

Chinese Joss House  
Weaverville, Trinity County, California

HABS CA-1452

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
District No. 38

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Irving F. Morrow, District Officer  
1605 DeYoung Building, San Francisco, Cal.

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

WEAVERVILLE JOSS HOUSE  
(Chinese Joss House)  
Oregon Street  
Weaverville  
Trinity County  
California

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ADDENDUM TO:  
CHINESE JOSS HOUSE  
Weaverville  
Trinity County  
California

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
Washington, DC 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

ADDENDUM TO  
WEAVERVILLE JOSS HOUSE  
(Chinese Joss House)

HABS No. CA-1452

Location: Oregon Street and U.S. Highway 299, Weaverville, Trinity Co., California. Lot 15, a portion of Block 8, Weaverville Townsite, Section 12, T33N., R10W.

Present Owner: State of California

Present Occupant: Department of Parks and Recreation

Present Use: State Historic Park

Statement of Significance: The Temple of the Forest and the Clouds, or as it is popularly known, the Chinese Joss House, is an important historical record of the Chinese culture that flourished in California beginning in the 1850's with the immigration of Chinese nationals seeking gold.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The site of the Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park is known as Chimney Point. In the Annals of Trinity Co., Isaac Cox wrote in August of 1858 "The ladies church has been raised . . . on ground donated by James Howe . . . said lot being the so-called Chimney Point." Additional notes by J. W. Bartlett to Cox's Annals published in 1926 add: "on the lot was erected a Methodist church which became the grammar school building . . . on the front of the lot on which the Methodist church stood is now a Chinese church." A report in the Trinity Democrat of 1855 estimated that as many as 2500 Chinese were in the Trinity Basin and as early as 1852 or 53 erected a temple on Chimney Point.
2. Date of erection: 1874. The Trinity Journal reported that on June 28, 1873, a fire in a cabin at the rear of the Chinese church, occupied by Dr. Croucher, a confirmed old sot, spread to the church. Although some banners and tapestries were saved the building was destroyed. The Journal later reported "over 2,000 individuals have contributed to the new church on which work was started on February 7, 1874 and the dedication held in the week ending April 18, 1874." This new structure is the building which has been in continuous use as a Temple of Taoist worship until given to the State as an historic park by the family of Moon Lee in 1956.
3. Architect: It is not recorded that there was an architect for the temple, but many of the immigrant Chinese were artisans with carving and carpentry skills.

The form of the temple is typical of many to be found in Southern China built for Taoist worship. A great deal of its interest lies in the architectural adaptations made by its builders to meet changed environmental conditions and lack of traditional masonry materials for construction.

4. Alterations and additions: Major stabilization of the structure was undertaken during 1956 and 57 by the State. Footings were repaired or replaced. Extensive dry rot due to inadequate drainage between the structures was removed and new roof gutters installed. Deteriorated ornamental carving and decorative architectural detail were restored or remade. However, no essential architectural change in the character of the structure was made with the exceptions of levelling the depressed section of the temple floor, adding protective railings and connecting the temple attendants' quarters to facilitate public tours of the structure.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The Lee family is a part of the history of the Weaverville Basin, and intimately connected with the Temple of the Forest and the Clouds. Arkpon Lim Lee and three sons came from Canton China, to California to work on the Central Pacific Railroad. They came to Weaverville in the late 1860's and were among the many connected with the erection of the new temple. Arkpon Lee and one son eventually returned to China, but his son Sam Lee remained in Weaverville. He married Jon Haw of San Francisco in 1897 and although most members of the Chinese community began to depart after a disastrous fire of Weaverville Chinatown in 1905 the Sam Lee family remained.

Moon Lee, grandson of Arkpon and son of Sam, became trustee of the temple upon the death of his father in 1947. The last religious keeper of the temple, Ah Fong had died in 1938 and the Lee family had acted as custodians of the property for the Chinese community until it was given to the State in 1956.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old Views: Various views of early days of Weaverville, photographs, lithographs and drawings are located in the J. J. "Jake" Jackson Memorial Museum at Weaverville. These are general views, some showing the present temple. No photos or drawings have been located of the earlier structure. Photographs of the building under rehabilitation by the State are on file with the Ranger in charge of the State Historic Park. Supplementary detail, photographs taken during the 1972 measurement project are in the Architectural Documents Collection, College of Environmental Design Library, University of California at Berkeley.

2. Bibliography:

Cox, Isaac. Annals of Trinity County with annotations by J. W. Bartlett, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1926. An on-the-scene report

ably documented and expanded by J. W. Bartlett.

Carr, John. Pioneer Days in California, \_\_\_\_\_, San Francisco?, 1891. A statewide history with emphasis on pioneer communities of Northern California.

\_\_\_\_\_, Trinity Journal, Weaverville, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1956. A special historical edition with references to early newspaper articles.

Young, Donna J. Weaver Basin, Jackson Memorial Museum, 1971. Collected articles, descriptions and notes of life and times in Weaverville.

Chinn, Thomas (Ed.). A History of the Chinese in California, A Syllabus, Chinese Historical Society of America, San Francisco, 1969. Has references to other Taoist temples in Northern California.

Densmore, G. B. The Chinese in California, Pettit & Russ, San Francisco, 1880, pp 58-71. General descriptions of Joss Houses in San Francisco.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Weaverville Joss House is a unique Taoist temple of all wood construction and ornamentation, combining western framing of the basic envelope with Oriental joinery and profiles in secondary architectural details.
2. Condition of Fabric: Excellent. Rehabilitation by the state park system has replaced deteriorated elements with work of equal quality and character.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The temple is 23' 3" wide and 48' 6" long of single story construction. It is structurally divided into three parts; the front third, approximately 15 feet has a recessed porch and narthex; the middle third is a small nave with side aisles; and the rear third, approximately 20 feet shelters the altar tables and three altars. The central portion of the floor of the middle third was originally lower than the narthex or side aisles and the rear altar section is raised 14" above the entrance floor level.

The attendants' quarters is parallel to the temple separated by a distance of 13½ inches and is 14' 2" wide and 32' 4" long. It is structurally divided into two parts; the front section served as a meeting room for the community and the rear section as living quarters for the attendant and visitors.

2. Foundations and underpinning: A good portion of the foundation work is new but follows the pattern of original work. Foundation posts for exterior walls are made of drum sections of 8" to 10" trees set on concrete pads flush with the earth's surface. It appears original work was native rubble stone packed into holes placed to support the foundation posts. The posts carry rough-sawn 6"x6" girders. Interior foundation posts are 6"x6" set on 4"x16"x16" wood blocks on concrete. Girders create four bays longitudinally, but there is considerable evidence of reframing. Some girders show notching to half their depth to receive floor joists.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: The side and rear walls of the temple are covered with 5/8"x5-5/8" boards running horizontally and lapped approximately 1". Photographs taken in 1957 during the rehabilitation show evidence of exposures approaching 5-1/2", judged by crude photogrammetry measurements. The surface is painted red. Munsell color--Red 5/8. Corner boards are 3/4"x5-1/2" butted and are painted the same color. Porch walls are covered with 1x6 nominal, horizontal flush boards. The surface is painted blue. Munsell color--Blue 5/6 with white striping in imitation of a common bond brick. The porch has exposed roof framing, beams are brown, purlins are red with blue soffits and the ceiling between purlins white.  
  
The attendants' quarters' walls are covered with a mixture of 1"x12" vertical boards with 1"x2-3/4" battens, 1x6 and 1x8 vertical board on board and 1"x12" horizontal flush boards. All the work on this structure is crude and without architectural refinement. The boards have been left unfinished to weather naturally.
4. Structural system: The front and middle portions of the temple are balloon framed with 2"x6" studding and diagonally braced. The rear altar section has a 6"x6" braced frame with 2"x6" stud infill. Due to restricted access it was impossible to observe enough differences to conclude sections were built at different time periods. It is a probability, but no documentary evidence was found contrary to the assumption that the building now stands as originally built in 1874.  
  
The attendants' quarters is framed with structural boards and battens fastened to upper and lower plates which are supported by 3"x3" posts approximately 6'0" on centers.
5. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The temple's recessed porch is enclosed with a gate and screen of Oriental details and profiles. The temple doors are double, single-panel doors with wide stiles and rails. They have a high 12" threshold which, according to Taoist building lore aids in the prevention of the entry of evil spirits. The doors of the attendants' quarters are of crude carpentry board and batten doors consistent with the rest of that structure.
  - b. Windows: The temple has no windows. Some light is admitted by circular cutouts placed high in the central lantern form and not detailed for glazing.

- c. Attendants' quarters: There is one double hung, six light sash. Other windows appear to be improvisations with materials at hand. In the living quarters small squares 8"x12" to 8"x16" of poor quality sheet glass have been cut randomly into the board and batten wall.

6. Roof:

- a. Temple: Gable roofs with ridges perpendicular to the long axis of the temple cover the front and rear sections. The middle section has a hip roof on a square lantern form with shed roofs on its two sides which slope down to parapeted exterior walls. All roofs are covered with straight split 6" wide barn shakes laid with a 9" exposure.
- b. Attendants' quarters: This is roofed with two gable roofs of approximately equal sizes whose ridges are perpendicular to the length of the building.
- c. Gable and ridge ornaments: The ridge of the front gable of the temple has a cresting of painted ornamental carvings in wood. Front and rear gables are ornamented with an architectural cresting derived from the multi-tiered roofs of traditional temples. These forms terminate with carved and painted rafters of Oriental design.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:

- a. The temple: The temple is entered from an uncovered platform of contemporary construction through the entrance screen and gate. The screen is assembled with mortise and tenon joinery, ornamented with low relief carvings of the peach, cucumber and pomegranate. Moldings, column bases, and jigsaw profiles follow Oriental prototypes. Beyond the screen is the covered porch, the ceiling of which has been described. The walls painted in imitation of masonry are banded with a painted wooden frieze with scenes of birds and vegetables on the left wall, and fish and birds on the right. The frieze on the main entrance wall is a tripartite painting. The entrance doors are flanked at the sides by large vertical boards with painted and carved calligraphy; a similar horizontal board at the head has been translated to read the Temple of the Forest and the Clouds.

The doors open into a narthex-like area created by the placement of the Spirit Screen immediately opposite the entrance doors. The Spirit Screen is supported by two round columns with turned wooden bases. The doors in the screen are single panel doors with wide rails and stiles. They are operable but are normally closed, forcing passage into the main body of the structure to the left or right. The doors close against a very high (13") threshold. The wood, cabinetry and ornamental profiles of the Spirit Screen indicate an architectural element which may have been imported from China.

The central section of the temple is framed with four square columns, two with molded square bases and two with molded octagonal bases. The profiles of the bases are Oriental in design. Two beams frame into the columns on adjacent sides to form a square bay with side aisles. The area between the upper and lower beams parallel to the side aisles are panelled with vertical boarding. The side aisles have a shallow vaulted ceiling of wood. The upper beams of all four sides support lattice panels which form the lantern of the central space. The ceiling of the lantern is made of horizontal random 1"x6", 1"x8, 1x10" boarding fastened to the hip-framed roof. The central portion of the middle section formed by the four columns is similar to classical Taoist temples of southern China. There the area is generally open to the sky and only the side aisles are roofed. In the Weaverville Joss House this area in which the original floor was lower than the side aisles and adjoining front and rear sections is similar to Chinese temple prototypes.

The rear or altar section of the temple is raised three steps from the rest of the building. It has a gabled ceiling supported by the lower chords of scissor truss framing of the roof structure. All of the interior walls of the temple are of 1"x6" horizontal boarding treated with a red stain.

- b. Attendants' quarters: The meeting space of the attendants' quarters is walled and ceiled with random pine boards varying from 1"x8" to 1"x16". There is no architectural refinement. The living quarters have no interior finish and space divisions are made with partition walls of 1" boards. On the west wall of the meeting room mounted horizontally is a 1/2" thick cedar board 1'7" wide and 16'0" long inscribed with the names of the contributors to the building of the temple.
2. Trim: The temple porch screen, the spirit screen and the columns and lantern framing were probably materials manufactured in China and shipped to this country. They all have traditional mortise and tenon framing easy to disassemble, pack and reassemble in a new location. The wood of their construction is a fine grain hardwood. The moldings are skillfully made. It has not been documented that such was the case, but the contrast of the carpentry of the temple building and its interior architectural elements supports the thesis. Since it is known many of the furnishings were imported from China, it is highly probable the same is true for these minor architectural elements.
3. Hardware: Much of the rough hardware has been replaced in the stabilization of the building. However, square cut nails typical of the 19th Century are found throughout the building. Hinges are 3"x3" surface mounted fixed pin. Locks on the temple doors are wooden devices designed to be secured from the interior. Locks on the attendants' quarters are surface mounted, square cast iron box types with brown porcelain knobs. Many brackets and hanging devices of Oriental design support the various wooden panels covered with painted and/or carved calligraphy throughout the temple.

4. Lighting: The temple interior is very dark. The only natural light comes from the entrance doors, when open, and four small vent openings high in the lanterned space. There is an ornate oil lamp of Oriental design which hangs in the central space. Its date of inclusion in the building is undetermined. Tapers and portable lamps provided artificial illumination. Modern lighting from concealed sources replaces original hazardous sources of artificial lighting.
5. Heating: The temple has no heating system, although during the stabilization of the building foil insulation was placed in the exterior walls. The attendants' quarters has wood-burning stoves. A cast iron stove manufactured in New York heats the meeting room. It has an unusual secondary heating element consisting of a horizontal cylindrical heat exchanger of sheet metal as part of the flue design of the stove.

D. Site:

The Taoism as the popular religion which the Chinese miners brought with them to Weaverville has borrowed elements of Buddhist philosophy. The Taoist basic trinity was the heavens, the earth and man's spirit. The wooded knoll selected for the temple site was bordered by a stream and it cannot be without conscious design purpose that the temple is oriented towards a view of the Weaver Bally mountain, whose three prominent peaks are snow covered for a good portion of the year. The natural elements of the forest, stream, mountains and sky formed an integral part of their religious life.

Although it is reported that a Chinese temple was on this site in 1855, the earliest records of Trinity County show the granting of a certificate to the Chinese Church Society based on the affidavit filed by Quong Song on July 30, 1877. A deed to the property was later issued on February 4, 1878. These records are a clarification of ownership of land in the Weaverville basin undertaken in 1877. Other property owners of the present state park site not occupied by the temple building were the Chinese Mason's Society, Charley Hop Lee, and the grammar school lot. This ownership record is consistent with the 1855 story that on the rear of the grammar school property was constructed a Chinese church. It was that structure that the present temple replaced in 1874.

The site is covered with pine and native locust trees. Moon Lee, the last trustee of the temple reported that the third locust tree on the west side of the temple, the one nearest the entrance is a special variety imported from China. He also reported his earliest memory of approach to the temple was through a gate in a white picket fence from Oregon street. The gate was on the axis of the temple building. Site improvements presently in existence are the developments of the State Park System.

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was executed for the State of California, Department of Parks and Recreation, William Penn Mott, Jr., Director; and supervised by Robert F. Uhte, Manager of the Design and Construction Branch. The project architect was Kenneth H. Cardwell, A.I.A., with the survey team of student assistant architects;

Alan Aoki, Jon Dixon, Kelley Hale, Robert Heynen, and Dan Tonnemacher of the University of California, Berkeley. The project photographer was Mary Kile Martin of Redding, California.

August 1972.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

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