

The Teochew Diaspora and their Temple in Singapore: An Architectural and Social History of Wak Hai Cheng Bio

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This Research Working Paper comprises of 3 working chapters of a book manuscript entitled *The Teochew Diaspora and their Temple in Singapore*.

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This Research Working Paper does not include illustrations but their captions have been provided.

Research Working Paper Synopsis

The Teochew Diaspora and their Temple in Singapore: An Architectural and Social History of Wak Hai Cheng Bio

The Teochew Diaspora and their Temple in Singapore offers a historical account of early 19th century Teochew settlers and the establishment of their temple, Wak Hai Cheng Bio (粵海清廟). It is the oldest surviving Teochew temple in Singapore. The temple has a twin shrine typology and is one of the very few traditional Teochew architecture extant in Singapore and Southeast Asia that has remain relatively unaltered since the mid-1890s. Throughout its long history, the temple has served as an important place of worship for devotees, especially those of Teochew descent. Apart from being a religious institution, the temple also took on numerous other social roles in the past. While some of these roles are no longer relevant today, the temple's significance has broadened in recent years as it takes on multiple new roles, that of a site of heritage, a tourist attraction, a National Monument and an important repository of a wide range of traditional crafts. The book will show how the temple's social role has evolved over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and shed more light on the ownership of the temple, particularly the early history of Ngee Ann Kongsi and its predecessors. It is hoped that this will answer questions regarding the origins and evolution of pan-Teochew "public" organisations such as the Ngee Ann Kongsi.

Unlike most historic Chinese temples in Singapore, the temple does not have any stele that records its history and other official written accounts are also limited. While there is no lack of secondary sources providing narratives on the temple's early history, these writings are often without references, which leave them open to question, and in other instances,

the narratives provide conflicting accounts. In the attempt to bring to light a more accurate account of the temple's history that is substantiated by historical evidence, a wide range of primary sources, including but not limited to maps, plans, land transactions, legal suits records, and other historical documents and artefacts were consulted and studied in the research of this book.

Apart from its social history, particular attention is also paid to the temple's architecture and the restoration process. The archival research into the temple's history was supplemented by the opportunity for a close examination of the temple's physical fabric, which was made possible by the author's participation as the architectural conservation consultant in its recent restoration in 2010–2014. As is the case for many historic traditional Chinese buildings in Singapore, the identities of their designers and builders are largely unknown. While mandatory submission of building plans requires an architect to sign off on the plans, it remains unclear if the architect was the actual designer of these traditional Chinese buildings. Additionally, the general consensus was that the building materials used were imported entirely from China. This however, is questionable as upon close examination of the temple's physical fabric during its recent restoration, it was revealed that many of the building materials used in fact originated from Southeast Asia. There is also a general lack of understanding of historical construction techniques in Singapore and Southeast Asia and this has important implications on the proper restoration techniques employed. In-depth knowledge of historical construction techniques is crucial for good restoration of a historic building. Without which, the quality of the restoration suffers and the historic building risks losing original fabric and character.

With a focus on both textual and physical evidence, the publication of *The Teochew Diaspora and their Temple in Singapore*, aims to provide a more holistic understanding of the temple and its social and architectural histories, as well as to afford new insights and answers to questions pertaining to

Chinese architecture in Singapore in general and on the history of early Teochew organizations in Singapore. The book will also address the issues regarding historical building materials and construction techniques, reinforcing the idea that historical research is an important component of any restoration process and the case of the Wak Hai Cheng Bio provides an example of architectural conservation practice in Asia.