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Architectural Philosophy in Thien Ie Kong Temple

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ABSTRACT

Thien Ie Kong Temple in Samarinda is a cultural heritage site that embodies the philosophical and spiritual values of the Chinese community. This study aims to explore the architectural philosophy applied in the temple's design, focusing on the implementation of traditional Chinese cosmological concepts such as Yin-Yang, the Five Elements (Wu Xing), and feng shui principles. The research methods include direct observation, architectural analysis, and a review of relevant literature. The findings reveal that the layout, orientation, and design elements of the temple are meticulously crafted to harmonize the relationship between humans, nature, and spiritual forces. The surrounding mountains and rivers symbolize the balance of Yin-Yang, while the choice of materials, colors, and decorative symbolism reflects the Five Elements cycle. Thien Ie Kong Temple serves not only as a place of worship but also as a philosophical representation of the harmonious relationship between humanity and the cosmos. This study highlights the importance of preserving temple architecture as part of the cultural and spiritual identity of the community.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Samarinda, the capital of East Kalimantan Province, is a city located on the banks of the Mahakam River, one of Indonesia's longest rivers. With a long history of trade and water transportation, Samarinda has become a center of economic growth and diverse culture in Kalimantan. In addition to the diversity of indigenous Kalimantan tribes, such as the Dayak and Kutai, Samarinda is also home to various ethnic groups who arrived as the city developed, including the Chinese.

The Chinese ethnic group in Samarinda, most of whom adhere to Confucianism, has contributed significantly to the city's social and cultural dynamics. This community maintains its traditions and beliefs through various institutions and buildings that serve as centers of their spiritual life. One iconic building that reflects Confucian values and beliefs is the Thien Ie Kong Temple. This temple is not only a place of worship, but also a symbol of cultural and spiritual integration, reflecting the harmony between humans, nature, and divine power within traditional Chinese architectural philosophy.

By studying the architecture of the Thien Ie Kong Temple, we can explore how the building's elements reflect Confucian symbolism and how it plays a role in connecting the community with their ancestral heritage.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to uncover how the building's elements reflect traditional Chinese architectural philosophy, particularly in creating a harmonious sacred space. By analyzing the symbolism contained in each architectural detail, this study will examine how this building serves as a medium of communication between humans and divine powers. Furthermore, this study will reveal how the temple's architecture shapes the identity of the Chinese community in Samarinda and strengthens their ties to their ancestral heritage. This study is expected to provide new contributions to the field of Chinese architectural history, religion, and culture in Indonesia, as well as enrich our understanding of symbolic meaning in the built environment.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative descriptive method by analyzing and explaining data obtained from the field. The research process will be carried out in several stages, namely:

1. Conducting observations on objects by direct observation.
2. Conducting interviews with administrators or related parties at the Thien Ie Kong Temple.
3. The third stage involves analyzing data obtained from observations and interviews, followed by drawing conclusions based on relevant theories and supported by a review of related literature, including books and journal articles.

4. DATA AND ANALYSIS OF THIEN IE KONG TEMPLE

In Chinese tradition, a temple is a combination of spiritual values, beliefs, and culture that reflects humanity's relationship with the universe, ancestors, and gods and goddesses. Temples serve as places of worship, reflection, and the embodiment of cosmic harmony. The following are the main elements that illustrate the philosophy of a temple:

4.1. Cosmological Concept

The concept of cosmology in Chinese tradition reflects a philosophical view of the origins, structure, and relationships between the universe, humans, and spiritual forces. In the context of Chinese temples, this concept forms the basis for the design, function, and spiritual role of these buildings.

1. Yin-Yang

Yin-Yang is one of the main principles in Chinese cosmology that emphasizes harmony and balance between two opposing but complementary forces or energies. Yin: Symbolizes the feminine, passive, dark, cold, and gentle. Yin is often associated with night, the moon, water, and tranquility. Yang: Symbolizes the masculine, active, bright, hot, and strong. Yang is associated with day, the sun, fire, and movement. In temple buildings, its application is found in statues.



Figure 1. Application of the yin-yang symbol in the area of statues depicting deities.

Source: Ronald, 2024

The yin-yang concept is also applied to the placement of the Thien le Kong Temple in Samarinda, which is situated between mountains (symbolizing Yin energy) and the Mahakam River (symbolizing Yang energy). The location is surrounded by mountains or hills that are relatively close together, with the temple facing directly towards the river. Mountains are often associated with Yin energy, which is passive, stable, and protective, and spiritually seen as having a deep connection with heaven and the gods, creating a peaceful atmosphere. In contrast, the river symbolizes Yang energy, which is active, dynamic, and flowing. In traditional beliefs, water is seen as a bringer of fortune and good fortune, as its movement reflects the positive flow of Qi.



Figure 2. The position of the temple that defines yin and yang
Source: Google Earth, 2024

2. Xing or Five Elements

The concept of the Five Elements (Wu Xing)—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—plays a fundamental role in the design of Chinese temples. These elements are applied not only symbolically but also practically in the selection of materials, colors, structures, and spatial arrangements to create harmony that supports the spiritual and aesthetic functions of the temple.

a. Wood (木 - Mu)

In the temple buildings, almost all of them use wooden materials that were brought directly by the Chinese community when they migrated to East Kalimantan.

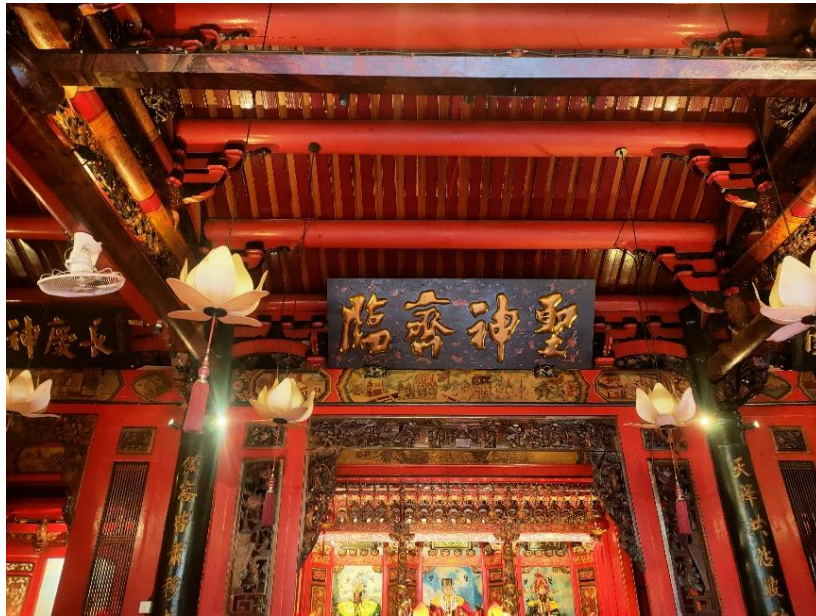


Figure 3. Application of wood elements in temple buildings

Source: Ronald, 2024

b. Fire (火 - Huo)

The red flame symbolizes courage and good fortune. The application of the fire element can also be seen on the roof of the temple, with its towering roof design, with its curved edges resembling flames rising to the sky.

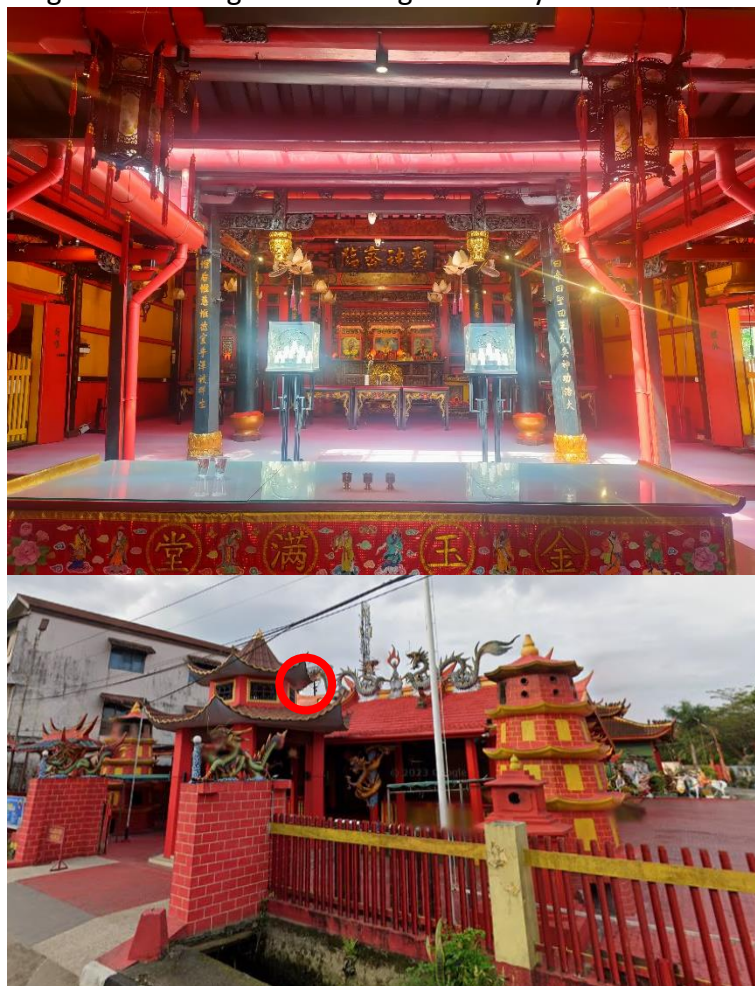


Figure 4. The application of red and a curved roof at the ends on the temple building.

Source: Ronald, 2024

c. Land (土 - Tu)

Earth symbolizes stability, protection, and connection to the earth. The earth depicted is colored yellow or gold. In temple buildings, it is used in prayer areas.



Figure 5. Application of yellow or gold in the prayer altar area
Source: Ronald, 2024

d. Metal (金 - Jin)

Metal Symbolizes strength, justice and purity. Metal ornaments used on bells, statues, and carvings, symbolize spiritual power. There is a bell placed in the temple which aims to make the bell ring during rituals or prayers, creating a resonance which is thought to cleanse negative energy.



Figure 6. Bell on a temple building
Source: Ronald, 2024

e. Water (水 - Shui)

Water symbolizes flexibility, life, and balance. The temple's position facing the Mahakam River is intended to capture the positive Qi flow from the water.

4.2. Respect for Ancestors and Gods

Honoring ancestors and deities in Taoist, Confucian, and Mahayana Buddhist traditions in Chinese temples aims to maintain harmonious relationships between humans, ancestors, and divine beings. This practice is not simply worship, but also reflects a more complex relationship between humans and ancestors, as seen in the Confucian traditions of China and Korea, where ancestral rituals remain an important part of family and social life (HU, 2022). In Korea, although only a small minority officially identify as Confucians, many continue to practice ancestral rites, indicating that this tradition is still alive and influential (Kim et al., 2022). In China, ancestor veneration practices are related to family formation, such as early marriage and preference for sons, indicating that these traditions are still relevant in contemporary demographic and cultural contexts (Hu & Tian, 2018). This ritual also reflects the synergy between various beliefs, where elements from various religious traditions can complement each other and enrich the spiritual practices of the community.



Figure 7. Statue of Ma Co or Tian Shang Sheng Mu (Goddess of the Sea)

Source: Ronald, 2024



Figure 8. Statue of Kwan Im (Goddess of Mercy and Forgiveness)

Source: Ronald, 2024

4.3. Philosophy of Life

Chinese temples teach the principles of simplicity, hard work, and social responsibility through the teachings of the revered deities, such as honesty, loyalty, and wisdom. These values are reflected in Chinese philosophy and culture, expressed through the temple's function not only as a place of worship but also as a social center connecting the community with broader moral values. Temples serve as reminders of the importance of social integration and collective responsibility in everyday life.

Furthermore, reliefs, statues, or paintings within temples often contain moral stories intended to inspire visitors. These elements serve not only as decoration but also as educational tools, conveying moral and ethical messages to the community. Thus, temples become places where visitors can reflect on life's values and gain inspiration for a better life (Cangianto, 2021).

4.4. Architectural Symbolism

In traditional Chinese architecture, gates, or paifang, symbolize the gateway between the mortal and spiritual worlds. Paifang not only serve as monuments and landmarks, but also carry rich cultural connotations, reflecting the ideologies and values of the feudal ruling class of the time (Wang & Duan, 2018). In the context of vernacular architecture, gates also function as elements that facilitate communication and interaction with the community, as well as being a symbol of protection and a boundary between private and public spaces (Dabu & Balaci, 2023). The symbolism of this gate shows how architectural elements can function as a bridge between the material and spiritual worlds, as well as a reflection of prevailing social and cultural values.

Arched roofs in traditional architecture are often seen as symbols of protection from negative energy and as a form of divine protection. This element serves not only an aesthetic function but also a spiritual one, reflecting the human desire for divine protection (Namwad et al., 2023). In addition, statues and carvings often found in traditional architecture contain symbols of protection, good fortune, and moral values. For example, in Chinese architecture,

stone lion statues are often used as symbols of protection and good fortune, demonstrating harmony with traditional architectural elements (Wei, 2024). This symbolism enriches the artistic and cultural value of the building, making it more than just a physical structure, but also an expression of the spiritual and moral aspirations of the community.



Gambar 1. Penerapan Gerbang dan Atap Yang Melengkung Pada Ujung Atap
Sumber: Ronald, 2024

5. CONCLUSION

The Thien le Kong Temple in Samarinda represents traditional Chinese architectural philosophy, integrating the concepts of Yin-Yang cosmology, the Five Elements (Wu Xing), and Feng Shui principles. The temple's architectural elements are designed to create harmony between humans, nature, and spiritual forces. Its strategic location, surrounded by mountains and rivers, symbolizes the Yin-Yang balance, with the mountains symbolizing static energy (Yin) and the rivers symbolizing dynamic energy (Yang). Furthermore, the choice of materials such as wood, red, gold, metal, and water reflects the cycle of the Five Elements, reinforcing the building's spiritual and aesthetic functions. Symbolism in the form of statues, reliefs, and curved roofs serves not only as decoration but also as a medium for conveying moral and ethical messages, as well as a spiritual connection with the gods and ancestors. More than just a place of worship, the temple also serves as a social center that strengthens the community and preserves cultural values. This research emphasizes the importance of preserving temple architecture as part of the cultural and spiritual identity of the Chinese community and a valuable Indonesian cultural heritage.

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