

Research on Seal Collection of the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware and Seal Carving in Lingnan

Final Report

The project was launched to conduct the first dedicated research of the seals collection of the Museum of Tea Ware (MT) donated by the K.S. Lo Foundation. Dr. Lau Ho-man Samantha was responsible for planning and conducting the research, with Dr. Tang Man-leung Raymond coordinating and supervising the project and Miss Lau Wai-kuen Caddie and the staff of the Museum of Tea Ware assisting them in carrying out the work. This one-year project has been divided into two phases, from May 2017 to May 2018, with the aim of carrying out a comprehensive study of the seals and their seal carvers and to build an inclusive database of the collection for research, publishing and curatorial purposes in the future. In addition, the focus on Lingnan's seal carving and seal carvers should enhance the understanding of the seal collection's importance and value regarding the development of seal carving in the Lingnan area. The project has been completed on schedule, and the research outcome and this report have clearly shown that all projected targets have been achieved.

1. First phase—Tracing the origins of the seal collection and organising information

The first phase of research can be categorised into three main areas: oral history interviews, revision of the data of MT's seals and compilation of seal carver biographies. The revision of the data of the seal collection began in May 2017 in preparation of the interviews and the compilation of seal carver biographies. Meanwhile, the work of designing the schedule, contacting the people involved in the project and determining the priority of each task was finished in July 2017. For details and outcomes, see the interim report submitted on 29 December, 2017.

As for the oral history interviews, the six interviews were conducted between July and November 2017. Ms. Wong Yin-fong Anita, Ms. To Yung-ting, Mr. Tang Cheong-shing, Mr. Huen Siu-chan, Dr. Chan Yung and Mr. Ou Dawei were interviewed in this order, with the aim to research the origins and provenance of the seal collection first and subsequently get a clearer picture of the development of seal carving in the Lingnan area. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into six written documents, which add up to more than 100,000 words in Chinese. The transcripts have been verified by the interviewees and archived. Apart from oral accounts, the interviewees provided us with a number of documents, and lent us seal books and rare publications to take photos. All material and photos have been saved in digital versions.

Through the process of revising the data of the seal collection, the 663 entries comprising 677 seals (accession numbers from C1994.0091 to C1994.0753) have been organised and studied comprehensively. Firstly, the seal characters and side inscriptions were checked and revised, and more textual information was added to the collection database in order to finish the basic tasks of segmenting the text, verifying the seals and interpreting the characters. Subsequently, we could proceed to validate

the details of the seals' carvers and production years, which provide explanations about the background and the historical context of their provenance. Such information helped with the research and the compilation of biographies of the seal carvers. At the same time, we followed up on the oral interviews to trace the origins of the collection. In the end, after the research results have been revised and organised, there are nearly 10,000 pieces of information, including texts and pictures; stored as electronic records, allowing for easy search and use.

The purpose behind the compilation of biographies is to study the 319 seal carvers affiliated with MT's seal collection. Following the compilation guideline laid down at the beginning of the research, we gathered information from more than 50 titles of books and an online professional platform for seal carving. We then further revised and verified the data to complete 279 seal carver biographies comprised of nearly 60,000 words. Based on the book released by MT (*Engraved Calligraphy: Selected Seals Donated by the K.S. Lo Foundation*), the research outcome is richly rewarding, taking into account the ten-fold increase in word count for the biographies. Both the seal carver biographies and the relevant primary information have been saved in digital and physical formats.

2. Second phase—Summarising the results of the research with resources and findings

Based on the research and findings from the first phase, the second phase began on 2 January, 2018. We arranged and verified the materials further to conduct topical research, especially on seal carving in Lingnan (181 collection entries comprising 185 seals and 59 seal carvers). Two articles dedicated to this topic have been written in order to summarise and reveal the results of this research.

Dr. Tang Man-leung Raymond has written an article amounting to nearly 8,000 words in Chinese, entitled "A Study on the Origins and Characteristics of the Seal Collection of the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware". The article investigates the origins of MT's seal collection and explains the provenance and history of part of the collection, before separating the seals into groups based on the traditions they belong to and their styles, calling attention to the characteristics and the significance of the seal collection, with a special focus on the items relating to seal carving in Lingnan. The abstract is as follows:

This article reveals the important findings of the "Research on the Seal Collection of the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware and Seal Carving in Lingnan". By sorting out documents and archived information and through interviews and oral history accounts, the origins of the seal collection were reorganised, and its significance to the study of the Lingnan seal carving identified. Ms. Wong Yin-fong Anita, current Curator for the University Museum and Art Gallery, The University of Hong Kong, assisted in reorganising the process of Dr. Lo donating the seals with relevant archived information, providing a few valuable clues and links that pointed to the origins of the seal collection, namely Tsi Ku Chai Company Ltd., Pokart Company Ltd. and Dr. Li Tsoo-yiu. Ms. To Yung-ting, who worked at Tsi Ku Chai at the time, described the company's background and the market of seal stones from the

1960s to the 1990s, and confirmed that the seals Dr. Lo bought from Tsi Ku Chai constituted 169 seal carving entries of MT's collection. Meanwhile, Mr. Tang Cheong-shing's accounts of his work experience and the seal imprints he provided confirmed the correlation between the Pokart Company Ltd. and Mr. Wang Dashan (1933–1993), and ascertained that 313 seal carving entries of MT's collection refer to the seals that Dr. Lo acquired from Mr. Wang. Having scrutinised the contents of the seals and the relevant documents, the close relation between the seals in Dr. Lo's collection and the collection of Dr. Li Tsoo-yiu, a medical doctor and seal collector active between the 1950s and 1960s, was revealed. In the end, the development process of MT's 663 seal carving entries (677 seals in total) has been consolidated, and the origins of 482 entries have been confirmed.

Three characteristics could be induced based on how Dr. Lo had collected his seals and the items in his collection. First, his focus was not on the quality of the stone or the materials used. Secondly, his priority was not to collect ancient seals. Thirdly, he had no particular preference for certain artists or schools. He was looking for a comprehensive collection that included as many works as possible of different seal carvers, seal styles and seal schools since the Ming and Qing periods. It is obvious that when Dr. Lo was building this seal collection, it was not based on personal preference, as he had intended to develop this collection for a museum from the start, so that items of the collection could be used for exhibitions, research and education purposes.

This seal collection sheds light on the seal carver communities in Anhui and Zhejiang during the Qing dynasty, and their counterparts in the areas of Shanghai, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Beijing during the late Qing and early Republican periods, with the seals serving as important evidence for a general historical account and the origins of seal styles of the Lingnan region. There are more than 180 seals in the collection, by 59 seal carvers (including 4 unknown carvers that require more verification) who had certain connections with the regions of Guangdong and Hong Kong from the mid-Qing dynasty through to the 20th century. Roughly three mainstreams of the art of Lingnan seals can be distinguished: 1.) The Guangdong School characterised by an intense literati's spirit; 2.) a branch of seal carving deeply influenced by the Zhe School; 3.) the tradition of the School of Yi Mountain started by Huang Shiling (1849–1906). Such a rich and diverse collection of seals offers more than a linear historical account, and reflects a web-like cultural network. Furthermore, if this seal collection is studied alongside the seal carving in the collection of the Hong Kong Museum of Art, the legacy of the study of seal carving could be extended to cover contemporary arts.

To conclude Dr. Tang's article, this research has not only preliminarily reconstructed the origins of the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware seal collection, but also illustrated the vision of Dr. Lo at the time when he put together this collection, as well as his selfless contribution to the Museum.

Besides, Dr. S Ho-man Samantha has written "Highlights of the Development of Seal Carving in Hong Kong over the Past 150 Years", an article consisting of more than 10,000 words in Chinese. Focusing on the study of seal carving in Hong Kong, her article discusses the culture and the geographical

conditions of developing seal carving in the city by analysing and collating the materials from the first phase of research and referencing other academic publications, and reaffirms the important role Hong Kong has played in the development of seal carving in the Lingnan area and even in China. The abstract is as follows:

Since the beginning of the 20th century, seal carvers and epigraphers have fled to Hong Kong or travelled between the then British colony and Guangdong to escape war. Gradually, a seal community formed in Hong Kong, and they were the bedrock. However, there are no publications dedicated to the history of seal carving, and very few researchers in this field of study in Hong Kong. The publications about seal carving in Hong Kong are widely scattered and thinly spread. Seen from the perspective of scholars studying Guangdong culture, the seal carvers of Hong Kong and their works are touched on only when Guangdong seal carving is discussed.

In fact, Hong Kong occupies an important place in the history of Lingnan seal carving. Dr. Lau's article provides an overview of Hong Kong seal carving, including its history and development. Using representative examples of seal carvers active in the local seal community, it creates focal points for discussing the origin of the seal community and its development, anecdotes of seal carvers, relevant documents and research materials of various topics, in the hope of getting a better understanding of the Hong Kong seal community.

The article also explores how Hong Kong has inherited the legacy of Lingnan seal carving, highlighting the influence of different stages, which are set out according to the historical evolution and the characteristics of seals. It draws on examples to illustrate the uniqueness of Hong Kong seal carving, regarding preservation of cultural heritage, seal carvers' craftsmanship, and their practices and activities, such as teaching, publishing and forming associations. It traces the networking of Hong Kong seal carving back to the Lingnan tradition dominated by Huang Shiling, whose students and style have found a place, grown and even become pioneers for seal carving in Hong Kong.

To sum up, the article states that there is considerable urgency to conduct research on Hong Kong seal carving. Despite the fact that little importance is attached to the study of seal carving in Hong Kong, there are exceptionally favourable conditions for its development. In addition to the works of seal carving that follow the Lingnan tradition, research materials can be found in abundance in both public and private collection. By continuing our predecessors' research work and at the same time making good use of those materials, the gaps in the study of seal carving in Hong Kong can be filled, and the future study of seal carving on a national level can be supplemented by the indispensable Lingnan seal carving.

The value and significance of the "Research on Seal Collection of the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware and Seal Carving in Lingnan" has been amply demonstrated, as seen from the collation and examination of the history of seal carving in Hong Kong, the systematic organisation of the information

of seals in Hong Kong, the collection and use of first-hand materials for the study of seal carving and the compilation of biographies of Guangdong and Hong Kong seal carvers. Those are not only significant outcomes that can be studied and compared, but also mark an important milestone in the study of seals locally, and will help to construct the history of Hong Kong seal carving.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ms. Wong Yin-fong Anita, Ms. To Yung-ting, Mr. Tang Cheong-shing, Mr. Huen Siu-chan, Dr. Chan Yung and Mr. Ou Dawei, for their contribution in providing oral history accounts and precious documents for this research project.

The use of the research output will be expanded by the Hong Kong Museum of Art / the Flagstaff House Museum of Tea Ware to reach a wider audience.