

Research Article

The Symbolic Meaning of the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery Building

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Abstract.

In 1898, Tjong Yong Hian was appointed as the Mayor der Chinezeen, the highest representative of the Chinese community in Medan City. To commemorate all of Tjong Yong Hian's legacy, there was a gallery building inaugurated at Kejaksaan Street, Central Petisah, Medan Petisah Sub-district, Medan City, North Sumatra, on October 29, 2011. This place is unique in its architectural symbols and Chinese ornaments. This paper uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis model known as the 'three-part-triadic' model. The data analysis technique was carried out in (1) Representamen, (2) Objects, and (3) Interpretants stages. The ornaments in buildings have particular meanings and purposes. These ornaments are seen on entrance gates, walls, doors, windows, roofs, and other places based on the Chinese people's beliefs, giving meaning to the building and its people.

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1. Introduction

Each region has its uniqueness, which is formed due to the cultural peculiarities of the community, different climatic conditions, site characteristics, the influence of spiritual values adopted, and the political or security conditions of a city or region. The uniqueness of an area or region is temporary, i.e., it changes over time. Over time, a city or region will experience a change of ruler, often followed by a shift in policy. The policies issued also affect the shape of the building of an area or region. The cities that exist nowadays are products of their respective history and are a superimposition of layers of time, a reflection of various forces (cultural, political, economic, and so on) throughout their formation.

Concerning Chinatown, North Sumatra has many relics that cannot be separated from its historical aspect, which refers to the site area of the Chinese city, namely the Kesawan area of Medan city, which was crowded with visitors from the beginning of the 12th century to the beginning of the 14th century. At that time, based on archaeological


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evidence, it was known that it tended to refer to the era of the Sung, Yuan, and Ming dynasties in China. Likewise, these findings showed that the merchant community from abroad, such as China, Johor, Java, Burma, and Thailand, has stopped in North Sumatra (Rudiansyah, 2016:13).

Cultural differences between the local and immigrant communities allowed the realization of a blend of both cultures (*Culture Acculturation*). Moreover, the cultural differences between the local and immigrant communities made the Chinese houses have specific characteristics. The various elements and components of the homes symbolized cultural acculturation and could tell stories of life at that time. Furthermore, it is understood that the acculturation element in the building has a broader meaning, where the Chinese residence represents the cosmos, society, or the human body.

One of the uniqueness and privileges of the Chinese-style building as an Indonesian heritage still visible and can be enjoyed is the Tjong Yong Hian gallery building. This place has peculiarities, including architectural styles, symbols, and Chinese ornaments.

2. Research Method

The research method was qualitative by conducting a literature study and field study. The literature study was carried out to analyze the symbolic meaning with related reference sources. Meanwhile, the field study was carried out to collect data on the symbols applied to the Tjong Yong Hian gallery building correctly and appropriately to protect, maintain, and preserve the ornamental variety and increase public appreciation of the richness of traditional arts and culture in Indonesia.

This research utilized the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, known as the 'three-part-triadic' model. The data collection technique of this research consisted of document analysis and field observations. Furthermore, the data analysis technique was carried out in (1) Representamen, (2) Objects, and (3) Interpretants stages.

The decoration application in one part of the observed building was on the roof of the gallery facade. The roof was the most visible part of the gallery building form for the first time and was at the top of the gallery. It was preferred as the research object because, as one of the exterior elements, the symbols on the gallery roof rarely experienced changes and developments in shape, motif, and color. Therefore, based on this phenomenon, the author tried to document the application of traditional Chinese culture ornaments that were applied to the roof of the gallery building while analyzing the symbolic meaning contained in the Tjong Yong Hian gallery building.

3. Results and Discussion

A symbol is an object that serves as a means to represent an abstract thing. The symbol is essentially intended to simplify a thought, idea, or phenomenon that develops around the natural human environment, which has a deep meaning to represent a particular idea, value, or purpose. The distinctive nature of the symbol is the possibility of a broad interpretation of the meaning. Symbols are pictures, shapes, or objects representing an idea or the amount of something. Although symbols are not valued themselves, symbols are needed due to the value of understanding they represent. Some of the decorative symbols found in the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery building included:

3.1. Dragon Symbol

This symbol is commonly found in various decorative arts in China, both on architectural relics, porcelain, or paintings. The characteristics of the Chinese dragon motif are that it has a sharp jagged snout, long mustache, and rarely has branched horns like a deer, long hair like horse hair, a long scaly body, upper fins, and legs like eagle claws, and tail like a peacock or fireball. A dragon in Chinese mythology is an animal whose breath resembles the wind. The dragon's voice is considered thunder and can create rain. Because of its activity in the sky, the dragon symbol in the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery building is interpreted as a symbol of the God of the sky.

In a book about Chinese dragon culture, Pang Jin (2007) explains that the dragon is a mythological animal created by ancient artists which is a combination of various animals, with the head of a camel, eyes of a rabbit, the body of a snake, horns of deer, thighs of a tiger, claws of an eagle, and scales of fish.

Dragon ornaments symbolize strength and kindness, courage and determination, courage and endurance. This dragon shows the spirit of change, bringing back life. The dragon brings life-giving rain. Thus, the dragon symbolizes the productive forces of nature (Lillian Too, 1996).

Dragon ornaments are found on wood, which is finished using gold paint. The gold color represents land, a symbol of glory, kingdom, strength, and prosperity.

According to Harum (2019), there were nine Dragons types in ancient China: Tianlong, Shenlong, Fucanglong, Dilong, Yinglong, Qiulong, Panlong, Huanglong, and Long Wang. Tianlong is a celestial dragon in charge of pulling the chariot of the gods and guarding the gods' palaces. Shenlong is the God (dragon) controlling wind and rain. Fucanglong is the underworld Dragon who is in charge of protecting its treasures.

Dilong is an earth dragon in charge of leading the river. Yinglong is the oldest of all the Eastern Dragons and the only Winged Dragon. Qiulong is the strongest Dragon. Panlong is a water dragon believed to inhabit the eastern lake mainly. Huanglong is the yellow Dragon in charge of guarding the Luo River, and Long Wang is the Dragon king who rules over the four seas (East, South, West, and North).

The dragon also has nine children. The nine children are Pulao, Qiuniu, Ciwen, Chaofeng, Yaxi, Bixi, Bi'an, Suami, and Baxia. Pulao is a dragon who likes to scream, usually carved on the handle of a bell. When the bell is struck, it aims to emit a loud sound as loud as the power of a dragon screaming. Qiuniu is a Dragon who loves songs, usually carved into musical instruments. Thus, when a musical instrument is played, it emits a beautiful and melodious sound. Ciwen is a dragon that likes to swallow, usually placed on the roof of buildings. Hence, all the evil elements that threaten the contents and physical structure are swallowed up by the Ciwen Dragon. Chaofeng is a Dragon who likes to challenge danger, usually placed on the four corners of the roof. Thus, the hazards that enter the building, even from various directions, are challenged by the Chaofeng Dragon.

Yaxi is a dragon who loves to kill, carved into the sword's handle. Thus, when fighting, someone who holds the sword is not invincible because of the power of the sword. Bixi is a dragon who loves literature carved on the grave's edge. Bi'an is a Dragon who loves blasphemy, cut above the prison door. Therefore, someone in prison cannot escape even in any way. The suami is a seated Dragon carved under the feet of the Buddha. Furthermore, Baxia is a Dragon who likes to carry burdens cut under the gravestone. All of the Dragons were engraved on objects that suited their nature, with the aim that the objects could capture the Ch'i energy of the Dragon.

3.2. Phoenix Symbol

The phoenix symbol frequently appears in Chinese decorative arts. In Java, this ornament is very popular, especially in the batik art of coastal areas such as Cirebon, Pekalongan, and Lasem.

This Phoenix bird is described as having a head like a pelican, a neck like a snake, a scaly tail like a fish, a peacock's crown, a dragon's spine, and a tortoise's hard skin. The Phoenix bird symbolizes immortality, harmony, and fortune. The phoenix is considered the king of birds by the Chinese. If you read the history books of Chinese symbols, it is stated that the history of the Phoenix Bird lived for 500 years. Phoenix birds are



Figure 1: Dragon Symbol. Source: Julina, 2021.

also believed to collect sandalwood or Chinese parasol tree branches and then burn themselves to ashes to experience rebirth.

His awakening from the ashes made his feathers more beautiful, his voice clearer, and his soul purer. The condition is called Phoenix Bird Nirvana. It is a symbol of *"the spirit of facing adversity without fear, constantly improving and renewing oneself"*, or in current modern language, is what does not kill you, makes you stronger. There was a gender difference between male and female Phoenix birds in the past. The male was called *feng*, and the female was called *huang*. However, both became a single feminine entity that became the symbol of the queen or empress. Thus, this Phoenix bird was paired with the Dragon, which connoted the male symbol emperor. Then, many were used as decorations for clothes, jewelry, and palace furniture. Especially those related to women, the bride, was frequently depicted as a *feng* bird, combined with long, a symbol of ideal and harmonious matchmaking.

The Phoenix is one of the four cardinal symbols, namely the direction of the South (the power of Fire), which rules summer. The Phoenix symbolizes human nature, and the feathers on its wings are colored in five primary colors, i.e., black, white, red, green, and yellow, which symbolize *Kong Zi's* five morality: *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin*. *Ren* symbolizes virtue, truth, and love. *Yi* symbolizes honesty and stands for truth. *Li* symbolizes decency and manners. *Zhi* symbolizes knowledge and wisdom. Then, *xin* symbolizes trustworthiness, loyalty, and integrity. There are five human qualities in the

body of the Phoenix Bird. Its head is a virtue. Its wings are noble duties. Its back is righteous action. Its chest is humanity. Then, its belly is trustworthy.

This Phoenix symbol is found on porcelain/ceramic and placed in the main living room. In addition to the Phoenix, there are supporting symbols like pawns and clouds. At the edges, there are geometric motifs arranged repeatedly. The ornament uses gold, green, red, and blue colors. The gold color in this Phoenix bird has an earth element, which symbolizes glory, kingdom, and prosperity. The red color found in this lotus flower has the element of fire and is the color of Yang. The green color found in this *lung-lungan* is a wood element that symbolizes spring, new beginnings, and a period of growth. This green color is the color of Yin. The blue color found in water is an element of wood, meaning peace, harmony, and eternity.



Figure 2: Phoenix Symbol. Source: Vivi Adryani, 2021.

3.3. Qilin Symbol

Qilin is a mythological animal that the Chinese people believe is a symbol of longevity, splendor, happiness, and wisdom. The symbol of this mythological animal, other than in the form of a statue, is often used in the interior of typical Chinese buildings. This motif is prevalent in Chinese decorative arts, especially in sacred places, iconic buildings, and government. This Qilin is gentle and friendly in character and possesses all the human qualities of all four-legged creatures. Qilin is the embodiment of wolves, goats, cows, horses, and deer. It has the shape of a deer's body. Its head grows long horns. There

is a lump of flesh on its horns. Its legs are like the legs of a horse, and its tail is like a cow's tail.

There is a gender difference between male and female Qilin. The male is called *Chi*, and the female is called *Li*. Hence, they are combined into a Qilin and are animals synonymous with generosity. The female qilin has no horns. The Qilin has five skin colors that symbolize imperial colors: red, yellow, blue, white, and black. Qilins are often said to have close relationships with dragons, turtles, and phoenixes. Qilin means honesty, the phoenix is stability, the turtle is good and evil, and the dragon is a change. In the beliefs of Chinese people in Hong Kong, Macau, and Southeast Asia, Qilin is frequently used as a *hongshui* object and symbol to bring prosperity, an antidote to evil, and is never used to harm others. The Qilin symbol is found at the main entrance of the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery building.



Figure 3: Qilin Symbol. Source: Rudiansyah, 2021.

3.4. Lotus Flower Symbol

The lotus flower is a symbol in Chinese culture, which symbolizes purity. In the world, the lotus flower is better known as the Water Lily. Besides, the lotus flower is also called *Kembang Padma*.

The lotus flower is considered to represent the purity of mind and soul. In the teachings of Buddhism and Hinduism, the lotus flower emphasizes that the process of blooming the lotus flower is a symbol of achieving perfection towards nirvana. The seeds, buds, and flowers bloom on the lotus, symbolizing the past, present, and future. The seed is a symbol of the past, the origin of which started from nothing. The bud is a symbol of the present, which comes into existence, from the empty of existing and from the formless to form. Furthermore, the peak blooming on the lotus flower, a symbol of the future, is a sign of perfection. This lotus flower symbol is found in a small pond or lake located on the front page of the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery building.

The lotus flower requires mud and water to grow and develop. It lives on calm and dirty water. With this condition, many think this lotus flower is worthless and dirty. However, it is contrary to fact. The lotus flower still appears with elegance of its flower, which is very charming to the viewer. It grows and develops with full beauty, even though the place of life is dirty. Furthermore, it is maintained and clean without being affected by a dirty environment.

The lotus flower can also be interpreted as a symbol of our life as a human being, who is born as a creature full of beauty and perfection and desires to develop in a better direction to achieve a goal. Without desire, the human journey will not be achieved, but we do not sink between the two. Desires are still lived with kindness so that all of them are obtained from goodness too, and in the end, give beauty to the surrounding environment.

There is a red lotus flower at Tjong Yong Hian Gallery. The red lotus flower is the highest lotus, as the highest and most sacred place, and is highly respected. Hindus and Buddhists believe that it is often associated with a supreme deity. It symbolizes the original state of the heart and is a symbol of love, affection, liveliness, lust, and emotions related to the heart. The red lotus flower is depicted with open petals, which symbolizes the beauty and openness of a giving heart.



Figure 4: Lotus Flower Symbol. Source: Rudiansyah, 2021.

4. Conclusion and Suggestion

There were various typical Chinese symbols in Tjong Yong Hian Gallery, including the Dragon, Phoenix Bird, Qilin, and the Lotus Flower symbols. Each symbol had a different meaning and placement. The meanings of these symbols were as follows: (1) the dragon symbolized strength and goodness, courage and firm stance, courage and endurance. It was placed on the wall of the main living room. (2) Phoenix Bird symbolized immortality, harmony, and fortune. This Phoenix Bird ornament was always paired with the Dragon symbol. (3) The Qilin symbolized longevity, splendor, happiness, and wisdom. This Qilin symbol was placed at the main entrance. Furthermore, (4) the Lotus Flower symbolized purity. This Lotus Flower symbol was located on the front page of Tjong Yong Hian Gallery.

This research was still far from perfect because the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery building used as a research location was still limited to its symbolic meaning. However, hopefully, the research results could benefit readers or other researchers who wish to continue and improve this research. In addition, it is also expected that the Tjong Yong Hian Gallery could be studied by other researchers based on different perspectives.

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