

Chinese Religions in Contemporary Societies

EDITED BY JAMES MILLER

A B C  C L I O

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Contemporary Chinese American Religious Life

JONATHAN H. X. LEE

CHINESE RELIGIOUS LIFE comes in multiple expressions: it is ritualistically lively, adaptable, inventive and, overall, syncretistic. Scholars have traditionally defined and investigated Chinese religion in terms of the combined interaction among Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and popular religious myths and rituals. Their work, however, has tended to locate Chinese religions within the sphere of Chinese culture and history. It has tended to ignore the religious experience of Chinese diaspora communities, those culturally distinct populations outside the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and other states and territories where ethnic Chinese are either a majority population or a significant cultural force (for example, Singapore). Within the United States, Chinese Americans have created specific enclaves of culturally significant communities referred to as Chinatowns both in the past and today. The inhabitants of those communities point to the historical, social, political, linguistic, and economic diversity that complicates the Chinese American religious landscape.

In order to understand the religious life of Chinese American diaspora communities, it is important first of all to understand the distinctive features of these communities in a larger historical context. This broad historical context can be divided into three phases: first, the early political doctrine that specifically excluded Chinese immigration; second, the ideal of the United States as a melting pot; and third, the meaningful pluralism that is the heart of the new American religious landscape. This chapter seeks to explain how Chinese religious institutions and communities functioned in each of these

historical contexts. Secondly, this chapter offers two case studies, one from the early period and one from contemporary times, that reflect the changing boundaries of Chinese religious life on U.S. soil. Thirdly, the chapter surveys two emerging transnational Chinese religious organizations whose global structure is creating a new kind of religious community. Although these examples are primarily based on Chinese American religious temples and communities in California and secondarily in other parts of the United States, they all reflect wider phenomena in contemporary Chinese American religious life. The chapter concludes by giving consideration to the changing dynamics of Chinese religious life in contemporary diaspora communities.

Historical Context

The Early Period

Between 1848 and 1882, waves of Chinese immigrants came to California in search of gold. They came predominantly from the southern province of Guangdong. The Chinese pioneers began by establishing Chinatowns, rebuilding and re-creating a sense of traditional community. The majority of these immigrants were young men in their working prime, chosen by their families to journey to "Gold Mountain" (*Jinshan*; Cantonese: *Gam San*) in the hope of striking it rich and returning home after several years abroad. The discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in 1848 had evoked a deep gaze toward the West Coast. Caucasian tradesmen recited embellished stories of gold and prosperity in the United States in order to convince young Chinese men to travel across the Pacific Ocean, but their real motive was to trade in "Chinamen." The possibility of finding gold was more legendary than real for the Chinese miners: even though there was a lot of gold to mine, they faced stiff racial prejudice from Caucasian miners as well as from local and state governments. The best example of this was the establishment of the 1850 Foreign Miner's Tax, which was enforced mainly against Chinese, who often had to pay more than once.

San Francisco was a major port of entry for Chinese immigrants during the early period of the Gold Rush. In the later 1840s there were some 325 Chinese forty-niners; by 1851, 2,716; and by 1852, 20,026 (Takaki 1989, 80). In 1876, the Pacific Mail Steamship Company began regularly scheduled runs between Hong Kong and San Francisco. Between 1870 and 1883, an average

of 12,000 Chinese immigrants were arriving through the port of San Francisco each year. And by 1870 there were 63,000 Chinese living on U.S. soil—between 75 and 80 percent of them in California. Hence, in the Golden State there were many Chinese communities of varying sizes along the coast, from as far south as Baja and San Diego to as far north as Mendocino.

Life in the United States was arduous. Discriminatory immigration laws beginning with the Page Act of 1875 had affected the number of Chinese women who were eligible to immigrate, and as a result the early Chinese communities were composed mainly of bachelors. They were hit again with discriminatory laws that hindered their ability to establish a family when the state's antimiscegenation law extended in 1906 to include Chinese men. The pinnacle of discriminatory legislation, however, occurred in 1882, with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (extended in 1892 and again in 1904) prohibiting Chinese laborers from entering the United States and resulting in a large decrease in the Chinese immigrant population in the early twentieth century. This demographic decline resulted in the gradual disappearance of Chinatowns throughout the West Coast. For example, the Chinese communities in California towns such as Cambria, Riverside, Mendocino, and San Luis Obispo slowly disappeared as the remaining Chinese moved northward to San Francisco or southward toward Los Angeles—two cities with major Chinese centers and more possibilities for employment. Those years, however, witnessed an increasing number of Chinese American families, which resulted in a new generation of acculturated English-speaking Chinese Americans who grew up between the 1930s and 1940s.

Chinese exclusion was finally repealed with the passage of the 1943 and 1965 Immigration and Nationality Reform Acts, which lifted the anti-Chinese feature of U.S. immigration policy. The repeal of Chinese exclusion affected the Chinese American landscape substantially: the population increased from 106,334 in 1940 to more than 2.4 million in 2000, most of that number being recent immigrants. The last three decades have therefore witnessed a rich transformation in the underlying terrain of Chinese American religious communities.

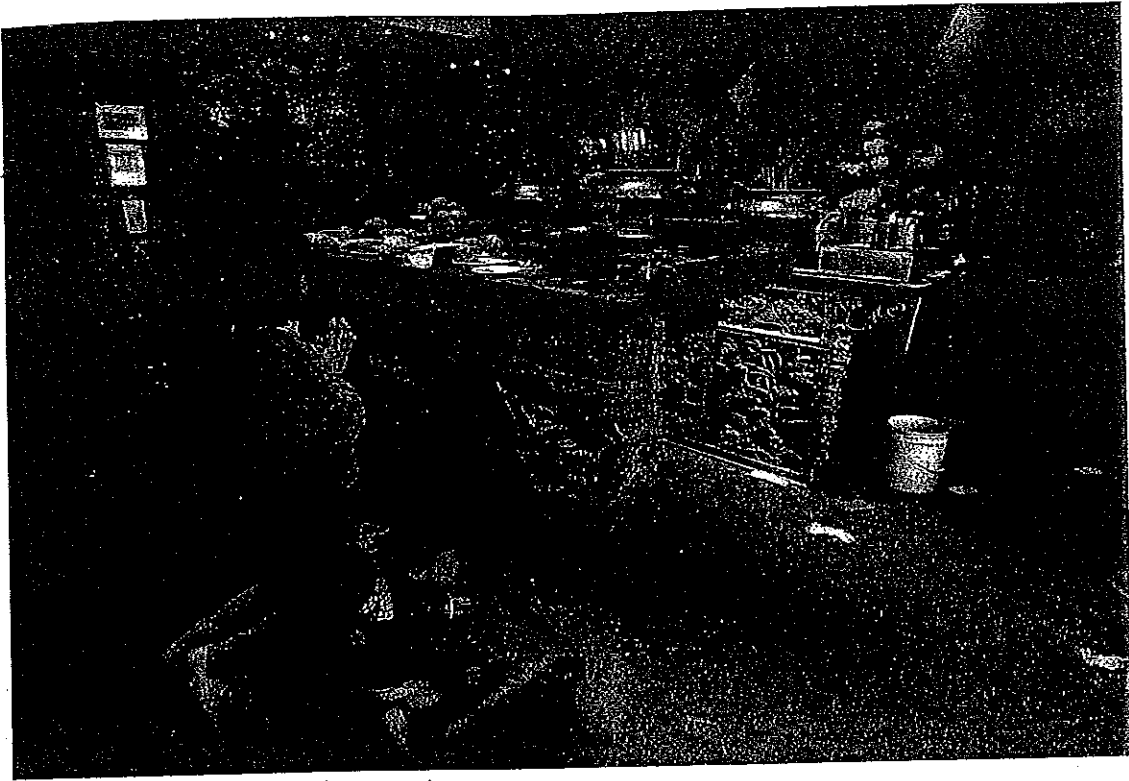
From "Melting Pot" to "Religious Pluralism"

The liberalization of immigration policy after 1965 paralleled the changing mainstream attitude and belief in U.S. culture. The initial American perception

of Chinese people was ambiguously positive: they were seen as diligent, clean, industrious, and endowed with the potential to become good citizens. But once economic competition in agriculture and gold mining increased, that attitude quickly shifted to one of exclusion. The first decade of the twentieth century had ushered in the great image of the melting pot, a process of assimilation by which diverse peoples from around the world gathered on U.S. soil and, over a period of time, acculturated themselves into mainstream American life. Chinese immigrants, however, did not melt into U.S. mainstream society smoothly. In terms of their religious practices, the first generation of Chinese Americans were creative in their attempts to “fit in.” That is well illustrated with the use of the term “church” instead of “temple” for their religious institutions. The historic Taoist Temple in Hanford, California, was officially the “Taoist Church” up until the late 1970s. Despite such attempts, however, Chinese immigrants found it difficult to assimilate. Because of their physical, cultural, and linguistic differences, mainstream U.S. society concluded that the Chinese were resisting assimilation. As a result, they were perceived as potentially dangerous and subversive to the American way of life.

The end of World War II ushered in the countercultural movements that began to question the normative vision of U.S. social life, and with it the expectation that immigrants would assimilate into mainstream society. The civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s not only expressed dissatisfaction with racist beliefs and public policies but also revealed a fundamental problem with the concept of assimilation. To the extent that the American way of life was normatively white and middle class, it was impossible for whole segments of the population ever to become fully “American.” The imagined consensus promoted by those who favored assimilation could be sustained only by excluding people with dark skin, non-European ancestries, and limited incomes—in particular, Asian immigrants. The civil rights movements not only demanded practical changes in public policy; they also demanded a transformation of U.S. national self-identity. They insisted that Americans recognize themselves to be a pluralistic people, that there were diverse and legitimate alternative ways of being American. This produced a pluralistic attitude toward American life, one that resembles a “salad bar”—indicating that Americans and American life come in a variety of styles, cultures, religions, languages, and so on.

Between 1882 and 1965, exclusionist attitudes gave way to the melting pot idea, which then gave way to the cultural pluralism of the 1980s. Since 1965



A family's prayers are sent to heaven with the scent of burning incense. Many sticks of incense are placed together in a burner at the Kong Chow Buddhist Temple in San Francisco's Chinatown. (Phil Schermeister/Corbis)

there has been a rejuvenation of Chinatown communities across the United States, especially in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and Houston. These regions have also experienced the formation of new Chinatowns in rural areas. In all of these areas, the formation of the new Chinatowns has occurred and continues to occur as a result of the continuous flow of Chinese emigrants from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and the Indo-Chinese from Southeast Asia. In these recent communities, temples and religious businesses have rapidly appeared on the new pluralistic religious landscape.

Contemporary Chinatown communities are now multigenerational, multinational, and heterogeneous. Chinese immigrants are creating and living in "culturally Chinese" communities outside of China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. It is possible for them to live without speaking English, to have continuity between the way they live their lives in the United States and the way

they lived their lives back home. The religious lives of the new Chinese American communities are therefore as diverse and complex as the communities in which they are located. This stands in direct contrast to the early homogeneous bachelor society, which did not reflect the intrinsic diversity in Chinese religious life. The following two case studies illustrate this extraordinary change in Chinese American religious life.

Early Period Case Study: The Temple of Kwan Tai

History of the Temple

In 1854, seven Chinese junks set sail for “Gold Mountain,” but only two made it to the California coast. One landed at Monterey Bay, the other on the Mendocino coast at Caspar Beach. Many of the Chinese immigrants who made their home along California’s coast introduced seaweed farming and abalone drying as commercial export industries. They gathered, dried, and exported seafood resources, including seaweed, kelp, and abalone, back to China. The historic Chinese community in Mendocino was one such community. As these coastal communities developed, the Chinese created a community by establishing homes, building restaurants and shops, and constructing religious institutions. Shortly after their arrival in Mendocino, the Chinese immigrants built a small cabin temple dedicated to Guandi (Kwan Tai), a deified general from the Three Kingdoms period (third century C.E.), regarded as a god of military affairs, literature, wealth, and business. By the 1860s, some 500 to 700 Chinese made Mendocino their home.

The Temple of Kwan Tai sits on a parcel of land at 45160 Albion Street in the historic district of Mendocino, facing the Pacific Ocean. It is perched on a south-facing hillside above Albion Street. This placement of the temple is consistent with the Chinese practice of geomancy (*fengshui*), according to which temples and large palatial buildings should always face south. The Temple of Kwan Tai is colloquially known as the Joss House. The word “joss” is believed to be an adaptation of the Portuguese word for god, *deos*. Hence, a temple where the Chinese venerate their gods became known as a “joss house.”

The exact date of the temple’s founding is unclear. The earliest written document of the temple’s history is a Sanborn Insurance Company map that dates it back to July 1883. However, based on the oral history of George Hee,



Loretta Hee McCoard, left, and her sister Lorraine Hee Chorley, right, look out the windows of Kwan Tai Temple in Mendocino, California. The temple, once used by the Chinese who built the railroads and chopped timber on California's north coast, is a monument to one family's devotion to tradition and the story of a vanished population. (Eric Risberg/AP Photo)

born in Mendocino in 1897, the temple dates back to 1854. Hee recounts that his grandfather, in combination with the other Chinese residents, constructed the temple when they purchased the property and built it with twelve dollars worth of virgin redwood. Successive members of the Hee family have held and preserved the temple since 1871, when the deed of the property was signed over to Lee Sing John. In 1979, the temple was registered as California Historical Landmark No. 927. A report written by the California state architect dates the construction to the early 1850s based on the materials used to build the temple, which supports the Hee family's estimate.

In 1995, members of the Hee family deeded the temple property to a newly established Temple of Kwan Tai, Inc., a nonprofit organization whose mission is to preserve and restore the historical landmark as a celebration of

Mendocino's community diversity. In addition, it will serve as a place in which to educate local schoolchildren and surrounding community members about the history and contributions of the Chinese in the United States. The nonprofit organization was established so that they would be able to solicit funds to support the restoration project. Before the establishment of the nonprofit organization, ownership of the temple's property was shared among six members of the Hee family.

In 1998–1999 the Temple of Kwan Tai received a thorough historic building assessment by architect Laura Culberson, who works for the architectural firm of Carey and Company of San Francisco. The assessment was partially funded by the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Fund of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Culberson's report provided the documentation and prospective plans for restoration that enabled the temple to secure restoration funds through the California Resources Agency. Culberson concluded her report with a statement on the significance of the Temple of Kwan Tai:

The Mendocino Joss House is an invaluable resource to the State of California. It is the only surviving physical document (made more significant by its continued use from the early 1850s), which retains its original integrity and marks the now mostly lost history of the Chinese in Mendocino. Mendocino was one of the few communities along the Pacific North coast that housed a substantial Chinese community. Although Mendocino's Chinatown burned in 1910, the knowledge of its existence and the cultural and historical relationship between the Joss House and the Chinese community are significant aspects of local and state history (Temple of Kwan Tai n.d.).

The architect's report, however, revealed that although the temple had remarkably survived for nearly 150 years, it was in serious need of stabilization and renovation. The foundations had to be supported, which involved raising the building, leveling it on steel support beams, digging new footings, and bringing the structure up to code. The exterior walls were removed temporarily to put in additional support and to place insulation between the interior and exterior walls. The exterior wall on the east side was replaced because the lumber was not salvageable. Additionally, the interior floor had to be replaced. The exterior walls are now newly painted in the original red with green trim. A plaque at the bottom of the stairs signals the temple as a California Historic Landmark.

Through the efforts of the Hee family, the temple trustees, Mendocino youth groups involved in the North Coast Rural Challenge Network, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and the California Coastal Resources Agency, the Temple of Kwan Tai was officially rededicated on October 13, 2001. The rededication ceremony included a parade from Little Lake Street to the temple, a Lion Dance, as well as *gong fu* (kung fu) and *taiji* (t'ai-chi) performances by the Chinese Redwood Empire Association of Santa Rosa. Lorraine Hee Chorley, the Temple of Kwan Tai director; Anthony VeerKamp, from the National Trust for Historic Preservation; Patty Campbell, the 4th District supervisor; and David Colfax, the 5th District supervisor, all addressed the people in attendance. In addition, Buddhist nuns from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas at Ukiah performed a Buddhist blessing ritual.

Members of the Hee family packaged their own Kwan Tai Temple Tea, made of a special black Oolong tea from Shui Xian. Each box of tea carries a decorative label commemorating the temple's rededication. Proceeds from the sale of the Kwan Tai Temple Tea are used to support the temple museum. The restoration efforts did not go unnoticed. On October 10, 2002, at the National Preservation Conference in Cleveland, Ohio, the Temple of Kwan Tai was awarded the prestigious National Preservation Honor Award.

Description of the Temple

Leading up to the entrance is a building-wide staircase painted red with green trim. The exterior wallboards are also painted red with green trim. Before the restoration the exterior walls were weathered to an almost natural red-brown color. From the base of the staircase one can see a red board with gold Chinese characters flanking the top of the green entrance door; it reads (from right to left) "Wu di miao," meaning "Temple of the Military God."

Upon entering the temple, one sees that it is a small but cozy room. The main altar dedicated to Guandi is located against the north wall, directly in front of the main entrance. The altar is crafted of locally milled tongue-and-groove and plain boards with simple cornice features, similar to the two narrow secondary altar pedestals in the front. The altar is painted green, while the secondary pedestals have been painted red with faded green-blue and gold highlights. The altar is elaborately decorated with aged yellow drapery, peacock feathers, and a red painted signboard over the top and vertical memorial boards with large gold characters.

The original image of Guandi accompanied by his comrades Liu Bei and Zhang Fei was made of fabric. It was an old, unframed, incense-sooted canvas about two-and-a-half by five feet in size, the focal feature of the altar. The image, fragile with age, was unfortunately damaged during the restoration process, when both the front and rear doors were accidentally left open and a sudden gust of wind took its toll on the antique painting. However, on a trip to San Francisco's Chinatown, Lorraine Hee Chorley and Loretta Hee McCoard happened on an exact replica of the original Guandi painting. The image currently hanging on the main shrine has a black background, and the images of Guandi, Liu Bei, and Zhang Fei are made of mother-of-pearl, seashells, and colored glass.

On the left side of the main altar there is a display of ceremonial flags, along with antique Chinese drums and baskets. There are several green boards inscribed with gold Chinese characters that are mounted on the walls of the temple. Local Chinese residents, either as a way to initiate a prayer or as a way to return thanks, donated these boards to the temple. There is a little room in the rear of the temple. Historically, it may have been the sleeping quarters for the temple-keeper, but today it has been transformed into an office. There are awards from the city and state recognizing the Temple of Kwan Tai's cultural and historical significance. There are also a miniature lion costume, swords decorating the walls, an air conditioner, a bookshelf, and a desk. When I visited the Temple of Kwan Tai on May 24, 2003, I noticed two abalone shells with offerings of flowers, coins, and seashells, in addition to a Chinese rice bowl with cloves of garlic. Loretta Hee McCoard said that some members of the local community had placed them there because they understand the religious nature of the temple.

The life and history of the Temple of Kwan Tai, in addition to the Chinese community of Mendocino, reflect larger cultural patterns. Lorraine and Loretta Hee McCoard's diligent work in restoring the Temple of Kwan Tai in the memory of their father reflects a deep appreciation for history, community, and tradition. The Hee sisters recall memories of their childhood in which the little bright-red cabin was a reminder of how different they were from the rest of their community. Today, it is the opposite; it is this difference that is celebrated, embraced, and remembered. The historic landmark status of the temple makes it a permanent part of Chinese American religious history. On receiving the National Trust for Historic Preservation's National Preservation Honor Award on October 10, 2002, Lorraine Hee Chorley said:

We have kept a promise for four generations, and it is our ancestors who deserve the praise for their pioneer spirits. The Temple has withstood years of turmoil, change and peace. The restoration, rehabilitation ensures that its story will be told for years to come. The Temple of Kwan Tai stands as a reminder to us all that this country was built on diversity and cooperation.

Contemporary Period Case Study: Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A.

On March 14, 1986, the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. was established in San Francisco's Chinatown on 562 Grant Avenue and officially registered as a non-profit religious institution. This temple was established as a branch of the Chaotian Temple located in Beigang, Taiwan. In the mid-1990s the temple relocated to 30 Beckett Street. The temple's stated mission is to advocate the virtues of Mazu (Ma-tsu), uphold the Buddhist dharma, teach the principles of human kindness and relations, and promote social morality.

The establishment of the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. bears witness to the changing patterns of Chinese immigration that were brought about by the end of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The 1965 Immigration Act abolished the provision, first established in 1924 and retained in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, that favored immigrants of Western European origin. Furthermore, amendments in 1981 were directed toward increasing Chinese immigration—including a separate quota of 20,000 for Taiwan, which Taiwan had previously shared with China and Hong Kong. The subsequent series of amendments in 1990, collectively referred to as the Immigration Act of 1990, provided for an overall increase in worldwide immigration and increased the allocation for both family-related and employment-related immigration. It also created a separate basis by which "diversity immigrants"—that is, nationals of countries previously under-represented since 1965, could enter the United States. It was that series of laws and amendments that enabled Chinese immigrants from Taiwan to enter the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Like their earlier compatriots, they began to establish communities while negotiating life as new immigrant Americans. Their religion played a central role in their resettlement and the formation of their new ethnic-cultural identity.

Ritual Tradition and Veneration

Mazu's official imperial title is the Empress of Heaven (Tianhou). The Empress of Heaven is popularly venerated in Taiwan as Mazu, an affectionate kinship term denoting "Granny." However, in mainland China and Hong Kong she is venerated by her formal title, Tianhou (or in Cantonese as Tin Hau). Historically, the Empress of Heaven has also been worshiped as a sea goddess. It was this role that made her ideal for early Chinese immigrants: their journey to Gold Mountain included an arduous three-week journey across the Pacific Ocean and adjustment to a strange land. Upon arriving safely and alive they returned thanks by constructing a temple to her. The first Tianhou temple was, not surprisingly, founded in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1852. In the age of airplanes, Tianhou's role as sea goddess has given way to other roles: protector of women and children, hearer of prayers, healer of illnesses, giver of prosperity, and protector of family and community.

The biggest festival at Mazu temples takes place on her birthday. In traditional Chinese settings, Mazu's birthday celebrations feature huge bonfires, firecrackers, big banquets, and continuous religious rituals performed in the temple by Daoist masters, as well as performances of Chinese operas to entertain the goddess. This type of traditional celebration lasts for several days and is still practiced in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Fujian at major Tianhou or Mazu temples. On Sunday, May 5, 2002, I attended Mazu's birthday celebration at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. When I arrived at the temple at ten o'clock, it was already packed with worshipers. Temple volunteers were busily preparing a delicious vegetarian meal for all visitors. By noon there was an invocation and offering ritual for "American Mazu" (*Meiguo Mazu*). The temple also gave "good luck" noodles to everyone who visited the temple on that day.

The smaller-scale celebration of Mazu's birthday at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. did not include the traditional "celestial inspection tour," in which the goddess views the state of her immediate realm and extends her protection to the community. Instead, the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. takes advantage of the Chinese New Year Parade, two to three months before her actual birthday, by participating in it to provide the goddess with an opportunity to make her celestial inspection tour. During the U.S. version of Mazu's inspection tour, she views the state of the world and extends her protection to the community, thus mediating between Chinese and non-Chinese culture while expanding the parameters of her religious sovereignty. One of the main functions of

Mazu's tour is to "unify" the community. Mazu is able to accomplish this because as a symbol of Chinese religious culture, she reminds both the Chinese and non-Chinese viewers of something that is distinctively Chinese.

Chinese New Year is also celebrated in the Sacramento Valley town of Marysville with a festival honoring Bok Kai, a Chinese water god. The Mazu from the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. is taken out of the temple and driven over to Marysville to participate in the annual Bok Kai Temple festival, held the first weekend of every March. Chinese immigrants built the Bok Kai Temple in 1879 because Bok Kai protects his devotees from floods and provides them with bountiful water for farming. The highlight of the annual festival is the Bok Kai Parade. This parade, produced annually for more than a hundred years, is the oldest continuing parade in California. Paul G. Chace, an anthropologist with an interest in Chinese American temples, suggests that despite its beginnings as a yearly celebration in southern Chinese villages, over time the parade's 121 years in Marysville have de-emphasized the religious nature of the parade. Instead, two U.S. threads have risen to the fore: commercialism, and coping with ethnic and cultural diversity (Chace 1992, 3-6, 588-605).

Chace explains the current nonreligiousness of the parade with the concept of "interpretive restraint," which means the purposeful withholding of symbolic meaning for traditional ritual performance. With interpretive restraints, the rites of Chinese popular religions could serve to celebrate the larger civic community and to promote interethnic and intercultural community relations. The theory of interpretive restraint thus suggests that Chinese Americans have politely concealed or downplayed the original reasons for the parade, thus allowing it to take on a new emphasis in the United States (*ibid.*, 3-6).

Mazu's participation in the San Francisco Chinese New Year and Bok Kai parades can be interpreted in different ways. To many non-Chinese viewers of the parades, Mazu and Bok Kai are symbols of Chinese cultural heritage. The carriage carrying Mazu, her two attendants walking in front of her, and the loud firecrackers exploding in the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade are distinctive aspects of the contemporary reality of U.S. cultural pluralism, comparable perhaps to dragon dances or young Chinese American children dressed in traditional Chinese clothes. To the Marysville community, who are mostly second-, third-, and fourth-generation Chinese Americans, the traditional religious meaning of these parades may also be downplayed in favor of civil, cultural symbolism.

The Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. also plays a role in emphasizing the cultural value of these activities, and it actively invites visitors to participate in their celebrations as a form of cultural exchange. For example, during the Chinese New Year Parade, they warmly welcomed non-Chinese volunteers as flag carriers, horn blowers, and incense carriers. They even let volunteers wear the costumes of the two generals at Mazu's side. After the parade, they invited all the volunteers to participate in the ritual return of Mazu to her celestial throne, followed by a meal at which a special vegetarian soup was served. Lastly, they invited everyone to revisit the temple on any occasion. Some of the volunteers freely mentioned that they were not devotees, but that they were excited about volunteering to show their support for the Chinese American community, as well as to have some fun by participating in the parade.

To the immigrant Chinese Americans who join with Mazu on the parades, however, these activities are full of religious meaning. The firecrackers, for instance, are not simply aspects of Chinese heritage but fulfill an important religious function by symbolically scaring away demons as she inspects her precinct. Mazu's participation in the parade also foreshadows the celestial inspection tour that she will later undertake on her birthday. Interviews confirm the continuing religious meaning for some participants. During the 2003 Chinese New Year Parade, a seventy-four-year-old Taiwanese American woman shared her reason for participating in the parade: ten years ago, when she was diagnosed with a terminal heart condition, her son went to the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A., petitioning Mazu to heal his mother. Immediately after his prayer, her mistaken diagnosis was corrected. It turned out that she had a thyroid problem, not a heart condition. Hence, she received proper medical care and medication. As a way to return thanks to Mazu, the mother and son have been attending every parade for the last ten years.

The contemporary U.S. version of Mazu's inspection tour serves both religious and secular functions. Each year during the parade, Mazu becomes an honored symbol of traditional Chinese culture both for Chinese Americans and for non-Chinese viewers. It would seem that a certain level of "interpretive restraint," to use Chace's term, concerning this activity has already begun. But even though for many people the role of Chinese deities in the parade is viewed purely in terms of cultural heritage, the continuing religious meaning of Mazu's participation in the Chinese New Year Parade has not disappeared—at least for recent Chinese American immigrants.

Creating Common Culture?

Mazu has been venerated for a thousand years by a considerable number of Chinese communities. Many Chinese Americans in the United States have venerated her for nearly 150 years. The development of new Mazu temples has related to the new and more complex composition of Chinese immigrants entering the United States, with an increasing percentage coming from Taiwan. New temples have been established in the 1990s in Los Angeles as well as in Houston. In Taiwan, Mazu is still considered to be the island's patron goddess, especially for Taiwanese whose ancestors arrived before World War II.

Vivian-Lee Nyitray posed several questions concerning Mazu's area of sovereignty. She states that

the multiple and powerful forces of modernization and shifting world populations have redrawn the boundaries of Tianhou/Mazu's concern. What remains to be seen is the final map of the goddess' sovereignty: Will it be so localized that Chinese people worship Chinese Mazu, Taiwanese people worship Taiwanese Mazu, and North American devotees worship a Canadian or American or Mexican Mazu? Or will Tianhou/Mazu's sovereignty shift from the identity politics of nation-states and ethnic origins to a conceptual realm of common culture? (Nyitray 2000, 176)

Mazu's history provides insights into the question of her connection to issues of nationality and ethnicity. In Taiwan, Mazu had historically functioned as a symbol uniting the various Taiwanese ethnic groups—Hakka, Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, and other Fujianese “Taiwanese”—and distinguishing them from those “mainlanders” who fled to Taiwan in the wake of the communist victory in 1949 (ibid., 172). Earlier in Chinese history, the Empress of Heaven had also served to unite the people, and was promoted by state authorities as a symbol of imperial pacification and “approved Chinese culture” during periods of chaotic dynastic transition. Recently, similar co-optation programs have been initiated by mainland China in its efforts to reunify officially with Taiwan. Centuries later and a world away in San Francisco, will she once again redraw the boundaries of her religious sovereignty to include the various Chinese American communities?

This question also arises when we consider the various localized versions of Mazu. As Nyitray asks, will North American devotees worship a Canadian

or American or Mexican Mazu? It seems likely that the answer to this question will be yes. First of all, Mazu is a territorial goddess: the territorial nature of her religious functions is evident in her celestial inspection tour, in which she views the state of the specific area over which she has religious authority. Secondly, there already is an American Mazu: she is enshrined at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. and is referred to as American Mazu (*Meiguo Mazu*) in all religious rituals. Moreover, during the Chinese New Year Parade and during her birthday celebration, her American appellation is emphasized, clearly differentiating her from the Mazu in Beigang, Taiwan. What then is the relationship between the Beigang Mazu and the American Mazu? In the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. the relationship between the two is symbolized spatially: Beigang Mazu's honorary shrine is placed in front of American Mazu's main shrine. Moreover, the statue of Mazu housed in the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. comes directly from the Beigang temple, but nevertheless she is addressed by her own American name. Clearly, American Mazu is a relative—perhaps a sister or a daughter—of the original Beigang Mazu. The two are closely connected, but each has her own identity. This subtle religious difference parallels the difference in needs and concerns between the Chinese American and Chinese Taiwanese communities.

There is, therefore, the potential for American Mazu to function as a unifying symbol of Chinese identity for the various ethnic Chinese American groups in the United States. More questions about the connection between religious, cultural, and ethnic identity will form as the composition of the Chinese American communities continues to change in light of the newer Chinese immigration from the Republic of China on Taiwan, in addition to the plethora of ethnic Chinese coming from Southeast Asia.

From my participant-observations at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A., I have noticed that the majority of worshipers are immigrant Chinese Americans. I have rarely seen second- or third-generation Chinese Americans visiting or worshipping at the temple, other than children accompanying their parents. Fenggang Yang has noted this same generational pattern in the Chinese American religious communities in Houston. Yang says, "[T]he continuity of these temples in their current form will depend on continual influx of immigrants more than on the maturing second and later generations" of Chinese Americans (Yang 2002, 80–81). Currently, all the workers at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. are recent Chinese immigrants who do not speak English. The question that

arises, therefore, is what role, if any, Mazu will play in unifying the multiple generations of Chinese Americans.

The fact that most of Mazu's devotees are immigrants does not necessarily mean that her symbolic role in Chinese American culture will disappear in future generations. Possibly she will become identified with the Chinese aspect of Chinese American life and will continue to remind Chinese Americans of their Chinese heritage. Since 1992, the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. has received several first- and second-place community service awards for its participation in the San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade. These awards would suggest that Mazu is already active in her role as Chinese cultural ambassador. Mazu is therefore a carrier of traditional Chinese culture, a cultural broker bridging Chinese and non-Chinese cultures, and a cultural entrepreneur in her role in redefining and reinventing a new Chinese identity in the United States. From my observations of the large groups of tourists guided by a Chinese American tour guide at the Ma-Tsu Temple U.S.A., the identification of Mazu with that which is Chinese is key.

The Globalization of Chinese Religious Life in America

The local and global dimensions of Chinese-America continue to experience rapid transformation sociologically, politically, economically, linguistically, culturally, and religiously. This has resulted in unprecedented demographic changes and fragmentation along class, language, and religious lines among the various ethnic Chinese communities in the United States. The accelerated process of globalization, fueled in no small measure by rapid advances in telecommunications, transportation, and Internet technology—as well as by growing transnational financial, commercial, and cultural-religious ties—has helped cement connections and forge new relationships that have transformed the various ethnic Chinese communities across national boundaries and in ways previously not imagined.

Today's Chinese American religious organizations, institutions, and communities operate across traditional borders and boundaries. Consequently, border and boundary crossings not only imply change and mobility but also the potential for the transformation of prevailing social, cultural, economic, political, and religious practices. This section will provide an introductory examination of two emerging global and transnational Chinese religious

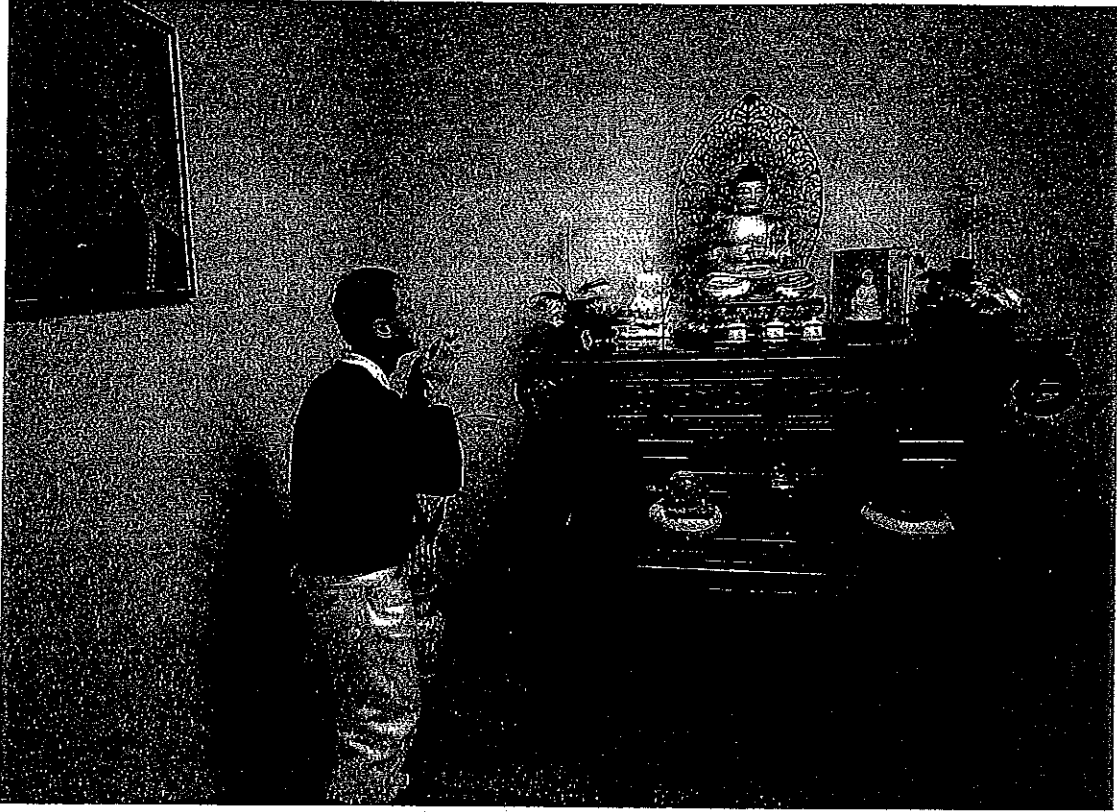
communities that are redefining Chinese-America: the Buddhist Tzu Chi Compassion Relief Society and the Indo-Chinese Teo Chew Association.

Tzu Chi Compassion Relief Society

Tzu Chi is a worldwide Buddhist social outreach network founded in Taiwan in 1966 by Dharma Master Zhengyan (see Chapter 9 for more information on its founder). Today it has centers throughout Europe, Latin America, Southeast Asia, and North America. The headquarters of Tzu Chi in America is located in Monrovia, California, within Los Angeles proper in a predominantly Chinese immigrant community sometimes referred to as “Little Taipei.” In the nearby city of Hacienda sits Hsi Lai Temple, the largest Buddhist temple in the United States, nestled on the side of a hill. Tzu Chi has established itself within the U.S. religious landscape through the promotion of social services. Typical of these social services is the Tzu Chi Free Clinic, established in 1993 under the leadership of Dharma Master Zhengyan. The clinic is a general health care facility providing medical assistance to financially disadvantaged residents of Los Angeles. It incorporates traditional Chinese healing and Buddhist philosophies of compassion to serve clients without regard to age, sex, race, class, or religious affiliation.

Tzu Chi clearly uses social service as a way of establishing community: recent Chinese immigrants donate to Tzu Chi and seek its assistance. But it is also a means for creating legitimacy for Chinese Buddhism. New immigrants recognize that they are up against false public perceptions and misunderstandings, so part of Tzu Chi’s work lies in correcting their own image and establishing themselves in the public eye as capable of performing social services. Social services are valued as a U.S. ideal, and by engaging in altruistic activities the religious community will foster an image of being “good Americans,” doing the things that good Americans do. The work of Tzu Chi is also redefining the form of religious activities for Chinese immigrant communities as they adapt their religious views to incorporate service into their religious activities.

The work of Tzu Chi also raises the question of the role of religion in the public sphere. Tzu Chi has refused to accept government funding, fearing that their services to those most in need might be compromised as a result of limitations or restrictions that could accompany such funds. For example, accepting government funding for social services might restrict them from



Tzu Chi volunteer Kane Chang bows at a Buddhist altar at the Tzu Chi Free Clinic in Alhambra, California. Tzu Chi is an international, nonprofit charitable organization with four major service areas: charitable services, medical services, education, and cultural services. Tzu Chi means giving with compassion. At left is a photo of Dharma Master Zhengyan, who founded Tzu Chi in Taiwan in 1966. (Damian Dovarganes/AP Photo)

serving residents who do not have proper legal documentation, which they compassionately refuse to do since a large percentage of their relief effort in urban areas like Los Angeles revolves around immigrant Americans.

Besides the free clinic and medical outreach, Tzu Chi participates in educational programs such as the Everyone Reads program. This literacy program organizes volunteers who meet monthly to read with an elementary school student. In addition, Tzu Chi celebrates U.S. holidays by donating Thanksgiving baskets and meals, Christmas gifts, and so on to needy local residents. Tzu Chi is also actively involved in new interfaith meeting and community events

as ways of establishing U.S. roots. Chinese religious institutions have always served the community, but unlike earlier Chinese religious centers, Tzu Chi recognizes that it is located more broadly in a multiethnic, multireligious setting. Tzu Chi takes care to serve this larger community, as well as the Chinese immigrant community, through its social services.

Teo Chew Association

The Teo Chew Association is one of several Indo-Chinese associations whose members are Chinese from Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos that immigrated to the United States as refugees following the Vietnam War. In 1975 more than 130,000 refugees entered the United States from those countries as communist governments were established in them. In 1977, the U.S. Congress passed a law allowing Southeast Asians to become permanent residents upon request. Among the Southeast Asian refugees were thousands of Indo-Chinese immigrants.

In the 1990s the Teo Chew Association appeared in urban Chinatowns across the country, in such places as New York City, San Francisco, Seattle, Houston, Austin, Chicago, Honolulu, Boston, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. Teo Chew is the word in the southern Min dialect for the city of Chaozhou in Guangdong province, China. In Cantonese it is known as Chiu Chow. Teo Chow culture is known for its unique food and music, and distinctive Teo Chow subcultures can be found in Hong Kong and throughout Southeast Asia. Most members of the U.S. Teo Chow Association are Indo-Chinese immigrants who can trace their roots to Chaozhou. The Los Angeles Teo Chew Association was founded in 1982 by Chinese Cambodian immigrants as a social network and community center to foster solidarity among its members. It provides financial services and assists new immigrants in finding homes and referrals for social and medical services. It is also a place for worshipping the red-faced Guandi, the Chinese god of war, literature, wealth, and social harmony. The temple hall is located in a one-story building that was once a commercial bank. The front room is the main worship hall, while the back portion is a large community hall for banquets and meetings. Like the Elderly Indo-Chinese Association, the Teo Chew Association provides an annual scholarship to children of members who maintain an overall GPA of 3.5 or better. The Teo Chew Association is now a global association with centers throughout Southeast Asia, Europe, and North and South America. In 2002

during its twentieth anniversary, Governor Gray Davis extended a warm congratulations to the Los Angeles Teo Chew Association for "its commitment to the Asian American community" and "investment in the future of our state."

The Teo Chew Association and temple in Los Angeles are open every day and welcome visitors and participants of various backgrounds. Their printed material is usually in Chinese and Vietnamese, but sometimes English. Like traditional Chinese temples, the Teo Chew Association does not have a formal membership system, because all are welcome to worship there. However, the social, educational, and financial services are provided to those who are considered "official" members only. On any given day, one may find a dozen or so old-timers whiling their time away in the company of their friends, reading a Chinese newspaper, or sipping a cup of coffee. Teo Chew, like Tzu Chi, has integrated social service and civil responsibility into its operations in the United States. However, unlike Tzu Chi, they do not extend their social services beyond the immediate immigrant Indo-Chinese boundary.

Conclusion

The life of Chinese religions and religious communities in the United States has waxed and waned with shifting mainstream attitudes, from exclusion to assimilation to cultural pluralism. It has also correlated with immigration policies and the increasing connections forged by transnational networks of religious communities. In the past the pressure to assimilate influenced Chinese American religious life and experience, but the current situation is dramatically different. The Kwan Tai Temple exemplifies a period of Chinese American religious life and community that reflects exclusion and assimilation. Its historical landmark status demarcates it as a piece of Americana: a Chinese American museum and temple. Although the Chinese American community of Mendocino has greatly declined in size, the little historic temple has gained increased religious and cultural significance. The Kwan Tai Temple resembles Confucian temples in East Asia, a "Temple of Culture" (*wen miao*) that preserves Chinese American religious culture and history.

Contemporary Chinese communities in the United States have creatively negotiated the extremes of both assimilation and pluralism in terms of their religious life. They find themselves operating in an area that crosses community boundaries, religio-cultural boundaries, and national boundaries. Adapting to the principle of social and community service, Tzu Chi has been

able to situate itself as an important religious-cultural nonprofit institution in the United States and throughout the world. Similarly, Indo-Chinese associations like Teo Chew, though directed toward the needs of member immigrants, have adopted the same principles of social and community service. Both Tzu Chi and the Teo Chew Association cross ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries. The Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. has also creatively negotiated traditional religious duties while creating new rituals and traditions.

Chinese American religious life and community come in various shapes, sizes, and imaginations. Traditional assimilation is no longer seen as viable, necessary, possible, or ideal. The changes in religious communities have influenced Chinese American identity, boundaries, and borders and will continue to do so. Geographical boundaries no longer inform solely citizenship, nationality, and identity, and Chinese identities in contemporary transnational and increasingly global communities are less bounded by distinct territorial boundaries, becoming defined more in terms of cultural heritage. The life of Chinese religions in contemporary U.S. society is being maintained and constructed in the Chinese American diaspora both apart from and within the so-called American mainstream. Contemporary Chinese religious life in the American diaspora crosses cultural, religious, social, economic, and national boundaries. It requires creative and imaginative investigation.

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