

## **The Lytton Joss House**

Rev. Master Kōten

The joss house that once stood in Lytton was built by the Chinese community before the railway came through - that is, sometime before 1881. It was located on lot 2, Block 13, near the present Braeden Lodge and was a frame structure 18ft by 27ft consisting of a main shrine hall probably with a guest room, caretaker's room and a room for community meetings as was the custom.

"Joss house" is Chinese pidgin English for "god house" and refers to a local village place of worship combining the features of a community hall, memorial for the dead and a temple. Such places were dedicated to folk heroes, historical figures and local protector gods as well as Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist deities and were constructed wherever Chinese people settled.

A joss house was considered to be a gateway or "portal to heaven" where people could go to be comforted, to pray for the dead and for loved ones far away, to seek medical advice, pray for children or just to be in contact with China, the home country, in the midst of a foreign land.

The Lytton joss house was specifically dedicated to healing and enshrined Kwan yin - goddess of mercy, Shen Nong - patron of herbal medicine and Zhu Rong – protector against fire, disease and anger. The building faced towards the river as is usual in places dedicated to Kwan yin.

Lytton would have seemed a very auspicious place to the early Chinese who came here. With the meeting of the rivers just like the two universal principles of Yin and Yang, dark and light, mixing and melding together and the protection of Botanie Mountain to the north as well as the nearby Botanie Valley full of healing plants, Lytton was an ideal place to construct a temple dedicated to healing.

When the joss house was built Lytton had a substantial Chinatown with stores, laundry, rooming houses and a cemetery across the river near the ferry. There was also an herbal medicine shop and Chinese doctor who would have dispensed medicine to all sections of the Lytton population.

Over the years the Chinese population decreased, especially after the railway construction was completed and with fewer visitors to the joss house it would have eventually seemed to be deserted. This was probably how a Mr. Taverna, who lived next door, was able to purchase the parcel of land at lot 2, Block 13 from the Crown in 1928.

The Chinese community at Lytton as well as the Consul-General of the Republic of China in Vancouver protested the sale of the land but to no avail. Chinese people came from all over British Columbia to visit the joss house and pay their last respects.

The joss house was turned into a chicken shed and storage building by the new owner.

What became of the statues and furnishings remains one of the most enduring mysteries of Lytton.

On Sunday, June 19th, 2011, one hundred and thirty years from the founding of the joss house and eighty-three years after its closing, a Kwan yin ceremony for all the dead and for the peace and healing of the entire Lytton area was performed on the joss house site by the monks of Lions Gate Buddhist Priory from Botanie Valley.

We hope to make this an annual event. The 2012 ceremony will take place at the joss house site on Sunday, June 17th at 10:00am. All are welcome.