just in front of the sedan chairs of the gods march the *baban* 八班—the eight guards of the temple whose murals adorn most Putian temple walls. They wear a black robe with red trim and a black rattan hat, and their leader carries a long board like those used in yamen

judicial interrogation sessions. A large procession may feature up to a dozen god's sedan chairs, with costumed bearers, flags and banners, umbrellas of the gods and large fans, and incredibly elaborately carved and gilded sedan chairs—more like movable palaces—that sometimes require a dozen able bodied young sedan chair bearers. Following the gods come the temple headsmen bearing the incense burners of the gods or of the *shê* altar. They wear Qing dynasty long blue robes and Shanghai style fedoras. The temple representatives are followed by a group of elderly women with brooms sweeping the way. Sometimes they wear paper cangues around their necks (or hang them around the necks of children) to pray for forgiveness of sins and recovery of good health. More banners and flags and incense carried by crowds who have joined the procession follow. Finally a long line of small ponies with red embroidered saddles and bells on their harnesses makes up the procession. On their saddles are rectangular paper envelopes addressed to the gods with the prayers of the individual patron who paid for the pony. They are led by horsemen who make a living taking their ponies around the irrigated plain all year to take part in processions. The ponies are quite used to the fireworks that are set off by every household along the way when the gods pass by. Each household prepares a table of offerings, and all the members of the household stand and bow when the gods pass, and then they set off firecrackers and burn spirit money in metal braziers before taking the offerings inside for a feast.

In many villages, the *Yuanxiao* festival is also marked by an evening lantern procession. Some areas place five or six lanterns on top a long stool, and then link the stools with attached lanterns to those of their neighbors. The entire linked line of lanterns can stretch on for over a kilometer. The stools and lanterns are carried on shoulder poles, and the entire line of lanterns makes a spectacular sight as it traces the boundaries of the village land or the outlines of the ritual alliance. The lanterns are generally marked with the name of the lineage, and each household is expected to provide at least one stool fitted out with lanterns and one male son to carry it. As the linked lantern chain reaches the courtyard in front of the temple, it circles or spirals until everyone is in the courtyard. Then truckloads of fireworks, rockets and strings of firecrackers, are set off. When these have all been exploded, the procession moves on, and the next segment takes its place. Needless to say, this can go on all night.