Every stone inscription tells a story

Granite tablets and other relics provide insights into early Chinese community

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A Taoist professor Kenneth Dean wanted to see where he first stepped into Thian Hock Keng Temple on Telok Ayer Street four years ago were two inscribed granite slabs.

There are other treasures at the 173-year-old landmark but the tablets - each 2.46m tall and 1.13m wide and erected on opposite sides inside the main entrance - are especially precious to him.

They provide rich insights into Singapore's early Chinese community and also details of the cost of construction, the benefactors and how much they gave.

Professor Dean, 56, a Chinese culture expert from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, was enthralled, and it set him on a quest for other fact-filled inscriptions in Chinese temples, schools and other places, assisted by his local religion scholar, Dr Hwee Guan Thye, 46.

"After stepping into Thian Hock Keng Temple and having read the inscriptions on the two stone tablets in 2009, I found the place an incredible, rich field for study but not enough work had been done," he told The Sunday Times last week.

For example, the inscriptions of about 400 words on one tablet give a colourful description of the Chinese community here in the early 19th century, with details of the physical landscape and business activities of the day. These details are not found anywhere else, said Professor Dean, also a visiting research professor at the Asia Research Institute and the Department of Chinese Studies at the National University of Singapore (NUS).

The inscriptions also offer a glimpse of the important links that Singapore Chinese community leaders and traders had with other Chinese communities in the region and China at the time.

The other tablet, with details of the temple's construction costs and donations received, shows the transparency in accounting in the temple's governance and management practices, even in those early days, Professor Dean said.

From Thian Hock Keng, he went to Telok Ayer Street's Nanyang Technological University, where he got a handout from the university's library on a few hundred other Taoist and Buddhist temples, clan and guild associations, schools and hospitals all over Singapore in search of similar stone tablets, wooden plaques and even temple boxes, bells and other objects which had Chinese characters inscribed or carved on them and which might give clues to the past.

After four years of research, they are putting their findings into a book in Chinese and English titled Chinese Epigraphy Of Singapore: 1819-1911.

It contains 1,265 inscriptions found on stones, wood, bronze, brass, plaques, paper and even candlesticks. The more than 1,500-page tome will be published by NUS Press and is expected to be out by the end of the year.

Professor Dean, who spoke about their research when he delivered this year's Wu Teh Yau Memorial Lecture at the National Library Building yesterday, said the material uncovered can help in a process of rewriting Singapore's history, especially about the Chinese community.

There were many new revelations, including some about the ritual practices and customs of the time, and other information about pioneer Chinese community leaders.

An interesting nugget from a tablet to Chong Weng Ge, a temple next to Thian Hock Keng, tells how devoutes would burn used papers with words on them as a ritual to show their respect for writing and the god of literature.

Another discovery is that prominent Chinese leader and opium merchant Cheang Hong Lim (1825-1860), after whom Hong Lim Green is named, was an agent for the imperial Qing government.

There is more information on the demise of Tan Tock Seng (famous for his care for the sick) and how he got the British authorities to help. This is recorded on a tablet preserved at the hospital named after him. The community leader and philanthropist was also one of the key people behind Thian Hock Keng Temple.

Professor Dean's lecture, titled The Story Of The Stones, which was attended by more than 200 academicians, students and NUS alumni members, was held as part of events to mark the 60th anniversary of NUS Department of Chinese Studies.

The professor's interest in Singapore Chinese temples stems from his background and love of Chinese literature. He was born in Holland and raised in Taiwan, where his American diplomat father was director of the American Institute. He had his early education in Taiwan, Hong Kong and China.

"The first language I spoke was actually Chinese," said Professor Dean, who is effectively bilingual in Chinese and English.

He obtained his bachelor's degree in Chinese Literature from Brown University in the United States, and his postgraduate degrees from Stanford University, including his doctorate based on his research into Taoist practices in China's Fujian province.

"I like Chinese literature for its history, culture and philosophy and it led me to my interest in Taoism," he said.

He chose Singapore for his current research on Chinese temples because the country has some of the finest temples in Asia, such as Thian Hock Keng, Shuang Lin Temple in Toa Payoh and Changdong Temple of the Calm Sea at Philip Street.

There will be a second volume of his research with Dr Hwee, to be published next year.

"I hope Singapore temples and scholars, especially the young, will make good use of the material as they are now available in English to re-examine their past as they move into the future," he said.