

Conserving a Straits Chinese Hearse

The paper is based on a large wooden artifact which was conserved for the National Museum of Singapore's History Gallery. The artifact is funerary hearse of Tan Jiak Kim (1859-1917), one of the pioneers of Singapore. He was a Straits Chinese merchant and a community leader. The paper will give a brief account of the Straits Chinese community, the significance of the hearse and the complex issues encountered during conservation treatment.

The elaborately-carved hearse is a rare Singapore artefact and it represents a period of reform in Straits Chinese funerary practices in the early twentieth century. Its carvings bear distinct evidence of European and Chinese styles. The hearse was acquired in the 1970's as separate parts with no specific document or image of how the parts should be re-constituted. Putting the component parts together was one of the challenges of the conservation treatment.

The objective of the treatment was to retain its historical and aesthetic integrity by restoring it to the extent that it can bear its structural load when fully constituted. Conservation treatment started in mid-2005 with seventeen components of which thirteen were in complete form. Poor storage had resulted in accumulative dirt and metal corrosion. There were numerous broken carvings, severe structural damages, missing structures and termite infestation.

Treatment was carried out in several stages. Thirty to forty per cent of the structure was either damaged or missing. The missing parts included two important roof structures and a wheel. All these are important support structures. Identifying suitable skilled craftsmen to fabricate replacement parts proved another challenge. The specifications then needed to be carefully and precisely communicated with the craftsmen and builders.

Author: Alvin Tee
Objects Conservation Section
Heritage Conservation Centre
32-Jurong Port Road
Singapore 619104
Fax: +65 6267 2614
Email: alvin_tee@nhb.gov.sg