



California State Parks

Video Transcript



The Temple in the Forest Beneath the Clouds: Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park

My name is Jack Frost, and I'm a Historic Monument Guide for the California State Parks. I'd like to thank you for coming today. You're going to be able to see one of the most unique cultural sites that we have within the California State Parks on our tour today. We're going to be visiting a Joss House, which is actually a Chinese temple. And this one is very unique. You're going to be seeing the last wooden Chinese temple here in the state of California that was built just shortly after the great California Gold Rush.

The building's located right here across the creek and we're going to be crossing over this bridge to visit the inside of the temple. It was built in 1874. And the Chinese population here in Weaverville, although it's very small today, they are still using the temple actively. So it is the oldest actively used Chinese temple here in California.

Now we're going to go across the bridge, and we're going to follow the curved pathway up to the front of the temple. And this is a very important feature that all of the Chinese want all of our visitors to do. There's a very, very old superstition that evil spirits only travel in flat, straight lines, and because the bridge has an arch to it and the pathway is curved, evil spirits have to stay on this side of the bridge, literally waiting for us to come back from the tour. But we'll go across and go up to the front porch and talk a little bit more about the front of the structure.

As you follow this curved pathway up to the front of the building, again, you're getting rid of all the evil spirits that plague you in the world. And that way, when you enter the temple itself, everything inside is peaceful and protected.

Now that we're looking actually at the front of the building, we have some very specific architectural details that are found only here at this structure. One of the problems that the Chinese had when they first came to California in 1850 and 51, during the Gold Rush, is that not all of them had had any education. And the Chinese characters that are on the face of this building were very, very difficult for them to translate. The three most important characters that are on the face of the building are actually the three characters that are painted in gold on the red board. The Chinese always write from the right side to the left side, so we have to interpret them from the right to the left. And it says, Won Lim Miao—that is in Cantonese. In English, we would say, "Cloud Forest Temple;" and as the Chinese would say, this is the "Temple in the Forest beneath the Clouds."

Now, if you can't read the characters, how would you tell what this structure was, what the name of it was? You couldn't very easily ask other Chinese people here in the area because

California State Parks Video Transcript

The Temple in the Forest Beneath the Clouds: Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park

there were a total of 36 different Chinese dialects being spoken here in the mining camps. The easiest way to tell what this building was used for was the simulated blue tile work, which is on the face of the building.

What we're actually looking at is actually blue paint with white mortar lines painted over that to simulate the old standard tile work that were on the temples back in China. The color blue mimics the color of the sky, or as the Chinese say, the color of Heaven. With the color of Heaven on this building, you know that this is the house of the ancestors because all of the ancestors' spirits are in Heaven. Whether you can read the characters or not, or understand the dialects, this color was only used on the Chinese Taoist temples, not on any of the businesses or any of the private homes.

Now, again to fool the evil spirits, as we enter the structure itself, the front gate and the front door have very large thresholds that we have to step over. The act of stepping over the thresholds leaves evil spirits behind because they physically can't do that.

And then the true temple doors are just inside. They're painted gold to distinguish them from the regular entrance doors, which are painted red. These doors were closed and locked by the Taoist priests 128 years ago, and they remain closed today. Evil spirits cannot make that right or left hand turn, which we're about to do, and so this is the last physical barrier that keeps them out of the temple.

The first ancestor that we're going to actually see as we come in, his name is Dai Tze. He's sitting here on this little table, and as you can see, there are still offerings of fruit and candy that Chinese have left here recently in his honor. Dai Tze is the door guardian or the protector of the temple. He is placed here to make sure that only good passes by him. He has the ability to keep the evil out, and everyone is to honor him for all the hard work that he does, day and night, protecting the temple for them.

Then, as we progress around the barrier doors into the temple, then we are faced with the other 13 ancestors and the spirit houses that they sit in. Now, the ancestors themselves, specifically, are made out of clay. Each of the clay statues represents a real person that lived in China many, many years ago. The people in the communities are the ones that decide which ancestors are going to be in each temple. Here in Weaverville they chose 13 specific ancestors.

They're placed into three groups or, as we say, three spirit houses. The spirit houses are in the back, and the Chinese always believe that you would go and pray and meditate to the spirits of these ancestors for your everyday problems and for the help that you need with your community life.

The first spirit house on the far left that contain the three doctors is referred to as the Altar of Health. All three men that are represented there were looked to for health and long life. The one in the center is referred to as the Altar of Wealth and Prosperity. The statues represent two emperors, two generals, and four soldiers. They were there to maintain the wealth, the prosperity, and the protection for the community. And then the one on the right houses the images of the two female ancestors. They are very specific because they are the protectors of

California State Parks Video Transcript

The Temple in the Forest Beneath the Clouds: Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park

the women and children of the community, and they are the providers of mercy, understanding, and forgiveness.

They believe that you always start with the largest group first and work down to the smallest group. So, looking at the three arrangements, we'll start with the group in the center. This is the one that has the eight men placed inside, represented by the statues. These were the primary ancestors for this particular temple. The two largest figures that are up in the back were two of the old emperors of China: Emperor Kuan Goon and Emperor Bok Ai. They were very important for the Chinese community. The spirits of these two men were always looked to for wealth and prosperity. But wealth wasn't always money; wealth was things more like guidance and direction, good judgment, virtue, and honor. We also see six smaller figures that are there with the two emperors. These are all guardians, generals and soldiers, that were protecting the emperors, and that's what they were there for—for the community, for protection for all the Chinese within the community itself.

Then to the left of the emperors, we have three men that are placed in that spirit house. They were all doctors during their lifetime, so they are there to always maintain good health and long life. We have the Doctor of 10,000 Herbs, the Doctor of Fortune, and the Doctor of Surgery.

Then the last group, but not the least, were the two female ancestors that are over here on the west side of the temple. The two female ancestors were very, very important for the whole community and for every individual. They were the protector of women and children and they were the providers of mercy, understanding, and forgiveness for the whole community. The Chinese believe before you can achieve wealth and prosperity, good health, and long life, you must have mercy, understanding, and forgiveness.

The colors inside the building are just as important as the blue color on the outside. As you can see in the coloration of the spirit houses, and even the walls and the ceilings, we have a predominant color of red inside the building. The red color is the color used by the Chinese to represent good fortune and good luck. Evil spirits always bring the exact opposite—they always bring bad fortune, they always bring bad luck to the area. So the more red that you can surround yourself with, within a community or within the temple itself, the more good fortune and the more good luck you have.

The other thing that they believe is that evil spirits cannot stand loud noises. So drums and gongs and cymbals and firecrackers are always used during all of the celebrations to hurt the ears of evil spirits and to drive them away from the communities.

The other thing that they believe is that evil spirits cannot stand their own reflection. So mirrors are used quite often to protect things of great value or of importance. Here in the temple itself, the associations here in the community honored the spirits of the two emperors with parade banners like these that are here against this wall. These four parade banners were made in China in factories dedicated to constructing things like this for the temples and for the imperial court. All the little mirrors that are placed on them are protective devices to keep evil spirits away. Again, the color red represents good fortune and good luck, so it keeps bad fortune and bad luck away. The flying bats that are on the top of the first and the last banner, these are symbols of happiness. This was because in Southern China the Chinese

California State Parks Video Transcript

The Temple in the Forest Beneath the Clouds: Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park

spoke Se-Yep Cantonese, and the word for happiness and the word for bat are very similar when spoken in that dialect.

These banners were used every year during Chinese New Year celebrations. There was a huge parade here at the community. And they would take lots of drums and gongs and cymbals. They would order lots of firecrackers for those celebrations to bring good fortune for the coming year.

The associations that purchased these banners to honor the two emperors, they also purchased things like the round umbrella here against the wall to represent all the other 13 ancestors: the female ancestors, the doctors, the guardians, the door guard, Dai Tze. It was used in the celebrations also.

And then against the wall above Dai Tze, we have the six association flags that basically represent the six provinces near Canton and Hong Kong that these people came from originally. It was very, very important for these associations to maintain themselves over the years. They kept the people organized within a group, they all spoke the same dialect, and they kept the connection back home to their relatives in China.

Once the temple was finished, and functioning well for the community, these temple associations decided to build one more structure, and they placed it just to the east side of the temple. And that became the community meeting hall for association meetings and for social activities. It also provided an area for the temple caretaker to have a living quarter because he was required to be here 365 days of the year with no time off. His basic duties were to the temple itself. And then he could decide at the end of that year whether he wished to continue or whether a new caretaker was hired.

Well, here we are in the temple caretaker's area and the association meeting hall. For a lot of our Chinese visitors, this room holds a great importance for them, especially to the past. As you notice here on the walls, we have a lot of paper notices that were pasted up here all the way up into the 1920s and the 1930s. These notices, all written in Chinese calligraphy, tell the people that can read the characters the history of how this community was functioning. And probably the most important thing for the Chinese here is the fact that many of these notices have lists of names recorded on them. Probably the most important thing here is the large board that's attached to the wall above the paper notices. And on that board are 697 individual names recording the very first temple association membership list. This list of names is very important to make that connection today for families that are visiting here for the first time. We have many Chinese visitors here that find their family names up there and hope that it is a relative that lived here in Weaverville at some time.

One of the other features here that a lot of our Chinese visitors recognize immediately, and are familiar with, is the interior of the living quarters. This was the area that was provided for the temple caretaker by the association. They lived here 365 days out of the year, very seldom left the temple, and it was a good job to have. Your duties were posted right here on the wall for you so that you knew what you had to do every month. But there was an advantage of having that position. The people in Weaverville had an obligation of providing food daily to the ancestral spirits. So the food was brought to the temple, left on the great feast table, and then, after three hours, that food was then left for the caretaker. So he was always partaking in the

California State Parks Video Transcript

The Temple in the Forest Beneath the Clouds: Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park

very best food that the community had to offer him. The only thing that he couldn't partake in was the wine offerings.

The stone urn that sits here in front of the feast table was placed there so that all of the wine offerings were poured into that vessel. It could also include sweet tea and pure water. But this was the one offering that was considered to be a permanent offering to the ancestors and then not retrieved by the families. They were given permanently to the ancestors in a stone vessel, which was allowed to evaporate.

Well, after we've looked at the Chinese caretaker's quarters, we'll go back through the temple, take one last look at the inside of the temple, and answer any questions that you might have as you go through there. This is the end of our tour and we'd like to thank you for coming to the Weaverville Joss House today.

Running Time: 17:13

© California State Parks, 2004