

# Weaverville Joss House State Historic Park



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Sacramento, CA 94296-0001

For information call: (800) 777-0369

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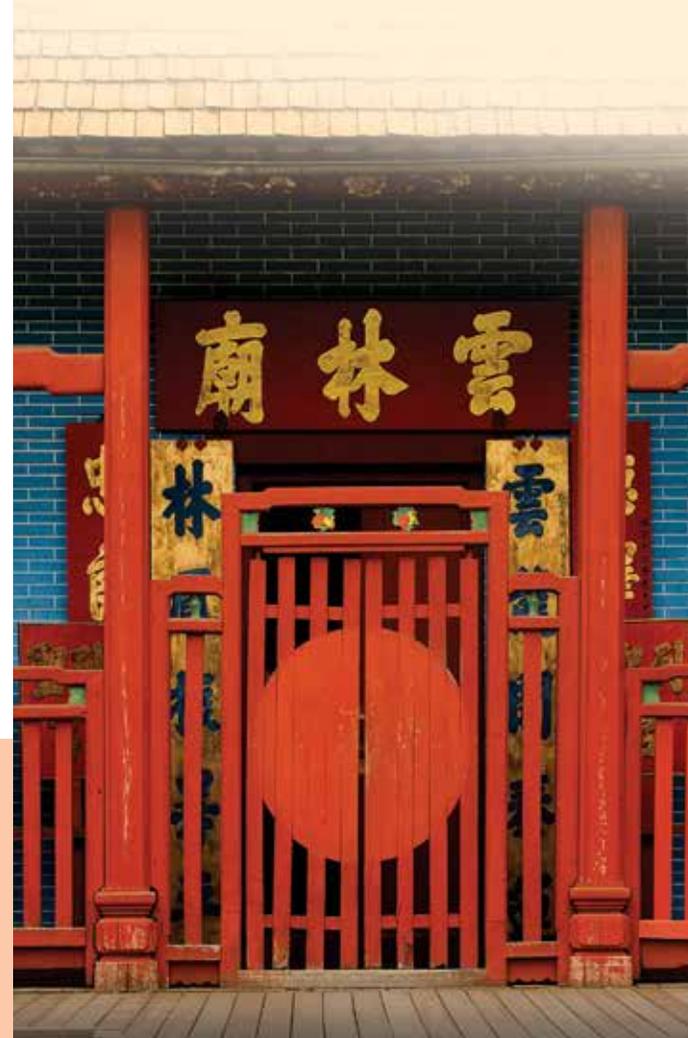
630 Main Street • P.O. Box 1217

Weaverville, CA 96093

(530) 623-5284

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*The characters above  
the Weaverville Joss  
House entry read,  
“Temple of the Forest  
Beneath the Clouds.”*



**I**n the small, historic mining community of Weaverville, the Weaverville Joss House is a vivid reminder of the Chinese contribution 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 area usually has sunny and crisp autumn weather. Rain and even snow fall frequently during most winters. From November through March, low temperatures range from 30 to 40 degrees, with highs of 40 to 60 degrees. Spring weather varies, but pleasant days are the rule, while summers are often hot and dry.



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

### **WEAVERVILLE'S FIRST PEOPLE**

The Wintu people have 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 traditionally lived along the Trinity River. Here 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; they 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 succumbed to diseases to which they had no immunity.

The 1848 California gold rush brought even greater changes for the native people, most notably the loss of their traditional lands and culture. Today their descendants are reviving the old native languages, crafts, and traditions.

### **THE CHINESE COME TO CALIFORNIA**

News of the 1848 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, most 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 and often unmarked graves.

A number of 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-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 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 temple. However, an 1873 fire also 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; however, the Chinese population in Trinity County had dwindled to fewer than 2,000 people by 1880. Gold had become harder to find, and many had left to work on the railroad. By 1931, only 16 Chinese resided in the town.

Over years, many furnishings from the third Joss House were stolen. Local 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 to be preserved for all Californians to appreciate. Mr. Lee finally saw his dream fulfilled when the Joss House became a part of the California State Parks system in 1956.



*Offerings from worshippers*

## 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 is painted bright blue to replicate the color of the sky, a symbol of heaven to the Chinese. White lines resemble the tile work of similar temples in China. On the temple roof sit two Chow Win Dragon Fish, thought 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



**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.

and female deities. An altar table holds candles, incense sticks, oracle fortune sticks, wine cups, and pictures of immortals painted on 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 visit to pray and to place incense, candles, food, and paper money before the spirit houses and altars. Any worshipper overheard asking for such a thing as revenge on an enemy could be fined by the temple's attendant.

An interpretive museum tells the story of the Chinese Americans in California; displays feature such items as the handmade weapons from the Chinese War of 1854 and equipment used by Chinese miners.

### ACCESSIBLE FEATURES

Parking, the temple, and the museum are accessible, but the restrooms are not. Accessibility is continually improving. For updates, visit <http://access.parks.ca.gov>.

### PLEASE REMEMBER

- For current park days and hours of operation, call the park at (530) 623-5284.
- Temple tours leave on the hour from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. A nominal fee applies.
- State law prohibits removal of any natural, cultural, or historical feature.
- Only service dogs are permitted in the buildings. Pets must be on a six-foot maximum leash while on the grounds.

This park is supported in part through a nonprofit organization. For information, contact Weaverville Joss House Association P.O. Box 2608 • Weaverville, CA 96093-2608 (530) 623-5284

