

No. 158 TELOK AYER STREET

In Keeping with Tradition



Owner:

Singapore Hokien Huay Kuan

Architect:

James Ferrie & Partners

Engineer:

KTP Consultants Pte Ltd

Contractor:

East Art Design & Engineering Pte Ltd

This project involved the restoration of the Thian Hock Keng Temple, a national monument, and the construction of two new linkways between the Middle and Rear Halls.

The architecture of the temple, built in 1842, is an exceptionally fine example consistent with Minan and other forms from the southern coastal regions of China. It is



"Swallow tail" roof ridge

typified by a complex timber post and beam structure with decorative features inside and out. These include "swallow tail" roof ridge forms embellished with spirals, dragons and fire pearls. Internally it is decorated with intricate carvings finished with gold leaf and lacquer paint. Artwork depicting gods and legends are present throughout.

Prior to restoration, damage from termite was extensive. All elements of the temple's structure and features were fully catalogued and documents for the restoration process drawn up. Artisans and craftsmen engaged from China employed traditional skills to restore the richly detailed features.

The "Top-Down" approach and the 3-R principle of maximum

retention, sensitive restoration and careful repair were adopted. The elements were retained and restored using a variety of traditional methods, techniques and skills. All damaged parts not salvageable were removed and replaced using scarfing techniques. During the course of this, all exposed areas were protected.

The traditional configuration of interior spaces and courtyards of the temple was kept in accordance with the original architecture.

Over the course of restoration, important discoveries were made. These included a scroll inscribed with the imperial edict of Emperor Guang Xu of the Qing Dynasty and the dragon design on the main beam of the Middle Hall, which was subsequently restored to its original state. The weathered and damaged spirals were also restored and painted to their original colours using a lacquer paste made from ground minerals and glazes.

In this way, an important symbol of our cultural heritage was restored in keeping with tradition.



Aerial view of Minan-style roofscape



End gable wall with plaster relief moulding



Plaster relief scroll panel above window opening restored



Courtyards, rear hall and wings fully restored



Exposed timber beams with intricately carved cantilevered brackets



Intricately carved granite columns and decorative features retained and restored



Calligraphy plaque presented by Emperor Guang Xu



Dragon design found on the main beam restored



Original bell retained



Carved timber hanging post

Thian Hock Keng Temple is one of Singapore's oldest Temples. Earliest known records show that it was first established by immigrants from Fujian Province around 1820's as simple shrine or "*joss house*". It was located at the landing place where the immigrants would have first put ashore shortly after Sir Stamford Raffles established Singapore as a trading post. At this time it fronted the shoreline at Telok Ayer Basin before land had been reclaimed from the sea.

The shrine was dedicated to Ma Zu Po; The Goddess of the Sea or Mazu for short. As the immigrants would have had a potentially hazardous voyage across the China Sea, the newly arrived showed their gratitude to Mazu for a safe passage. Those making the return trip would have done likewise to insure a safe return.

Mazu lived on the coast near the Island of Meizhou in Fujian. She was gifted with great powers; of healing the sick and that of guiding seafarers to safety when the sea conditions were hazardous. Though her life was quite short (AD. 960 - 987), her exploits were extensive and were recognized by The Emperor.

After her death she was revered as a goddess or saint and particularly by those whose livelihood depended on the sea and those embarking on a voyage. She was said to have appeared in dreams to coastal dwellers and instructed them to build temples so that they could receive blessing for safe voyages.

This is evident from the many temples including Thian Hock Keng dedicated to her that can be found throughout the region from Fujian, along the coast of Southern China, Indochina and the Malacca Strait including Penang and Lumut. This was the area of sea plied by the Fujian Seafarers. These temples all feature close similarities in architectural style and the deities represented within including idols of Mazu herself as the principle.

The importance of Mazu's blessings for safe passage from China to Singapore cannot be under estimated as in those days the voyage was made in small sailing junks across seas beset with dangerous reefs and typhoons. Safe passages as well as safe arrival of the cargos and trade upon which commerce depended featured significantly to the welfare of all the immigrants from Southern China. Thus the clan leaders made it their business to build temples dedicated to Mazu.

The effort to firmly establish a proper structure for the Thian Hock Keng was lead by the Malacca born pioneer and philanthropist Tan Tock Seng. He, together with other donors from the Hokien Huay Kuan contributed a building fund for the first permanent and proper building commenced in 1839 and was completed in 1842. This original structure is largely the form of that which has now undergone this contemporary restoration programme. Granite plaques located at the sides of the entrance hall list the donors and sums contributed.

The adjacent structures of Chung Wen Pagoda, Chong Hock Pavilion and Keng Teck Huay were built in 1849, 1913 and 1847 respectively. Though connected, these were separate developments and not part of Thian Hock Keng Temple proper.

In 1906 an upgrading programme was implemented. During this many of "western styled" features were added including: the wrought iron gate – imported from Glasgow, Scotland; the courtyard tiling and the dado tiling. Though these elements are not in any way traditional of the original Fujian styles employed, they do possess a historical significance as, along with Peranakan elements found in the rear hall, imply reference to Singapore's international status. The contemporary restoration recognizes these features and effort has been made throughout to distinguish and retain such from haphazard adhoc repair works of no noteworthy significance.

In 1907 in recognition of the stature of Thian Hock Keng Temple, the Qing dynasty Emperor, Guang Xu, presented a calligraphy plaque with the characters meaning "*THE WAVES ARE CALM IN THE SOUTH SEA*". Reference of the temple's significance to overcoming hazardous sea voyages is again emphasized. The plaque, with gold embellishment restored, is hung above the deity of Mazu. It also held a sealed tubular vessel that was alleged to contain a scroll, inscribed the original characters of this imperial edict.

There had been some debate as to whether the scroll was genuine or even existed as the Emperor was very young and the time and was imprisoned shortly after the scroll was dispatched.

When the vessel was opened for the first time during this contemporary restoration, not only was the scroll there but in good condition. Scholars have since confirmed its authenticity. The scroll is now permanently exhibited in the National Museum in Singapore.

Thian Hock Keng was gazetted under the Preservation Order on 28th June 1973 as a National Monument. Though some minor repair works were carried out over the years, it was not until this current programme that a full scale restoration has been conducted.