

Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park



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Weaverville Joss House SHP

630 Main Street

Weaverville, CA 96093

(530) 623-5284

*The ornate beauty
of the Weaverville
Joss House stands
as a lasting tribute
to Weaverville's
Chinese pioneers.*

遠都正在人心
天不可欺未曾舉意
越貧窮奸狡原來天
雙親養子方知父母
代代相傳信有之

In the small, historic mining community of Weaverville, the Weaverville Joss House is a vivid reminder of the Chinese contribu-

tion to this part of California. Above the front door Chinese characters in luminous gold translate to read, “The Temple of the Forest Beneath the Clouds.” Located about 50 miles west of Redding on Highway 299, the Weaverville Joss House is the oldest continuously used Chinese temple in California.

The climate in this area depends on the elevation. Higher elevations generally tend to be cooler, with more precipitation—often taking the form of snow—during winter. From November through March lows range from 30 to 40 degrees, with highs of 40 to 60 degrees. Spring weather varies according to elevation, but pleasant days are the rule, while summers are hot and dry. Dressing in loose-fitting layers allows flexibility in case of temperature changes.

WEAVERVILLE'S FIRST PEOPLE

The Wintu people lived in the Weaverville area for about 4,000 years. Closely related to the Nomlaki and Patwin to the south, the Chimariko to the west and the Hupa to the northwest, the Wintu people lived along the Trinity River, where they found everything they needed to thrive. Seasonally, they hunted deer, elk and small game, fished for salmon and steelhead, and harvested berries, seeds and other plants. The Wintu were known for basketry that was both beautiful and useful, and traded with various native



groups living in coastal and valley areas of California.

The Wintu way of life was forever changed with the incursion of trappers and settlers ready to exploit this resource-rich area. By the early 1800s nearly three-quarters of the Wintu people had been decimated by diseases to which they had no immunity. The gold rush brought even greater changes for the native people, most notably the loss of their traditional lands and culture. Today their descendants, seeking to carry on the old ways, are reviving their languages, crafts and traditions.

THE CHINESE COME TO CALIFORNIA

In 1848 news of the gold discovery in California stirred China as it did the rest of the world. For some time southern China had been experiencing economic hardships, and emigration to the California gold fields seemed a solution. Thousands came, hoping to find gold and return to China as men of wealth. Chinese immigrants, mostly from the province of Guangdong, established claims in

Trinity County. Despite the high \$4 monthly tax on foreign miners, the hardworking Chinese were able to send their earnings back to their families in China. Unfortunately, not all Chinese miners flourished in the gold fields. This remote, unforgiving environment brought many others to early, often unmarked, graves.

Many Chinese immigrants did not go to the gold fields. Some became entrepreneurs, opening grocery stores, doctors' offices, barbershops, bakeries and restaurants in Weaverville. Before long, Weaverville had an opera house and a puppet theater to accommodate traveling troupes of Chinese entertainers.

CHINESE WAR OF 1854

Because of their history of clan associations, the Chinese banded together in groups according to the area in China they had come from. In Weaverville, four separate companies—the Yong-Wa, Se-Yep, Neng-Yong and Sam-



The Lion Dance—Chinese New Year



The temple and grounds as they appear today

Yep—were formed. In June 1854 one group was accused of cheating the others in the Weaverville Chinese gambling hall. Animosity grew until a battle was called to settle the dispute. Carrying weapons crafted by local blacksmiths, the two groups met on the battlefield. The great Chinese War of 1854 saw the smaller group defeat the larger one, with eight men dead and another 20 wounded.

TEMPLE OF THE FOREST BENEATH THE CLOUDS

The term “joss” is believed to be a corruption of the Portuguese word “Deus,” meaning “God.” Thus, a temple where Chinese gods were kept and worshipped was called a joss house. About 1853, the Chinese residents of Weaverville erected a small Taoist joss house that they named *Won Lim Miao* (Won Lim Temple). Taoism, which subscribes to the teachings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu from around the third century B.C., aims at serenity through harmony with nature. Each individual is expected to eliminate ambition and attain purity and simplicity. This belief is also influenced by

Buddhism, Confucianism, and the veneration of Chinese heroes and sages.

The first temple building, with most of its furnishings, was consumed by fire in 1861. Local Chinese residents then contributed generously to build a new



A Taoist ceremony presented by the Ching Chung Taoist Association of America

temple. However, in 1873 a fire swept through Weaverville, completely destroying the second temple.

In February 1874 the residents began construction of the present building in the Chinese section of Weaverville, but by 1880 the Chinese population in Trinity County had dwindled to fewer than 2,000 people. Gold had become harder to find, and many had left to work on the railroad. By 1931 there were only 16 Chinese residents in town.

In 1938, after the *Won Lim Miao* had been robbed of many of its furnishings, which were quickly recovered and returned, Weaverville resident Moon Lim Lee was appointed its trustee in acknowledgement of the

temple's historical significance. For nearly 20 years Mr. Lee tirelessly promoted the temple as a statewide treasure that should be preserved for all Californians to appreciate. In 1956 Mr. Lee finally saw his dream fulfilled when the Joss House became a part of the California State Park System.

SYMBOLIC FURNISHINGS

The Joss House is a remarkable structure; except for the installation of protective railings and electricity, its interior has not been changed since 1874. Its historical significance lies in the fact that very few such temples still survive.

The ornate wooden gate to the porch and the fanciful gables and cornices on the building reflect the Chinese presence. The front of the building, painted bright blue to replicate the color of the sky, a symbol of heaven to the Chinese, has white lines that resemble the tile work of similar temples in China. On the temple roof sit two Chow Win Dragon Fish, once believed to keep wooden structures safe from fire. Just beyond the very high thresholds of the entrance doors stand two more wooden doors—“spirit screens”—to keep out evil spirits. According to traditional Chinese belief, such spirits are unable to travel over barriers or around corners.

Inside, three ornately carved wooden spirit houses contain clay statues of male and female deities. An altar table holds candles, incense sticks, oracle fortune sticks, wine cups, and pictures of immortals painted on



Temple Door Guardian

glass. A small wooden table holding food offerings sits in front of the altar, and a stone urn under the table offers beverages, including sweet plum wine. Along the side walls, processional banners, drums, gongs and association flags used in the Chinese New Year parades are displayed.

A conference room, living quarters for the temple attendant, and a boarding room with bunk beds for Chinese travelers are separately attached to the temple building. Hundreds of faded orange papers with the names of contributors and the amounts of their contributions for temple upkeep hang on the walls of the conference room. Worshippers would visit to pray and to place incense, candles, food and paper money before the spirit houses and altars. Any worshipper overheard asking for such things as revenge on an enemy could count on being fined by the temple attendant.

An interpretive museum tells the story of the Chinese Americans in California, and displays such items as the handmade weapons from

the Chinese War of 1854 and equipment used by Chinese miners.

THE LION DANCE

Every February during Chinese New Year and every Fourth of July weekend the Weaverville Joss House Association holds a Lion Dance celebration that draws hundreds of visitors to the park.

ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park currently has no developed, wheelchair accessible features that meet the regulatory standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Accessibility is continually improving. For current accessibility details call the park, or visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

PLEASE REMEMBER

- For current park hours contact the park at (530) 623-5284.
- Temple tours leave on the hour from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. Call park for fee information.
- The law prohibits removal of any natural, cultural or historical feature.
- Only service dogs are permitted in the buildings. Pets must be on a leash while on the grounds.

This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For more information contact: Weaverville Joss House Association • Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park • PO Box 2608 • Weaverville, CA 96093-2608 • 530-623-4343

