

GENDER, TEMPLE, AND COMMUNITY IN A CHINESE MALAYSIAN SETTLEMENT

Sharon A. Carstens

Introduction

This paper examines gender relations in Chinese folk religious practices in the Hakka community of Pulai, located in the southern reaches of Kelantan State, West Malaysia. Much of the discussion focuses on a female religious group, known as the *fūnū hui* (妇女会), which I first encountered while doing ethnographic research in the community in 1978. In brief, I argue that the meanings that the *fūnū hui* held for Pulai women and men, and the roles that it played in community life both derived from and changed with the specific local contexts of the Pulai community.^①

Observers and scholars of Hakka culture have frequently remarked on the special historic positions of Hakka women, who, with their unbound feet and productive labors outside of the home, seemed much less constrained than other Chinese women.

Sharon A. Carstens Professor, Department of Anthropology, Portland State University, Oregon, U.S.A.

① Research in the Hakka community of Pulai has been supported by a Fulbright Doctoral Research Abroad Grant (1978), a Fulbright Faculty Research Abroad Grant (1984), and a Portland State University Faculty Development Grant (1989), all of which are gratefully acknowledged. The steadfast assistance, patience, and warm friendship of numerous Pulai friends and acquaintances have supported my inquiries into Pulai history and gender issues over many years; hopefully these friends will recognize their many contributions to my interpretations of their small, but distinctive community. Thanks also to my colleague Michele Gamburd for her sound advice, encouragement, and superb editing of this paper. Any weaknesses and errors are, of course, my own.

Explanations for the origins of the special roles played by Hakka women have suggested possible influences from neighboring non-Han groups such as the She,^② or have pointed to the poor agricultural conditions in Hakka areas of Guangdong and Fujian that drove Hakka men to search for work elsewhere, leaving Hakka women responsible for agricultural and other tasks that would have been a male domain in other parts of China.^③ Yet, while few observers would deny that Hakka women have generally been involved in a wider variety of economic tasks outside of the household than other Chinese women, the specific roles and positions that Hakka women have held in their families and communities have varied with local circumstances.^④ Most recent ethnographic research in Hakka communities has shown that positions of public authority in such communities have generally remained in the hands of Hakka

② This is suggested obliquely by Wing-hoi Chan, "The Decline of Ordination and the Emergence of the Hakka Lineage in Changle County." Paper presented at the First International Conference on Hakkaology (Hong Kong, September 23-6, 1992).

③ Dorothy Heid Bracey, "Economy, Household Structure, and the Hakka Woman" in *Journal of Asian Affairs*, Vol. IV No. 2, (Fall 1979), pp. 52-8; Sharon A. Carstens, "Form and content In Hakka Malaysian Culture" in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, ed. Nicole Constable (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), pp.124-48.

④ A good example of this variation comes from the Hakka community of Chung Pui in the Hong Kong New Territories. Prior to 1968, with their husbands laboring away from home, Chung Pui Hakka women not only did agricultural work and controlled their own incomes, but also represented their households in dealings with the British government and dealt with outsiders who came to the village. In 1968, the building of a reservoir forced these Hakka villagers to relocate to apartment buildings in a nearby market town, encouraging many Hakka men who had worked elsewhere to return to the area to live and work. In the new setting, Chung Pui Hakka women switched to purely domestic tasks, while Hakka men took over control of both family and community affairs. See Bracey, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-8. Elizabeth Johnson, similarly observed that Hakka women served as household managers in the absence of men in the Hong Kong village that she researched. See Elizabeth Johnson, "Hakka Women: Great-Aunt Yeung: A Hakka Wage Laborer," in *Lives: Chinese Working Women*, eds. Mary Sheridan and Janet Salaff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 88. (In contrast, in the Taiwan village that Myron Cohen studied, Hakka men, who did not labor outside of the community, uniformly served as family managers and family heads.) See Myron Cohen, *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 91-5. Finally, based on research in another part of Hong Kong, Fred Blake has argued that in most situations, although Hakka women could exert considerable informal power, they were not given formal positions of authority in the family and village, even where Hakka men worked outside of the community. See Fred C. Blake, *Ethnic Groups and Social Change in a Chinese Market Town* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981), pp. 56-9.

men.^⑤

Gender roles and divisions in the Hakka Malaysian community of Pulai in 1978 clearly followed these patterns. Although Pulai Hakka men and women jointly planted and harvested rice, tapped rubber, and cooperated in many daily tasks, public spaces and public events in Pulai displayed clear gender divisions. Men held all formal public positions of authority, serving as heads and representatives of their respective households at community meetings of every type. Only males congregated in the two Pulai shops for drinks and conversations during the afternoons, and only men cooked for the large community feasts held in honor of weddings, elder's birthdays, and funerals.

Male domination of community affairs was particularly marked during the annual Guanyin temple festival, a nine day cycle of ritual events that Pulai residents considered the most important festival of the year. Pulai families were represented on a temple list by the names of their senior males; only these men were in turn eligible for ritual election to the office of temple *luzhu* (炉主), the ritual leader of temple activities for that year. A male temple committee chair, *zhuxi* (主席), chosen by twenty male members of an elected temple committee served as the more secular counterpart to the ritually chosen *luzhu*. Village politics and temple management clearly overlapped: of the three men vying for appointment to the office of village head or *penghulu* in 1978, one served as temple committee chair and temple chanter while the other two were also, although not equally, active in temple affairs.^⑥

Men not only dominated all of the formal organizations that arranged for the Pulai Guanyin festival, but also led and dominated the rituals themselves. Men made up all of the ritual leaders, chanters, and musicians. Public rituals displayed a commonly understood spatial mapping of gender and political hierarchies. Only men occupied the front rows of worshippers (with the most senior and most prominent male com-

⑤ See Ellen Oxfeld Basu, "The Sexual Division of Labor and the Organization of Family and Firm in an Overseas Chinese Community," In *American Ethnologist*, Vol. XVIII No. 4 (Sept. 1991), pp. 700-18; Fred C. Blake, *op. cit.*, pp.56-9; Nicole Constable, "Poverty, Piety, and the Past: Hakka Christian Expressions of Hakka Identity," in *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*, ed. Nicole Constable (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), pp. 98-123.

⑥ In addition to the fact that both men were members of the temple committee in 1978, one of these men had also chaired the special temple committee responsible for rebuilding the Pulai temple in 1978; while the other had sought spiritual powers through the study of spirit mediumship.

munity members standing front and center), while female worshippers positioned themselves in rows separate from and behind the men.

Despite this clear domination of festival activities by Pulai men, a special women's group, known as the *fun' hui*, also carried out its own special activities. Made up in 1978 of about seventy married women who had each contributed \$2 Malaysian to support female ritual activities at the festival that year, the women's group took charge of the preparation of ghost clothing and spirit money for the two evening ghost worship ceremonies (conducted solely by men). More importantly, it also organized two separate female rituals during the festival: a special woman's altar set up along the route of Guanyin's procession through the community, and a separate women's service in the temple on the following evening. *Fun' hui* leaders used members' contributions to purchase offerings for these rituals, which followed formats similar to other temple services, except that only females worshipped at these times. Yet despite this clearly separate sphere of female activity, Pulai women had no explicit explanations for their gender-specific group activities, other than that they derived from Pulai traditions.

The Pulai *fun' hui* presented something of an anomaly in the midst of male defined and dominated community and ritual structures. Since first encountering this group in 1978, I have searched the literature on Chinese religion for evidence of similar female religious groups, but with little result. Although records exist of female pilgrimage groups,^⑦ and of female Buddhist vegetarian sects,^⑧ such female religious groups were not associated with community temples or with the ritual organization of women in a single community as occurred in Pulai. There exists one tantalizing glimpse of a group of Hakka women organizing special rituals in honor of Guanyin in the Indonesian community of Sukabumi in the 1950s,^⑨ as well as the report of a "Woman's Temple", also dedicated to Guanyin, in the Indonesian community of Se-

⑦ See Glen Dudbridge, "Women Pilgrims to Tai Shan: Some Pages from a Seventeenth-Century Novel," in *Pilgrims and Sacred Sites in China*, eds. Susan Naquin and Chun-fang Yu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 39-64.

⑧ "Sisterhoods" in *Lives: Chinese Working Women*, eds. Mary Sheridan and Janet Salaff (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 51-70.

⑨ See Giok-Lan Tan, *The Chinese of Sukabumi: A Study in Social and Cultural Accommodation* (Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project Monograph Series, 1963), p. 138.

marang, which may have been Hakka.^⑩ In a more recent paper, John Lagerway describes a group of Hakka women in a Fujian village in 1989 holding their own evening ritual in the midst of a Taoist *jiao* (教).^⑪ Unfortunately, Lagerway provides no further information on either the structure or the ritual practices of this group.

These small bits of information suggest that Hakka women in some situations have organized more formal female groups associated with public rituals in Hakka communities. It is also quite possible that scholars have overlooked such female groups in other Hakka settings, and that they may have been more common than we now realize. Of course, labeling these female religious groups as Hakka phenomena does not take us very far in explaining their presence and their roles in Hakka communities. Certainly, we would require more extensive information from at least several communities to begin to make generalizations about their relevance for Hakka studies. In what follows I attempt to present historic and ethnographic information on the Pulai *funü hui*, with explanations firmly rooted in the particular history of the Pulai Hakka community. My discussion begins with the activities and functions of this group in 1978, focusing on its role in the context of the Pulai temple festival of that year. It then explores the history of this group, and its relationship to shifts in community structures and cultural practices over time.

The *Funü Hui* and the Guanyin Temple Festival, 1978

About six hundred Hakka Chinese lived in the Pulai community in 1978, in about a hundred households dispersed over more than ten square miles of land. The Pulai Guanyin temple occupied the community's central area along with two small shops and four family houses. Most Pulai families lived on their own agricultural land, supporting themselves through a combination of subsistence padi production and the establishment of plots of small holder rubber. Pulai kinship practices followed Chinese norms of patrilineal descent, with inheritance divided equally between sons;

⑩ See Donald Earl Willmott, *The Chinese of Semarang: A Changing Minority Community in Indonesia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), pp. 212-3. Although Willmott does not identify this temple as Hakka, he reports that Semarang's first Chinese temple, presumably founded by the earlier Hokkien immigrants, was also dedicated to Guanyin. This suggests that the second Guanyin temple was very likely sponsored by Hakkas, who were the second largest dialect group in Semarang.

⑪ John Lagerway, "Taoism Among the Hakka in Fujian." Paper presented at the First International Conference on Hakkaology (Hong Kong, September 23-6, 1992), p. 8.

patrilocal residence; and ancestral worship of patrilineal kin at ancestral altars in Pulai homes and during the Qing Ming festival at family graves.

The nine day Pulai temple festival, held annually in honor of Guanyin's birthday during the second lunar month, encompassed many features and themes found in the Hong Kong Hakka *jiao* ceremonies described by David Faure, but without employing Taoist priests or similar ritual specialists.¹² During the initial six days of the festival, all Pulai families became vegetarian, with the temple serving two complimentary vegetarian meals daily. The festival officially began on the 17th day of the 2nd lunar month when villagers moved the eight temple deities, including Guanyin, to a special temple hall. Meanwhile ritual specialists invited an additional array of local deities and spirits, both Malay and Chinese, to join in the celebration, and to occupy various special altars set up within and outside of the temple hall. In addition to rituals and processions held in honor of Guanyin and other deities, two special evening rituals (one during the vegetarian portion of the festival, and the other after the fast was broken) fed and propitiated community ghosts in a field removed from the temple environs.

The Pulai *fun/ hui* contrasted with community sponsored religious organization in several ways. While temple membership was based on family/household units, the seventy Pulai women subscribed to the *fun/ hui* as individuals, not as representatives of their families. Unlike the male temple committee, this group held no formal meetings. Moreover, the woman identified as the group's head claimed to have simply volunteered her services for the past seven years. Two special rituals sponsored by the woman's group revealed further contrasts between the form and functions of this female group and male ritual structures.

The woman's altar sponsored by the *fun/ hui* during the Guanyin procession through the community was one of three temporary altars where the procession stopped for worship. The first altar was sponsored by the temple and community as a whole; the second by the *fun/ hui*; and the third by a group of (non-Pulai) Chinese logging bosses who worked in the area. Pulai male ritual leaders conducted identical rituals at all three altars, directing worshippers in the standard sequences of presenting incense, wine, and other offerings, and chanting written prayers asking for the blessings and protection of Guanyin. Pulai men worshipped in the front row at the

¹² David Faure, *The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 80-6.

first (community sponsored) altar with Pulai women in rows behind; only Pulai women and children worshipped at the second altar; and non-Pulai logging bosses worshipped at the third altar.

Two key differences distinguished the ritual held at the first community altar from the other two: the inclusion of individual names at the end of the prayers for blessing at both the women's and logger's altars, and the separate payment of ritual leaders, chanters, musicians, and others for their services at the latter two altars. The communal nature of the first altar, with temple sponsorship representing the undifferentiated Pulai community, thus contrasted with the individualistically sponsored altars of both the Pulai women and the loggers from outside.

The special women's ritual sponsored by the *fun/ hui* in the Pulai temple hall the following evening likewise followed the usual ritual sequences, but again with interesting minor differences. First, instead of the usual temple offerings of special vegetarian foods carefully arranged on the altars in symmetrical series of threes and fives, the women's offerings consisted of plates of more common foods: peanuts, hard candy and rice cakes, placed on the altars in an asymmetrical order. Secondly, despite the presence and assistance of a male ritual specialist, and a service that consisted of the same ritual format as all of the others, the twenty-five mostly middle-aged and older Pulai women who gathered for worship appeared uncertain and confused about the proper steps of worship, with some women bowing while others kowtowed, and some straggling behind in the worship at the various altars.

In many respects the gendered messages of ritual symbolism contrasted the individualistically organized women with the communally organized men; however, the structure of the women's group and the actual performances of these rituals suggested other types of interpretations as well. The *fun/ hui* in 1978, comprised of women who had individually chosen to contribute that year and headed by a voluntary leader, lacked the formal structure, hierarchy and the clear division of labor found on the male temple committee. The women's ritual offerings such as peanuts and hard candies were undifferentiated from other items of daily use, in contrast with the special fruits and vegetarian offerings used in regular temple rituals; likewise, women's shuffling performance during their evening ritual stood in sharp contrast to the orderly and precise acts of temple worship during the rest of the festival.

Taken together these things suggested that the women were acting out their own common response to questions about ritual behavior, which was to repeatedly claim that they didn't know how or why things were done in a particular way. This lack of

specialized knowledge expressed by the women seemed to place their behavior in direct juxtaposition with that of the men, who routinely used their claims to knowledge as one of the most important tools in male status competition. Knowledge for Pulai men referred not only to formal education, but also to skills such as geomancy, the use of herbal medicine, or the ability to play musical instruments. Historically men passed these skills down as family secrets, for specialized skills offered their practitioners special status and recognition within the community. Arguments between Pulai men, which occurred frequently in the context of the temple festival, typically revolved around issues of superior knowledge, or who understood the best way to do things.

Meanwhile, Pulai women organized their worship of the gods on a somewhat different basis, appropriately expressed in one of the more common phrases used in temple prayers: *shannan xinnu* (善男信女) : righteous men and believing women. Pulai women often commented that belief in the gods empowered their actions in the community. Women also frequently told stories of Guanyin's acts of mercy to the community in the past, interpreting them as arising from the faithfulness with which Pulai people had cared for her image. The symbolic messages embedded in Pulai female rituals similarly suggested that simple acts of faith, however disorganized, provided appropriate modes for female religious participation.

By not challenging men in terms of their organized systems of knowledge, Pulai women seemed to stake a claim for a separate set of female concerns relating to their gender, rather than ties to their particular families. Yet neither the rituals nor comments on female ritual behavior by women or men directly addressed the precise nature of these female concerns. Moreover, even while certain aspects of female ritual behavior in Pulai contrasted with the style of male dominated rituals, ritual forms still overlapped; hence claims for distinctive gendered understandings of ritual or distinctive female consciousness would be a great exaggeration.

Similarly, while one might be tempted to see the *funu hui* as an assertion of female unity, as female resistance to the male dominance of public symbols, and/or as a form of female expressive culture, none of these explanations takes us very far in understanding what inspired Pulai women to participate in a group that was characterized, at least in 1978, by such muted expressions. Further contextualization of special circumstances in the Pulai community in 1978 can shed some light on this question. First, the recent death of the last Pulai community spirit medium had left a ritual leadership vacuum and some insecurity about ritual efficacy. Meanwhile, the constant government suspicions of Pulai support for communist jungle guerrillas; the arrests of

the Pulai headman and two dozen other men two years prior to this on such charges; as well as the daily 12 hour curfew, drew Pulai families and the community closer together. Thus, both internal and external factors at this time emphasized the importance of community cohesiveness, and of creating a sense of common community identity and purpose. Pulai women, as members of families and the wider community, shared in these concerns. The muted behavior of female rituals and the *funü hui* suggests that distinctive gender interests could become subordinate to collective challenges to the wider community.

The *Funü Hui* and Pulai History

Historical context also sheds light on the meanings and activities of the *funü hui* in 1978. When did the *funü hui* begin and under what circumstances? These questions necessitate some brief remarks on the historical background of the Pulai community.

Hakka gold miners originally entered the Pulai area in the late 18th or early 19th century. By the third decade of the 19th century, some of these miners began to grow rice and to marry local Siamese and Temiar (aborigine) women. Pulai informants report that the children of such unions were raised according to the traditions of their fathers, establishing distinctively Chinese cultural and linguistic practices in the emerging Pulai community. The Pulai Guanyin temple, first constructed sometime before 1845,¹³ housed not only Guanyin, but also the Hakka deity, *Tangongye* (谭公爷),¹⁴ as well as the Pulai version of *Tianhou* (天后) : three sworn sisters known as *Maniang* (妈娘), who possessed and empowered Pulai community spirit mediums. By the late 19th century, Hakka school teachers instructed Pulai sons in the Confucian classics, while itinerant *gongfu* (功夫) instructors trained them in the martial arts.

I did not think to inquire about the history of the *funü hui* in 1978; unlike many other types of historical information, the topic was never raised by others. In 1990, an older Pulai man, identified as an expert on Pulai ritual history, began to provide me

¹³ Huang Kunfu, "Jilantan De Huaren" (The Chinese in Kelantan) in *Jilantan Zhonghua Zong Shanghui Wushi Zhounian Jinian Tekan* (吉兰丹中华总商会五十周年纪念特刊 Kelantan Chinese Chamber of Commerce 50th Anniversary Memorial Volume) (Kota Baru : Kelantan Chinese Chamber of Commerce, 1966), p. 47.

¹⁴ See David Faure, "An Exploratory Study of Pingshan, A Hakka village Cluster to the East of Shenzhen." Paper presented at the First International Conference on Hakkaology (Hong Kong, September 23-6, 1992).

with lists of the names and approximate dates of past Pulai spirit mediums and temple caretakers. When this man went on to list former Pulai school teachers, he mentioned that a woman had taught school in Pulai during the 1920s and 30s. He also related that in 1857, forty Pulai women had commissioned an elaborately carved palanquin for Guanyin; each woman had donated a half *liang* (两) of gold to have it built in China and brought to Pulai. The chair had been previously used in the temple processions but lost during the Japanese occupation. Somewhat surprised by this new information on Pulai women, I asked him about the history of the *fun// hui*. My informant said that this group had formed more recently, after the Japanese occupation, when social relations had grown too complicated (*fiza* 复杂), and female roles were added to the rituals of the temple festival.

The Pulai women with whom I spoke claimed little knowledge of either the specifics of Pulai history, including the lists of school teachers, temple caretakers and spirit mediums, or of prior ritual practices. Although some women also claimed to know nothing about the history of the *fun// hui*, others maintained that the *fun// hui* had collected money from Pulai women and organized separate worship services for at least three generations. These women asserted that Wen Ah Chong, the former female school teacher, had written the prayers used for the special services of the *fun// hui*, and that women had played musical instruments to accompany the female rituals.

Stories of the past told by Pulai men and women suggested somewhat different gendered views of a local history that remained tied, for the most part, to selective transmission through oral traditions. Interestingly enough, unlike the more uncertain memories of past female activities, the commissioning of the Guanyin palanquin by forty Pulai women in 1857 may have remained more fixed in community memory because there probably had been a written inscription on the chair commemorating this. Nevertheless, the more important question that arises is what to make of this “fact”? Who were these women and what does this suggest about gender relations in early Pulai?

The women who commissioned the Guanyin palanquin in 1857 were almost certainly the wives of Pulai Hakka men, who, by my estimation first began marrying local women around the 1830s and 40s. By 1857 some Pulai women may have been the daughters of Hakka fathers and Siamese or Temiar mothers, but many, if not most, of the married Pulai women at this time were probably themselves Siamese or Temiar. According to contemporary Pulai accounts, the non-Chinese women who married in-

to the community learned to speak Hakka and observed the Chinese customs of their husbands. Yet it is tempting to ask how in fact the presence of these non-Chinese women affected the community, and whether the *funü hui* began with these women.

Siamese women, who probably made up the majority of non-Chinese wives, would have been Theravada Buddhists, and accustomed to earning merit through such activities as attending temple rituals and feeding the monks. Although Guanyin was also a Buddhist deity, the Chinese worshipped her according to Mahayana Buddhist traditions. Nevertheless, contributing to the Guanyin palanquin might conceivably have provided Siamese wives with an opportunity to earn merit according to their Theravadan beliefs. Similarly, the women who commissioned the Guanyin palanquin might also have organized the *funü hui* at the same time.

The religious practices of Temiar women and their relationship to Chinese religious practices are more difficult to envision. Temiars practiced a type of spirit mediumship where (mostly male) mediums in trance drew on the powers of their spirit guides to heal illness and solve other problems. Choruses of Temiar women accompanied the mediums' performances, giving Temiar women important and visible roles in Temiar rituals.¹⁵ Roseman reports that Temiar trance sessions were held in some Pulai houses before the Japanese occupation,¹⁶ suggesting that some overlapping beliefs and practices associated with spirit mediums may have linked Chinese and Temiar religious views.

In Pulai, the community spirit mediums who were empowered by Maniang, the second most influential deity in the Pulai temple, commanded the most authority as ritual specialists. Villagers believed that the Maniang spirit mediums were called by the gods, often against their will. Villagers also felt that this election by the gods certified the moral source of the Maniang medium's power, and they contrasted this with another type of Chinese spirit medium who studied how to trance and communicate with spirits, but could use these powers for good or evil. Based on informants' accounts, it seems quite probable that some Pulai men studied Temiar trancing and spirit medium practices. Hence, the division between the respected Maniang spirit mediums who led community rituals, and the less respected and less powerful self-taught mediums who only served individuals, may have also symbolized some of the divid-

¹⁵ See Marina Roseman, *Healing Sounds from the Malaysian Rainforest: Temiar Music and Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp.106-28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 201 n. 47.

ing lines that the Pulai Chinese sought to maintain between themselves (as Chinese) and their non-Chinese, but nevertheless influential neighbors.

At some point, probably in the late 19th or early 20th century, the Pulai Maniang spirit medium brought a message from the gods that barred Pulai women from entering the Pulai Guanyin temple; female pollution was said to offend the gods. In this case, Chinese folk beliefs in the spiritual dangers of female menstrual pollution shared common features with Siamese and Temiar folk beliefs.¹⁷ The banishment of Pulai women from the main temple remained in effect until the end of the Japanese occupation, forcing women who wished to worship the deities in the Guanyin temple to pass their offerings in through the men. Again, it is tempting to speculate whether this prohibition resulted from some crisis that the community was facing. Perhaps it was associated with one of several historic struggles with outside groups of Chinese or Indonesians in the late 19th century.¹⁸ If Pulai women as a group were considered less Chinese than the men, this might have signified another way of drawing lines against outsiders.¹⁹ Alternatively, the prohibition may have been connected with the advent of Chinese school teachers from China at the turn of the century. Villagers credited the first Pulai school teacher with the composition of many of the formal written prayers still used in temple rituals. Perhaps the arrival of Chinese school teachers stimulated a period of renewed Chinese identity that again highlighted the different origins of Pulai women, and prompted stricter gender divisions in public rituals.

Historically, some of the most rigid gender divisions in temple affairs began to

¹⁷ For Chinese pollution beliefs, see Emily Ahern, "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women," in *Women in Chinese Society*, eds. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp.193-214. For Siamese beliefs, see Lorraine Gesick, *In the Land of Lady White Blood: Southern Thailand and the Meaning of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1995), p. 6. For Temiar beliefs, see Sue Jennings, *Theatre, Ritual and Transformation: The Senoi Temiars* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 124.

¹⁸ See Sharon Carstens, "Pulai: Memories of a Gold Mining Settlement in Ulu Kelantan," in *Journal of the Malaysian Branch Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. LIII No.1 (June 1980), pp. 50-67.

¹⁹ This speculation is partially supported by an account of discord that arose during the late 19th century between the Pulai Chinese and a group of jelutong rubber tappers from Sumatra, who had settled near Pulai. The Pulai Chinese took their grievance to the Kelantanese Sultan after the Sumatran Malays scattered dead birds around the Pulai temple during the annual temple festival. The Sultan wrote a warning forbidding those who were ritually unclean (namely the Sumatrans) from entering the temple compound. In telling this story, more than one Pulai informant mentioned also the prohibition of (unclean) women from entering the temple.

break down following the Japanese occupation. More than one male informant characterized this period as one of tremendous complexity (*fuzza*). One powerful influence on the community from the 1930s on came from communist schools and camps established in the area. Although the main message of the Malayan communists focused on independence from the British, perhaps other sorts of communist messages, including those of gender equality, also filtered into the community. If so, this might help to explain what appear to have been decreasing ritual restrictions on women at this time. Unfortunately, given the Malaysian government's continued suspicion of Pulai support for the communists during my periods of fieldwork, no one in Pulai could discuss this topic with me. Yet the possible effects of such wider events like the communist movement on Pulai women as well as Pulai men should not be neglected.

To recontextualize this historical information with my earlier presentation of gender relations and the Guanyin temple festival, I assert that the meanings of ritual practices in 1978 and the ways in which these practices defined community drew in part on a long history of shifting gender relations within the community and evolving relationships between the community and outsiders. The *funu hui* may have originated with non-Chinese women, or it may have developed in response to increasing male restrictions on female religious practices, which may in turn have been linked to the appearance of Chinese school teachers who advocated stricter views of gender divisions. Yet the arrival of the female school teacher, Wen Ah Chong, who some villagers said was educated in China by her school teacher father, must have challenged some of these views as well. Wen Ah Chong reportedly never convinced Pulai families to formally educate their daughters, yet the accounts of her support for *funu hui* rituals suggests that her presence in the community further inspired the public performance of female rituals.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the *funu hui* seems to have disappeared entirely from 1952-1970, the period when the government removed Pulai families from the area under Emergency regulations and forced them to resettle in three different places in Malaysia. Although the portion of the Pulai community resettled in Trengganu carried the Pulai gods with them, and although the Guanyin temple festival was continued in the Trengganu setting, women reported that they organized no special rituals there.²⁰

²⁰ Following the return of the original deities to Pulai in 1970, the Trengganu branch of the Pulai community installed their own set of "Pulai gods" on the temple altar there and continued to hold annual temple festivals. When I attended their Guanyin festival in the 6th month in 1978, I noted that while they generally followed the format of Pulai rituals, there were no special female rituals and there was no Trengganu branch of the *funu hui*.

The *fun// hui* did not resume its activities until 1970, when villagers built a new temple in Pulai and the Pulai gods returned to Pulai itself. The rebuilding of the temple and the resumption of the Guanyin festival on Pulai ancestral soil symbolized the long awaited reconstitution of the historic Pulai community, a community that had for some time included public religious expressions by women through the *fun// hui*. Nevertheless, the style in which Pulai Hakka women worshipped and interacted as a group in 1978 derived from a complex and somewhat ambiguous mixture of long-standing understandings about female positions in the community, as well as current circumstances. As these circumstances changed in the years that followed, and as new groups of outsiders were integrated into the Pulai temple festival, Pulai women's roles and their understandings of these roles within the festival also changed.²¹

To conclude, the creation and continuation of female rituals in the Hakka Malaysian community of Pulai resulted from a dynamic mixing of cultural traditions and constantly shifting social realities. Within the Pulai milieu, as elsewhere, gender divisions were only one of a number of forms of social differentiation that served to unify or separate people in diverse ways. Nevertheless, the study of certain types of gender issues, particularly the often hidden practices and viewpoints of women, remain a challenge. The anthropologist who wishes to decipher the history and significance of the *fun// hui* for Pulai women and men is continually forced into the realm of imaginative reconstruction. As with other forms of female culture that rarely find their way into written histories, the precise origins and development of the Pulai *fun// hui* will most likely never be known. Yet, I would argue that the patient piecing together of scattered bits of information coupled with careful inferences, as I have attempted in this paper, can at least offer one plausible historic scenario that includes, rather than ignores, the practices and beliefs of women as well as men.

²¹ In a previous paper, I focused on the shifts that I witnessed in these rituals between 1978 and 1990, but I now believe that a more interesting understanding of more recent shifts can be attained by pursuing these questions over a much longer time frame. See Sharon Carstens, "*Shannan Xinn//* : Ritual and Gender in a Chinese Malaysian Community." Manuscript.