

Chinese Gods in New American Homes? Material Religion, Rituals, and Community

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Abstract

Over time and through the process of “culture work,” local communities construct a meaningful identity for themselves using information drawn from history and received interpretation; the community then continues to narrate this identity for themselves and outsiders. The authors examine two case studies, both revealing different aspects of culture work conditioned by time, changing ideologies of American society, and material resources. First, in the case of the historic Chinese immigrant community of Marysville, California, cultural and linguistic barriers can produce misinterpretations that become naturalized. Drawing primarily on the material evidence of a northern California Chinese American temple, built in 1854, and its enshrined images, the authors reveal the ways in which culture work has created a god, “Bok Kai,” and an edifice, “the Bok Kai Temple,” that are contrary to Chinese tradition, may typify Chinese American culture work, and are uniquely significant to the local context of Marysville. Second, the authors examine an emerging Taiwanese American goddess community in San Francisco’s Chinatown founded in 1986. The goddess, venerated as Mazu among Taiwanese devotees is style Tianhou, the Empress of Heaven. In the American context, she is represented as Meiguo Mazu (American Mazu). This is a deliberate localized representation of a Chinese deity that conforms to ritual traditions and representation. The material religion at the Ma-tsu Temple U.S.A. reveals the complexity of this representation in terms of ritual status, transnational connection to Taiwan, and by extension Mainland China’s Meizhou, the birthplace of Mazu cult. In both communities, material religion normalizes new representations of Chinese deities, purposefully or involuntarily thereby normalizing new ritual traditions and adaptations, and communities.