



## **Traces of Time and Chinese Culture: an Analysis of the Historical Tourism Opportunities of Semarang's Ancient Temple**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to identify the architectural characteristics, spatial organization, and ornamental features of four ancient Chinese temples located in the Old Chinatown area of Semarang, and to analyze their symbolic meanings as a basis for formulating the potential of these temples as an area-based historical tourism narrative. The research adopts a qualitative cultural-arts approach through field observation, semi-structured interviews, and literature review focusing on architecture, ornaments, symbols, and the social functions of the temples, supported by descriptive-comparative analysis and data triangulation. The results show that all four temples share a simple spatial configuration consisting of a front veranda and a main worship hall, a predominance of wooden construction, and a rich repertoire of ornaments featuring mythological fauna, flora, and cosmological symbols, with red and gold as dominant colors representing prosperity and balance. The findings confirm that the temples function not only as places of worship but also as living heritage that embodies history, identity, and the collective memory of the Chinese community in the Old Chinatown area. The implications of this study indicate that these ancient temples have strong potential to be developed as area-based heritage religious tourism assets, provided that their sacred values, symbolic meanings, and the central role of the local community in management and interpretation are consistently maintained.

**Keywords:** ancient Chinese temples; architecture and ornamentation; historical tourism narrative; heritage religious tourism; Old Chinatown

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi karakter arsitektur, tata ruang, dan ornamen empat kelenteng kuno di kawasan Pecinan Lama, Kota Semarang, serta menganalisis makna simboliknya sebagai dasar perumusan potensi kelenteng sebagai narasi wisata historis berbasis kawasan. Metode penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif seni budaya melalui observasi lapangan, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan studi literatur terhadap arsitektur, ornamen, simbol, serta fungsi sosial kelenteng, dengan analisis deskriptif-komparatif dan triangulasi data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa keempat kelenteng memiliki pola ruang sederhana serambi-ruang pemujaan, dominasi material kayu, serta kekayaan ornamen fauna mitologis, flora, dan simbol kosmologis dengan warna merah-emas sebagai penanda utama makna keberuntungan dan keseimbangan. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kelenteng tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai ruang ibadah, tetapi juga sebagai warisan hidup yang merepresentasikan sejarah, identitas, dan memori kolektif masyarakat Tionghoa di kawasan Pecinan Lama. Implikasi kajian ini menunjukkan bahwa kelenteng-kelenteng kuno tersebut berpotensi kuat dikembangkan sebagai aset wisata warisan religi berbasis kawasan, dengan tetap menjaga kesakralan, nilai simbolik, serta peran komunitas lokal dalam pengelolaannya.

**Kata Kunci:** arsitektur dan ornamen; kelenteng kuno; narasi wisata historis; Pecinan Lama; wisata warisan religi



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### **Introduction**

Semarang's Old Chinatown stands as a significant historical enclave, embodying the rich heritage of the Chinese community along the northern coast of Java. Consequently, it is

unsurprising to encounter a multitude of structures showcasing Chinese architectural styles in this locale. Notable examples include kelenteng, or temples, which serve as both places of worship and historical landmarks. These ancient kelentengs not only fulfill spiritual functions but also symbolize the cultural identity and collective memory of the Chinese community, which has engaged with the local populace in Semarang for centuries.

The Chinese temple situated in the Old Chinatown area is intrinsically linked to the history of Semarang, a city believed to be one of the ancient urban centers that emerged in the 18th century (Wijayati, 2019). This connection is evidenced by the presence of several historical structures, including temples that exhibit architectural styles from that era. The design of these temples reflects a cultural heritage distinct from the local Indonesian traditions. This divergence arises from the temple's role as a structure that frequently showcases spatial forms and decorative elements aligned with the cultural and spiritual beliefs of the Chinese community. The Chinese influence evident in these temple edifices is closely tied to the longstanding presence of ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, which is estimated to span several centuries, including in Semarang (Yuliati et al., 2023).

A Dutch expert, J.R. van Berkum, who once resided in Semarang, estimated that the Chinese population that settled in the Simongan area had been present since 1000 AD (Tio, 2002). M. Husayn, in his dissertation titled *Java as noticed by Arab Geographers* (Nainar, 1953), estimated that the Chinese presence in Semarang dates back to approximately 921 AD. The presence of Chinese individuals in Semarang became more evident with the arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho in Simongan around 1405-1416 AD, serving as an envoy of the Chinese Emperor to assess colonial territories beyond mainland China (Fang, 2019). In the Simongan area, local residents later constructed a place of worship for Admiral Cheng Ho, known as the Sam Poo Kong Temple, also referred to as the large "Stone Building" Temple of Semarang (Tio, 2002).

The temple, known as kelenteng or klenteng, as a notable example of Chinese architecture, presents an intriguing subject for discussion due to its unique characteristics that distinguish it from other structures in Semarang. Researchers are keen to explore the singularity and distinctiveness of the temple as a historical tourist attraction by formulating a central inquiry: what are the distinctive charms of the four ancient temples in Semarang, Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bio, that render them appealing cultural tourism sites? The objective of this research is to elucidate the allure of each ancient temple, thereby providing valuable insights into their individual charms and their potential for development as key cultural and historical tourism attractions in Semarang..

The term "kelenteng" in Indonesia is derived from the word Kwan Im Teng (觀音亭) which refers to a place of worship dedicated to the Goddess Kwan Im, the deity of compassion, who is predominantly venerated among Mahayana Buddhists and within traditional Chinese belief systems, including Confucianism, Taoism, and the broader beliefs of the Chinese populace (Hay, 2025). Another perspective suggests that the temple's name is derived from the sound "klinting-klinting" a bell that was subsequently translated as a temple. The temple, as described above, serves fundamentally as a place of worship where individuals engage in devotion to God, the prophets, and the saints revered by its adherents (Moerthiko, 1980). Three primary teachings underpin the fundamental concepts and guidelines for prayer procedures in temples are Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These teachings are intricately interwoven and inseparable, constituting the essential doctrines. Consequently, these core teachings provide a framework for worshippers in conducting prayer ceremonies.

The construction of a temple is frequently linked to the principles of *fengsui* or *feng shui* 風水, namely the principle that asserts every human being must consistently coexist in harmony

with nature (Usman et al., 2023). The emphasis on harmony with nature is reflected in the orientation of buildings, the placement of doors and windows, and this principle extends to temple architecture. The majority of temples are oriented towards the north (Salmon & Lombard, 2003), refers to the phenomenon that the majority of Chinese temples are oriented towards the sea, which is regarded as auspicious in Chinese culture (Madeddu & Zhang, 2017).

The application of color in temple architecture embodies significant meaning and symbolism. The incorporation of color in temple structures and decorations not only establishes a unique atmosphere but is also thought to exert a beneficial effect on those who engage with it. Commonly utilized colors in temple edifices include vibrant red, golden yellow, green, and blue (Suliyati, 2011). These colors are regarded by the Chinese as harbingers of good fortune for those who don them. In Chinese culture, these hues represent the five elements of life, each possessing its own significance: fire, wood, earth, water, and metal (Ren & Woudstra, 2021). The fire element is typically represented in red, signifying longevity, growth, and eternity. Red frequently serves as the predominant color in Chinese temples and is applied to the building's columns, symbolizing majesty and strength. Similarly, with other colors, it is regarded as one that carries a positive connotation (Hwie, 1986).

Colors and ornaments serve as symbols in temple architecture, as outlined in a text known as *Yingzao Fashi*, specifically a text that governs the application of color, size, and dimensions of temple adornments as a site of worship (Guo, 1998). Animal (fauna) and plant (flora) motifs are frequently employed as decorative elements in temples.

The fauna depicted as ornaments often consists of mythological creatures well-known in Chinese culture, including dragon (naga), phoenix (burung hong), and qilins (kilin) or chimeras. The dragon is the most revered animal symbol in temples, surpassing other creatures. The Chinese believe that dragons embody dynamic and potent energy (Zaman, 2022). There are three recognized types of dragons, *Liong*, *Li dan* *Jiao*. The evolving characteristics of the dragon are reflected in the symbolism of its body structure, which comprises various animal features. Specifically, the dragon's feet resemble those of a chicken, its body is covered in scales akin to that of a fish, the edges of its mouth are adorned with manes reminiscent of insects, and its mouth bears a resemblance to that of a crocodile (Tan, 1953). Another animal frequently portrayed alongside dragons is the white tiger. The representation of the green dragon and white tiger symbolizes total strength and adaptability, embodying a harmonious balance of life while also serving as a safeguard against malevolent forces. Another mythological entity commonly depicted as a temple ornament is the phoenix. This bird is regarded as a symbol of sincerity, justice, loyalty, and humanity, often illustrated with five-colored feathers. Another creature, akin to the phoenix, that also represents justice and honesty is the lion. The kilin is a mythological creature from Chinese tradition, portrayed in temples with the head of a dragon, the body of a deer, and the mane and tail of a tiger in five distinct colors. This creature embodies good fortune, magnanimity, longevity, and wisdom. (Lip, 1981).

Plants or flora commonly utilized for temple adornments include peonies and lotus flowers. Peonies represent steadfastness, whereas lotus flowers signify purity. Additional flowers regarded as harbingers of good fortune encompass cherry blossoms (*mui*), cypress (*song*), bamboo (*tik* atau *zhu*) and banyan. The Chinese believe these four flowers embody wisdom and exhibit resilience across all seasons, or eternal youth (*ban lien djing*), symbolizing longevity, wisdom, and patience (Lip, 1981).

In addition to flora and fauna, other motifs employed as temple ornaments encompass representations of nature and geometric patterns. These natural images feature elements such as wind, rain, stars, and the sky. Fire is portrayed as a symbol of illumination and purity. The sun and moon frequently appear on altar tablecloths (*tik lian*), as they are regarded as emblems

of justice and the remarkable power of the light they emit. Geometric ornaments frequently illustrated encompass "S" or double twists, swastikas, and meanders or spirals. Additionally, there exist geometric patterns that do not denote a specific shape but are merely repetitions of a design (van Der Hoop, 1949).

Chinese individuals regard the temple as a sacred space for deities and ancestors, as well as a site for reverence and worship; consequently, it must be adorned accordingly (Trisno & Lianto, 2023). The decorations adorning temples serve not only to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the structure but also, at times, to convey philosophical significance (Herwiratno, 2007). This is evident in the depiction of the statues representing the gods and goddesses. A frequently referenced symbol is that of the Eight Immortals (*pat sian*), a collective of deities revered by the Chinese populace, recognized since the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). The depiction of the Eight Immortals represents longevity, prosperity, and happiness. Numerous legends from renowned narratives are frequently illustrated as symbols, including the tale of Hong Sin (Hay, 2025) and Sam Kok (Cheung, 2024).

Chinese individuals frequently adorn temple structures with distinctive symbols, which are thought to repel malevolent spirits and promote safety and prosperity. Among these symbols are the *pat kwa*, *yin yang*, Buddhist emblems, *taiji*, pearls, coins, and gourds (*hulu* atau *hiolo*). The pearl represents the sun, while the gourd is believed to possess mystical properties that uphold feng shui balance and deter negative influences (Hwie, 1986).

Numerous prior studies have explored temples from diverse perspectives, including their religious functions and cultural acculturation, particularly in significant temples like Sam Poo Kong (Nurriszki et al., 2025), application of feng shui principles in the configuration of temple structures (Suliyati, 2011; Marcella, 2017a), along with architectural and symbolic analyses of temples in urban environments (Trisno & Lianto, 2023). Other studies also highlight the significance of temples as hubs of social activities and identity within the Chinese diaspora. (Herwiratno, 2007; Junus, 2015). Most of these studies primarily concentrate on large-scale or iconic temples, treating them as isolated entities without exploring their interconnections within a specific historical context.

This review reveals a research gap: no comparative study has been conducted on small-scale ancient temples in Semarang's Old Chinatown area as a cultural heritage network that contributes to a region-based historical tourism narrative. Prior research has predominantly focused on either religious or architectural functions, failing to systematically connect these elements to the concept of heritage religious tourism, which integrates sacred, symbolic, and cultural tourism potential.

This study introduces innovation by investigating four ancient temples in Semarang's Old Chinatown: Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bio. These temples are analyzed within the context of historical area boundaries as delineated by the 1913 H.F. Tilemma map, positioning them as a cohesive network of cultural heritage sites within a singular historical locale. Another aspect of this innovation is the comparative analysis of temples within the same area, which uncovers variations in architectural character, ornamentation, spatial planning, and the social context surrounding the establishment of each temple, thereby forming a regional narrative. Additionally, this study offers conceptual innovation by framing the temple as a narrative medium that articulates the historical narrative of the area and its connection to cultural heritage structures or architectural entities. The study's novelty further extends to the integration of heritage tourism and religious tourism frameworks, interpreting ancient temples as living heritage that amalgamates sacred functions, symbolic meanings, and the potential for area-based cultural tourism. The methodological innovation is evidenced by the utilization of H.F. Tilemma's historical map, which serves as the foundation

for delineating the study area, ensuring that the research boundaries are informed by the historical spatial reconstruction of the Old Chinatown region.

This study catalogs the architectural and ornamental features while also interpreting the symbolic significance, spatial configuration, and social function of the temple as a living heritage that remains actively utilized today. In this context, the temple is regarded as a site of worship and a narrative medium that embodies the history, culture, and identity of the Old Chinatown area. Given this background, the study aims to address the problem formulation concerning the distinctive characteristics of four ancient temples in the Old Chinatown area of Semarang City, specifically examined through the lens of architectural style, spatial arrangement, ornamentation, and their symbolic meanings, as well as how these unique attributes can be understood as foundational elements for constructing a narrative of historical tourism based on the region.

### **Research Method**

This research constitutes a qualitative study employing an arts, culture, and ethnography approach. The study is situated in the Old Chinatown area of Semarang City, focusing on four ancient temples: Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bio. The investigation centers on the architectural character, spatial arrangement, ornamentation, and symbolic significance of the temples, serving as a foundation for interpreting the potential narratives of area-based historical tourism.

The data sources comprise both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through direct observation of the temple structures (architecture, spatial arrangement, ornamentation, and symbols), in addition to semi-structured interviews with temple administrators, leaders of the Chinese community, and visitors. Secondary data were gathered from literature reviews, historical documents, archives, and historical maps pertinent to the Old Chinatown area.

Data analysis was performed using both descriptive and qualitative methods, involving data reduction, thematic categorization (architecture, ornamentation, symbols, and social functions), comparisons among temples, and the interpretation of symbolic meanings within the framework of heritage and religious tourism. The validity of the data was ensured through the triangulation of sources and methods. The findings of the study are presented in a narrative-comparative format, enhanced by succinct tables and visual descriptions that highlight the unique character and allure of each temple within the regional context.

### **Research Findings**

#### **History of the Ancient Temple of Semarang**

Chinese temples, referred to as "kelenteng," serve as places of worship for the Chinese community and are believed to have existed in Indonesia prior to 1650. The term "kelenteng" is distinctly Indonesian and is not utilized in other countries. In areas such as Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, and China, similar structures are more commonly known as "bio." It is thought that the term "kelenteng" originated from the local community's interpretation of the "teng-teng" sound produced by bells from these religious edifices, which subsequently became the designation for the place of worship itself.

Each temple typically features a principal deity as the focal point of worship, alongside other deities who are also venerated. The name of a temple frequently reflects the primary deity being honored, such as Lu Ban or Lu Ban Gong Temple and Guanyin or Guanyin Ting Temple. Additionally, numerous temples incorporate the term Fude Zhengshen (福德正神) or Hok Tek Ceng Sin (Hokkian), for example Hok Tek Bio in Bogor dan Hok Tek Tong in Parakan. Chinese

temples, referred to as tepekong or toapekong in the Hokkien dialect, are typically situated in urban centers. This placement is linked to the historical arrival of the Chinese community, who initially engaged in trade before establishing themselves and expanding into other regions of Indonesia, especially the coastal areas of Java. (Alam, 2023; Liji, 2012).

What is the historical context surrounding the establishment and evolution of the four ancient temples in the Old Chinatown area of Semarang City, and what social and community factors contributed to their construction? Drawing from literature reviews and field surveys, the history of each temple, Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bio, can be articulated as follows:

Kelenteng Tek Hay Bio (澤海廟 Ze Hai Miao) situated near Sebandaran I in Gang Pinggir, was established by the Kwee clan community in 1756 to honor Tuan Kwee Lak Kwa (郭六官 Guo Liguan) also known as Lak Kwa Ya, a deity revered as a formidable Chinese merchant who conducted trade from Sumatra to Semarang by sea. Following the massacre of Chinese individuals in Batavia in 1740, which incited resistance from the Chinese community and its leaders, Kwee Lak Kwa actively participated in the guerrilla warfare against the Dutch alongside the Javanese populace and other prominent Chinese figures, including Kwee An Say, Oey Ing Kiat, (Souw) Tan Pan Tjiang, Auw Seng, and Tay Pan. Due to his supernatural abilities, Kwee Lak Kwa was bestowed with the title of god, known as Tek Hay Cin Jin (Cangiando & Hartati, 2022). The veneration of Tek Hay Cin Jin transcends merchants and fishermen, encompassing various segments of society beyond the Chinese ethnic group. This unique reverence is particularly noteworthy as it originates from Indonesia, with worship practices distinctively rooted in the country.



**Figure 1.** Tek Hay Bio Temple, Semarang

Source: Documentation of the Indonesian Tridharma Places of Worship Association

The inauguration of this temple, situated in Semarang's Chinatown at Gang Pinggir number 105–107, was once celebrated with the performance of traditional Chinese musical instruments. Founded by the Kwee clan, the temple originally featured an open footprint. It has since undergone several renovations, including the installation of a reclaimed floor, the addition of an ash room, and an extra prayer room. Remnants of the original structure remain visible today in the base of the porch columns and the lower hinges of the main door. The name Tek Hay Bio Temple translates to Temple of the Calming Ocean. This edifice is recognized as the second oldest temple in Semarang's Chinatown. It was constructed to honor Kwee Lak Kwa, with an ancestral hall (*citang*, 祠堂) initially established as a memorial to him.

According to the records preserved at this temple, no information was discovered concerning the role of the kongsi, the ash house, or the purpose of the shop; thus, it can be inferred that the term "toko" denotes a stall utilized for trading activities. In his writings, Liem Thian Joe asserts that the Tek Hay Bio Temple prospered due to its ownership of multiple plots of land in the Gambiran and Pekojan regions (Liem Thian Joe, 1933). Field observations of the inscriptions discovered in this temple confirm that, in addition to the *citang*, there exists a shop building that is part of a unified complex.

The second ancient temple is the Tong Pek Bio Temple, established in 1782 by *Luitenant der Chinezen* Khouw Ping and the Hokkien community. Historically, this temple was referred to as the Tang Kee Temple, signifying a house of worship situated on the eastern side of the street. In contemporary usage, it is commonly known as the Gang Pinggir Temple, owing to its position on Gang Pinggir, which directly faces Jalan Sebandaran and Jalan Pekojan, the primary entrance to Semarang's Chinatown. The Tong Pek Bio Temple is recognized as the third oldest temple in Semarang's Chinatown (Pasaribu et al., 2023; Sudarwani & Widati, 2022). The principal deity venerated in this temple is Hok Tek Ceng Sin.



**Figure 2.** Tong Pek Bio Temple, Semarang

Source: Documentation of the Indonesian Tridharma Places of Worship Association

Hoo Hok Bio Temple is one of the historic temples located in Semarang's Chinatown. Established in 1792 by the residents of North Chinatown, many of whom were engaged in the cloth trade (Sudarwani & Widati, 2022). This temple is also referred to as the Prumputan Temple or the Gang Cilik Temple<sup>1</sup>, it is situated adjacent to the Gang Baru market, precisely at the terminus of Gang Mangkok. The name Prumputan Temple derives from the profusion of shrubs and grass surrounding the temple, which served as a resting area for horses. The deity venerated at this temple is Hok Tek Ceng Sin. The temple structure has undergone multiple renovations, the first occurring in 1845 with contributions from *Majoor der Chinezen* Bhe Tjhing Kwee dan Tan Keng Lin. Subsequently, in 1870, another renovation was executed with support from Tuan Liem Kiem Ling.



**Figure 3.** Hoo Hok Bio Temple, Semarang

Source: Documentation of the Indonesian Tridharma Places of Worship Association

The Ling Hok Bio Temple was established in 1866 at the behest of Liem Giok Sing, a notable member of the Chinese community residing in Besen Alley. The temple, which faced Besen Alley, was designed to safeguard the area and its adjacent streets from malevolent forces. Its inauguration was marked by a religious ceremony.<sup>2</sup> This temple possesses a rich history that mirrors the socio-cultural evolution of the Chinese community in Semarang, serving as one of the cultural icons of the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the insights gathered from an interview with Kwa Tong Hay, July 1, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Based on the insights gathered from an interview with Bram Luska on July 1, 2025.



**Figure 4.** Ling Hok Bio Temple, Semarang

Source: Documentation of the Indonesian Tridharma Places of Worship Association

### **Characteristics and Allure of Each Temple**

The allure and distinctiveness of each ancient temple in Semarang's Old Chinatown are prominently displayed through the architecture and embellishments adorning the structures. The Tek Hay Bio Temple exemplifies simplicity in its ornamentation, characterized by translucent carvings (*a-joure relief*) that frequently depict nautical themes. This is likely connected to its founder, Tuan Kwee, a renowned seafaring merchant. A distinctive aspect of the temple is the inclusion of two exit doors, which is atypical for a small temple. The structure is primarily constructed of wood, complemented by black stone, reflecting a Taoist architectural style. Animal reliefs, including cranes, deer, tigers, and dragons, enrich the symbolism, while the red door adorned with gold script enhances the building's prestige. Additionally, the temple features two doors leading to the exterior, a rarity among small temples like Tek Hay Bio, which typically possess only one entrance. Unlike many other temples, this one does not face the street directly in front of it, diverging from the common practice of aligning with auspicious directions (*fengsui, feng shui*).

The Tek Hay Bio Temple is built primarily of wood, complemented by black stone in certain wall sections. Its predominant wooden structure reflects the unique features typical of a Taoist temple. The porch walls are embellished with animal reliefs, including cranes and deer. Inside the main worship hall, reliefs of tigers and dragons are prominently displayed. The tiger relief, which is larger than the dragon, commands attention on the left side of the inner wall.

Another allure is evident in the temple door, adorned with gold Chinese characters. The door leaf consists of robust red boards that create a striking contrast with the gilded inscriptions. Flanking the door are rectangular windows featuring red frames, complemented by red and yellow wooden bars. Outside the Tek Hay Bio temple, red burning gourds are positioned, utilized for incinerating prayer papers directed to the revered deities, specifically Tek Hay Djien, Kong Hu Cu, Hok Tek Tjeng Sin, and Houw Tjiang Koen.

The Tong Pek Bio Temple, a Taoist sanctuary, is dedicated to the deity Hok Tek Tjeng Sin as its principal figure, accompanied by the gods Houw Tjiang Koen or Kwan Tee Koen, Kwan Sie Im Poo Sat, and Kong Tek Tjoen Ong. Despite its modest size, this temple enchants visitors with its intricate carvings of the door god (Kiem Puk), as well as dragon and tiger motifs adorning the walls, and chimeras (mythological creatures) depicted on the horse-drawn carriages. The color palette is dominated by red and gold, complemented by a Phoenix carving atop the roof. The double doors, featuring a blend of black panels and red bars, along with windows adorned with floral and fauna designs, further enhance its aesthetic allure. The carvings predominantly showcase gold and red hues. Another captivating aspect of the Tong Pek Bio temple's artistry is the transparent Phoenix carving situated at the apex of the roof.

The main entrance comprises a pair of doors, featuring two layers: the inward-opening door is constructed from black wooden planks, while the outward-opening door is fashioned from red wooden bars and is shorter in height compared to the inner door. Rectangular windows, framed in red and yellow, are situated to the left and right of the main door. The carvings beneath the windows illustrate images of storks, deer, flowers, and incense. The green hue applied to the ceiling of the Tong Pek Bio temple enhances the vibrant palette of the structure, which is predominantly characterized by red and golden yellow.

The Hoo Hok Bio Temple features a straightforward spatial design, prominently showcasing the principal deities Hok Tek Tjeng Sin and Houw Tjiang Koen. Its distinctiveness is highlighted by the integration of geometric ornamentation, floral vines, and intricate carvings of elephants, birds, and dragons. The color palette is dominated by green, red, and yellow, while the incense burner on the front porch is embellished with floral motifs. Windows framed in green and yellow, along with red doors embellished with gold circles, further enhance the traditional ambiance.

The Eastern and Southern Sky Gods are represented on the left altar, whereas the Western and Northern Sky Gods are represented on the right. Devotion to these deities within the Hoo Hok Bio Temple primarily focuses on seeking prosperity in business. The temple's allure is highlighted by its geometric carvings and floral vine embellishments. The predominant colors of the temple are green, red, and yellow.

The primary entrance of the temple features two layers of red doors, adorned with a circular gold knocker. Windows are positioned to the right and left of the main entrance, characterized by their rectangular shape and brown color, framed in green and yellow. The ceiling trusses and consoles are elaborately carved with motifs of vines, flowers, birds, elephants, and dragons. Additionally, floral carvings are present on the stone incense holder situated at the front center of the temple's veranda.

The Hoo Hok Bio temple is notable for its furnishings that predate its establishment, including the altar table, which dates back to 1784. In contrast, the Ling Hok Bio temple is characterized by its simplicity, yet it features intricate carvings on the consoles and partitions of the worship area. The temple's single-layered door is adorned in red with gold Chinese characters, and the windows are reinforced with thick, dense bars. Symbolizing protection and balance, a pair of phoenixes, a dragon, a tiger, and a chimera are prominently displayed. The ceiling is predominantly red and yellow, with a single red door featuring gold characters serving as the focal point. This temple, dedicated to the main deities Houw Tjeng Sien and Houw Tjiang Koen, is also recognized as a Taoist temple.

Ornamental carvings are predominantly located on the horse-drawn carriages, consoles, and partitions within the main worship area. A pair of phoenixes, or hong birds, which are mythological creatures in Chinese culture, along with paintings of dragons and tigers, adorn the walls of the left and right verandas of the temple. The red consoles, embellished with yellow

trimmings and affixed to the ceiling, exemplify the unique aspects of Chinese culture. Additionally, square wooden horses intricately carved in the forms of elephants and chimeras enhance the temple's allure.

Based on the research findings, these four temples exhibit a comparable spatial arrangement characterized by two primary sections: the veranda and the prayer hall. Nevertheless, each temple showcases unique attributes in its ornamentation, color, and layout. The abundance of symbols, especially dragons, tigers, lions, and mythological birds, reflects a profound connection to Taoist philosophy and the principles of balance (*yin yang, feng shui*). The persistent prevalence of red and gold further underscores the belief in good fortune and prosperity.

The design of the four ancient temples is straightforward, comprising two rooms: a prayer hall and a veranda. Within the prayer hall lies the altar room, a sacred space for the deity and its adherents. Additionally, a small intermediate area, referred to as the transitional space, is situated within the prayer hall. The spatial divisions are uniformly distributed, allowing the spatial mass to be characterized as "equal" ("setangkup") (Putri et al., 2023).

The perspective of equal spatial division can be associated with the belief in the Chinese cosmological framework, specifically the Ho-Ju Concept (referring to He Tu or the He Map), a principle interpreted as the essence of balance or symmetry. As a principle of equilibrium, the Ho-Ju concept is connected to yin yang, the notion of harmony that underpins Chinese philosophy concerning the balance of the universe and existence.

Consequently, the spatial divisions utilized in temple architecture are typically of nearly uniform dimensions. Most temples are constructed on unstoried foundations or as single-story structures, stemming from the belief that no individual should be elevated above the deity being venerated. Likewise, the staircase leading to the entrance is consistently three stories high. This design is linked to the mythological narrative of the three founding kings of mainland China, each symbolizing culture, agriculture, and medicine.

Observations revealed that not all temples possess an ash chamber. Such chambers are exclusively located in clan temples, serving to store the ashes of deceased family members. Among the four temples examined, only the Tek Hay Bio temple features an ash chamber, as it belongs to the Kwee clan. This temple primarily venerates ancestors as its principal deity. The ash chamber is situated in the rearmost room and is regarded as sacred and of significant importance.

**Table 1.** Key Characteristics of the Research Subjects of Four Ancient Temples in Semarang

Nama Kelenteng	Tahun Berdiri	Ciri Utama
Tek Hay Bio	1756	Didirikan oleh marga Kwee; ornamen laut; dua pintu keluar unik.
Tong Pek Bio	1782	Didirikan oleh Letnan Cina Khouw Ping; ukiran naga & phoenix.
Hoo Hok Bio	1792	Didirikan oleh Mayor Cina Bhe Tjhing Kwee dan Tan Keng Lin Pahatan flora, fauna, dan geometri; warna hijau–merah–kuning.
Ling Hok Bio	1866	Ukiran burung hong, naga, harimau; dominasi warna merah–emas.

Source: Documentation of the Indonesian Tridharma Places of Worship Association

The spatial configurations of the four ancient temples examined in this study are categorized as simple, featuring only two *jian* (main rectangular rooms) surrounded by walls.

This arrangement does not include an outer corridor and is supported by four columns. The primary building material utilized in the construction of these ancient temples is wood. Considering that several temples in Old Chinatown have experienced repairs and modifications, the wood employed for these renovations may not originate from the same period as the original construction. This complicates efforts to trace the original materials used in the construction of the ancient temples in Old Chinatown.

Doors represent a vital component of every temple examined. The principal doors of a temple are consistently an odd number. Smaller temples, such as the ancient ones analyzed in this study, feature a singular main door. Traditionally, the main doors of temples are adorned rather than left unembellished, often intricately carved or painted with depictions of deities, especially the door deity (門神 *menshen*) which features Chinese characters and is typically inscribed on the temple door (Hay, 2025; Hay et al., 2021; Lan, 2013). The Chinese characters (*hanzi*) symbolize the aspirations or guidance sought by the congregation. Additionally, temple doors are often adorned with mythological creatures and other motifs thought to bestow good fortune.

A comparable function pertains to temple windows, which fulfill both technical and aesthetic roles. The windows of the ancient temples examined in this study showcase floral, faunal, and geometric motifs. Additionally, some windows are adorned with symbolic carvings that reflect the beliefs of visitors. The design of the shutters on each temple varies, encompassing rectangular, circular, and other geometric forms. Almost all of the windows in the temples analyzed are rectangular, featuring red or yellow window bars.

The ceilings and roofs of temples reflect the overarching architectural style of Chinese structures, featuring ceilings that conform to the contours of the roofs above and are crafted from individual planks. Temple ceilings are often embellished with vibrant colors, such as red, yellow, and green. Conversely, darker ceilings may be observed, resulting from the smoke of incense (*hio*) and candles. The trusses and consoles on the upper levels of these edifices frequently showcase intricate carvings or sculptures, encompassing both geometric and floral designs.

The symbolism of a temple is frequently manifested in the name of the deity or *kongco* (main deity) venerated, as well as in the temple's ornamentation and architectural design. The principal deity worshipped within a temple dictates its sect affiliation. The four temples examined were all Taoist, although some also featured altars dedicated to deities or prophets from other sects. In this context, it is often asserted that the ancient temples analyzed served as places of worship for the broader Chinese faith, which encompasses three components: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, collectively referred to as the Tridharma. Temple ornamentation is typically crafted in relation to the symbolic meanings attributed to it, as evidenced by the tiger and dragon carvings consistently positioned on either side of the entrance. Each type of ornament carries its own significance, as does the arrangement of each piece. The most prevalent symbolism is represented by the pair of dragons and tigers, which signifies a form of balance aligned with the principles of *feng shui*. (Marcella, 2017a, 2017b; Suliyati, 2011; Usman et al., 2023). Another significant symbol is the pair of male and female lion statues. The male lion is consistently positioned on the left, while the female lion is situated on the right.

The fundamental architecture of Chinese temples is characterized by red and golden yellow, complemented by green, white, and blue. However, all the temples examined in this study predominantly featured yellow and red as the primary colors. Yellow and red are regarded as auspicious colors.

The distinct characteristics of each temple also mirror the social context and purpose of its founding community. Tek Hay Bio, for instance, with its nautical-themed ornamentation and the inclusion of an ash room, exemplifies a clan temple that embodies a robust ancestral identity and maritime heritage. In contrast, Tong Pek Bio and Hoo Hok Bio exhibit the characteristics of a general temple, which is more receptive to community activities and the economic requirements of the Chinatown community. These differences illustrate that temples serve as social spaces imbued with multifaceted meanings.

### **Diverse Functions of Kelenteng**

The ancient temples in Semarang that are the focus of this research (Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, Ling Hok Bio) continue to serve the same purpose as when they were originally established, functioning as sacred sites for worship and veneration of ancestors within the Chinese community.

The distinctions in the function of temples in Indonesia, particularly in Semarang, when compared to those in other countries such as Malaysia, exemplified by the Bat's Cave Temple in Penang or the Tian Hou Gong Temple, also known as Mazu Temple in Kuala Lumpur—are evident in the realms of cultural acculturation, socio-religious roles, and their contributions to tourism. Moreover, temples in Indonesia frequently act as venues for the integration of local culture with Javanese or Nusantara traditions. The Sam Poo Kong Temple in Semarang, which boasts a history spanning several centuries and attracts numerous visitors, remains one of the most significant temples in Indonesia. Following restoration, repairs, and expansion, the temple not only serves as a site of worship but also stands as a historical emblem of Admiral Cheng Ho's arrival in Java, thereby embedding its identity within the historical narrative of Semarang. In contrast, temples in Malaysia, such as the Tian Hou Temple (Mazu Temple), highlight their dual purpose as both places of worship and modern tourist attractions, unlike the Mazu Temple in Lasem, which is primarily accessible for general tourism (Triatmodjo et al., 2022). The building is magnificent, multi-story, and includes tourist amenities such as gardens, souvenir shops, and cultural exhibition spaces. At Batu Caves Temple (Malaysia), the temple attracts not only devotees but also tourists, drawn by the unique presence of the thousands of bats that inhabit the surrounding area. This signifies a fusion of spiritual purpose and ecotourism.

The Cap Go Meh cultural parade organized by the Liong Hok Bio Temple in both Semarang and Magelang exemplifies the integration of Chinese cultural values with local traditions, fostering harmony and unity within the community. This event holds considerable promise as a religious tourism attraction. Through the utilization of social media, the religious tourism aspect can be effectively promoted and enhanced (Kusuma et al., 2024).

Various social, cultural, and health institutions, including business organizations, frequently utilize or rent temple spaces to conduct artistic activities such as wayang potehi performances and wushu, as well as social services including health screenings, free medications, blood donations, and the distribution or sale of subsidized basic necessities (Junus, 2015). The Boen San Bio Temple in Tangerang, for instance, regularly organizes blood donation drives in partnership with the Indonesian Red Cross (PMI) (Suharlim, 2025). Several temples also leverage their expansive areas to provide limited daily meals for the community. The Tay Kak Sie Temple in Semarang is notably active in social initiatives, such as distributing thousands of rice packages during the *King Hoo Ping* celebration, a Confucian ceremony honoring the spirits of ancestors and deceased family members, alongside offering free medical services and blood donations.

Temples in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia, function not only as sites of worship but also as focal points for diaspora identity and catalysts for cultural tourism. Featuring visual

elements such as dragon and phoenix motifs on their roofs, kilin reliefs, and hiolo gourds, the temples of Old Chinatown hold significant curatorial value for promotion within the regional Chinese heritage route network, complementing prominent landmarks like Sam Poo Kong (Aisyah et al., 2021; Permatadewi & Gunawan, 2023). The local wisdom inherent in the temples examined in this study, including rituals, sacred space etiquette, and community cooperation, serves as a mechanism for preserving sacred harmony, spiritual tourism that resonates with the cultural traditions of the Central Java populace. The implementation of specific restrictions and visitor education regarding symbols (pat kwa, taiji, Buddhist swastika), the colors representing the five elements, and guidelines for behavior in the veranda and worship areas will assist both devotees and visitors in upholding the sanctity of worship within the temple (Triatmodjo et al., 2023; Trisno & Lianto, 2023).

### **Cultural Heritage and Religious Tourism**

The discovery of four ancient temples in Old Chinatown—Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bio—affirms that these structures are architectural artifacts serving as living heritage, continually undergoing the reproduction of meaning through religious practices, social activities, and tourist interactions.

The distinctive architecture of Southern China, primarily constructed from wood, features a layout that includes verandas and worship spaces, adorned with various ornaments depicting mythological creatures such as dragons, tigers, lions, and phoenixes. The prevalent use of a red and gold color palette, symbolizing good fortune, enhances its appeal as a significant tourist attraction. These attributes establish a compelling foundation for positioning it as a heritage religious tourism asset, merging sacred functions with cultural value.

The heritage tourism framework perceives both tangible and intangible heritage as catalysts for identity, education, and the destination economy. The distinctive architecture, spatial configuration, and decorative elements—such as the dragon and tiger as a complementary duo, phoenixes, geometric patterns, and the use of red and gold—underscore the heritage value that can be crafted into an interpretive narrative of space and symbols. This includes the dragon and tiger symbolism representing harmony and protection in thematic temple tours. From this vantage point, the potential of temples as cultural tourism assets is firmly established, not merely as objects, but as experiences meticulously curated through interpretation (Timothy & Olsen, 2006; Widiastuti et al., 2015).

The findings may serve as an alternative to religious tourism (pilgrimage), with the robust symbols and rituals reinforcing this dual-function concept, provided that management upholds carrying capacity and promotes visitor education (Olsen & Timothy, 2021). This approach to religious tourism positions the temple as a sacred space for worship and rituals, while also serving as an experiential venue for general visitors.

The abundance of iconography (reliefs, sculpted horses, consoles, patterned windows) further enhances the cultural heritage pathway that links the four temples, the historic alleys (Gang Warun and Gang Pinggir), and the banks of the Semarang River, creating a cohesive narrative of this historic region (Gulo & Octafian, 2024; Rochana et al., 2024).

### **Conclusion**

This study addresses three primary research questions. First, concerning the historical establishment and development of ancient Chinese temples in the Old Chinatown area of Semarang City, the findings indicate that the Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bio temples were constructed during various periods, ranging from the mid-18th century to the latter half of the 19th century, by local Chinese communities and individuals

from diverse social backgrounds. The establishment of these temples functioned as sites for worship, clan kinship connections, community solidarity, economic activities, and the creation of social spaces for the Chinese community in the Old Chinatown area. The history of these temples is intricately linked to the dynamics of the Chinese community's growth and the development of the Chinatown area as a significant historical landscape of the city.

This study reveals that the distinctive characteristics and allure of the four temples are primarily derived from their small-scale architectural design, featuring a straightforward building composition, the inclusion of a porch that serves as a sacred-profane transition space, a centralized orientation of the worship area, and the utilization of wooden materials alongside traditional structures. From a spatial perspective, the linear arrangement exhibits a clear sacred hierarchy, fostering an intimate and communal spatial experience. In terms of ornamentation, the temples' charm is manifested through a variety of mythological fauna motifs, floral designs, calligraphy, and geometric decorative elements, all harmonized with the predominant colors of red and gold. The symbolic significance of each temple encompasses cosmological and religious symbols that embody values of protection, safety, prosperity, harmony, and the community of its founder. The variations in ornamentation and symbolism contribute to the distinctiveness of each temple, despite their proximity within the same region.

This study illustrates how these distinctive characteristics serve as the foundation for crafting a regionally based historical tourism narrative. By integrating the architectural features, spatial arrangements, ornamentation, and symbolic significance of each temple, a regional narrative emerges that situates the temples as pivotal points within the historical context of the Chinese community. This narrative is formed from a network of smaller temples, each representing various historical phases, the social backgrounds of their founders, and the functions of the communities they serve.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the four ancient temples in the Old Chinatown area are living heritage sites that exhibit a distinctive charm through their architectural scale, intimate spatial experiences, intricate symbolic decorations, and the historical significance of their communities. Consequently, they hold substantial potential to serve as a foundation for developing area-specific historical and religious tourism narratives. The implications of this research for future studies highlight the necessity for further exploration of area interpretation strategies, the design of visitation routes informed by temple narratives, community-based models for religious tourism management, and an examination of visitor perceptions regarding the significance of the symbols and sacred spaces within the temples. Such additional research is crucial to ensure that the development of temple-based tourism adheres to preservation principles, upholds the sanctity of worship spaces, and reinforces the role of local communities as pivotal actors in the transmission of the region's cultural values.

Based on the findings of the research and subsequent discussions, it can be concluded that the four ancient temples located in the Old Chinatown area, as indicated on the map by H.F. Tilema from 1913, namely, the Tek Hay Bio, Tong Pek Bio, Hoo Hok Bio, and Ling Hok Bi temples, can serve as valuable assets for religious and cultural tourism. These sites have the potential to enhance Semarang City's tourism portfolio, complementing larger attractions such as Sam Poo Kong, and serve as tangible evidence of Indonesia's cultural diversity.

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