3.VI.8.d-i **Chinese: temple**

The vast majority of the Chinese immigrants to the United States before 1965 emigrated from 24 districts of Guangdong, China. They brought their local syncretistic religious practices and beliefs, which combined elements from Buddhism, Taoism, local cults and ancestral worship. A temple in the United States was commonly dedicated to one primary deity with others arranged as an entourage. A variety of gods, goddesses, Bodhisattvas, immortals, mythical and historical figures, and supernatural beings could be honoured in a given temple. The three most popular deities were the god of war (Kuan Kung), who valued valour, honour, fidelity, and learning, the goddess of mercy (Kuan Yin) who offered mercy, compassion, and progeny, and the Empress of heaven (Tien-hou) who had special powers to aid fishermen and sea voyagers.

Temples occupied structures which followed local construction practices. Simple wood-framed structures with pitched roofs, wood siding and front porches were common in small rural towns. ‘Fireproof’ brick bearing wall construction was the norm in turn-of-the-century densely built up urban settings and in towns rebuilt after disastrous fires.

A temple in a multi-storey building sought the top floor, which symbolically translated the traditional Chinese axial hierarchy culminating at the end into a vertical hierarchy of floors. The symmetrical facade commonly had a balcony with a central doorway and flanking windows. Shaped cornices, tiled roofs and roof ornaments (imported from China), and green, red and yellow trim might enliven an exterior.

Usually, a temple was composed of a main hall, which was symmetrically arranged around a central axis ending in the primary shrine. Worship was individual. On entering, a person passed the sculpted or painted door guards, and went around the ‘false door’ screen which kept out evil spirits. Directly in front of the main shrine stood one or more altar tables with a row of ritual containers including an incense burner in which devotees could light and place their incense offerings to call forth the deities. Deities could partake of the spiritual essence of food offerings. To the side there would be a drum and gong for summoning the spirits, and an incinerator for burning paper offerings. After a prayer, the worshipper could seek advice from the deities with the aid of crescent-shaped divining blocks, and a jar of bamboo divination sticks found on either an altar or an offering table.

The main shrine at the end of the central axis contained one or more idols. The primary deity occupied the central position raised above the others who would be symmetrically disposed in rows to either side. Lesser deities could be placed in a front row below the row of primary deities. In modest temples a painting or printed image of the deities sufficed. Spirits and supernatural beings without images were represented by inscribed tablets. The shrine could be decorated with carved and gilded panels imported from south China depicting mythical scenes. Secondary shrines could be added along the sides of the hall. A utility room served as an office, meeting room, storage area, and sometimes the attendant’s residence. It occupied any available space attached to the main hall.

The last two decades of the 19th century represented the heyday for the temples. The Exclusion Acts (beginning in 1882) reduced Chinese immigration to a trickle until 1965, and life in a Western industrial state, Christian proselytizing, and American schooling of the young eroded traditional religious beliefs. New immigration from Asia since 1965 has led to a modest increased use of the surviving temples, and to a recent boom in Buddhist temple construction modelled on contemporary East Asian prototypes.

**References**

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