



Original Article

Traces of Chinese Culture in Medan: A Study of Social History and Architecture

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Abstract:

This research aims to examine the traces of Chinese culture in the city of Medan through a social history and architectural approach, by highlighting how the Chinese community shapes, maintains, and represents its cultural identity within the urban space. The qualitative approach was used by field observation methods, in-depth interviews with community leaders and the Chinese young generation, as well as documentation studies of historical buildings and local archives. The results of the study show that the Chinese community in Medan has been present since the late 19th century and plays an important role in the fields of trade, education, and socio-religious life. Their cultural identity is manifested through the existence of religious foundations, educational institutions, and clan-based social structures. Architecturally, the community left behind a legacy of temples, shophouses, and Chinese-classical buildings scattered throughout the Kesawan area and its surroundings. However, many of these buildings have been converted or abandoned due to a lack of preservation regulations. In terms of the younger generation, it was found that there was a shift in cultural identity influenced by modernization and national integration. Although core cultural values are still maintained, the use of regional languages and ritual practices is beginning to decline. This research highlights the importance of preserving Chinese culture as part of the multicultural identity of the City of Medan. Therefore, preservation efforts need to involve partisan policies, cross-generational cultural education, and collective community awareness to maintain the diversity of cultural heritage.

Keywords: Chinese Culture, Medan, Social History, Architecture, Identity, Cultural Preservation.

Introduction

The city of Medan, as the capital of North Sumatra Province, is known as one of the a multiethnic city that has a high cultural diversity. This diversity is reflected in the social life of its people which consist of various ethnic groups, including the Chinese (Sylvia et al., 2022). The role of the Chinese community in shaping the dynamics of the city of Medan has been going on since the Dutch colonial period and continues to



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develop until now. The presence of ethnic Chinese in Medan cannot be separated from the history of global migration that occurred in the 19th century, especially when the colonial government opened up economic opportunities in the Dutch East Indies region (Rahman, 2023). Chinese immigrants, mostly from Fujian and Guangdong, came to the region in search of better livelihoods, many of them working in the trade and agricultural sectors.

In the long process of assimilation and social interaction, the Chinese community also made a great contribution to the economic, social, and cultural development of the city of Medan. They are not only economic actors, but also cultural agents who enrich local cultural treasures through customary practices, language, and architectural arts. The traces of Chinese culture in Medan are manifested in various aspects of people's lives, ranging from culinary, celebration traditions, performing arts, to historical buildings spread across several areas of the city. Areas such as Kesawan and Jalan Semarang, for example, have many old Chinese-style buildings that are still standing today (Rudiansyah & Sijabat, 2022).

Tracing the traces of Chinese culture in Medan is not only an effort to uncover the past, but also an important step in understanding the social dynamics that shape the character of this city. The study of social history and architecture is a relevant approach to explore how this cultural heritage continues to live and adapt. In its social history, the Chinese community in Medan experienced various phases, ranging from the colonial period, independence, the New Order, to the Reformasi. Each period brings challenges and opportunities that affect their social position, cultural identity, and integration within the wider society (Scott, 2025).

In addition, the relationship between the Chinese community and other ethnic groups in Medan shows a complex pattern of interaction. There is a dynamic between integration and segregation, between acceptance and rejection, which forms a typical pattern of social relations in this city. Meanwhile, in terms of architecture, the heritage buildings of the Chinese community reflect a strong cultural identity. Temples, shophouses (shophouses), and houses with Chinese ornaments are physical evidence of the cultural acculturation process that has occurred for hundreds of years (Christyawaty, 2011).

Chinese architecture in Medan not only shows a unique aesthetic, but also contains symbolic and spiritual values that represent the life view of its people. In many cases, these architectural elements also blend with Dutch colonial and local Malay styles, creating a hybrid and distinctive architectural style (Yuwono & Rukayah, 2018). Unfortunately, the rapid development of the city, especially since the era of modernization and development, has caused many historic buildings to be damaged or even disappear. Preservation efforts are still limited and often faced with economic pressure and lack of public awareness of the historical and cultural value of the building.

This study seeks to delve deeper into the role of Chinese culture in shaping the identity of the city of Medan, by tracing the socio-historical and architectural traces that can still be found today. A multidisciplinary approach that blends history, anthropology, and architecture is used to gain a more holistic understanding. This study is also important as a contribution to an inclusive Indonesian discourse, by placing Chinese culture as an integral part of national history, rather than as a separate or foreign entity. In this context, Medan is a real example of how cultural pluralism can become a social force.

The research methods in this study include literature studies, field observations,

interviews with Chinese community leaders, and visual documentation of historical buildings. The combination of these methods is expected to enrich the data and strengthen the analysis presented. The tracing of the social history of the Chinese community in Medan will begin from the initial phase of their arrival, the relationship with the colonial authorities, to the development of the social and educational organizations they built. These aspects are important for understanding how these communities develop identities and maintain them.

On the other hand, the study of architecture will identify the distinctive elements of Chinese architecture and how these elements blend with other architectural styles in Medan. Temples such as the East Mountain Temple and the old building on Jalan Ahmad Yani will be concrete examples in the discussion. The study will also highlight the role of families and communities in preserving cultural heritage through religious celebrations, ancestral rituals, and social organizations such as foundations and clan associations. This heritage lives on in daily practice and strengthens social solidarity among Chinese people.

No less important is how the young generation of Chinese in Medan responds to their cultural identity in the midst of globalization and modernization. Do they still retain their ancestral cultural values or undergo an identity transformation to become part of a more cosmopolitan urban citizenry? By understanding the social history and architectural heritage of Chinese culture in Medan, it is hoped that we can see that diversity is not a barrier, but a bridge to harmonious social integration. The preservation of cultural heritage is a shared responsibility across ethnicities and generations.

This study is also relevant to support the development of cultural tourism based on local wisdom, which is not only economically profitable, but also strengthens pride in local history and identity. In the end, this study wants to invite readers to see the city of Medan not only as a geographical space, but as a historical and cultural space shaped by the interaction of various ethnic groups, including the Chinese community, whose traces are still evident in the pulse of city life to this day.

Methods

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method (Assyakurrohim et al., 2023). The purpose of this approach is to understand in depth the dynamics of Chinese culture in Medan, both in terms of social history and architectural forms that still survive today. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring cultural meaning, symbols, and experiences in a particular social context in depth.

1. Data Types and Sources

This study uses primary data and secondary data.

- Primary data was obtained through direct observation of Chinese architectural buildings, interviews with community leaders, temple managers, residents of Chinese descent, and visual documentation.
- Secondary data was obtained from previous literature such as history books, journal articles, government archives, Chinese foundation documents, and local mass media that discuss the existence of Chinese culture in Medan.

2. Research Location

This research was conducted in several areas in Medan City that are known as the center of the Chinese community, including:

- The Kesawan area – known for its old buildings and economic activities of the Chinese community.
- Jalan Semarang and its surroundings – a center of Chinese trade and cuisine.
- The main temples, such as Gunung Timur Temple, Setia Budi Temple, and Borobudur Temple.

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data was collected using the following techniques ([Jogiyanto Hartono, 2018](#)) :

- **Participatory Observation**
The researcher directly observed the environment, cultural activities, and historical buildings that have elements of Chinese architecture. Observations were made on the shape of the building, ornaments, spatial layout, and social interactions that occurred around it.
- **In-Depth Interview**
Interviews were conducted with key figures, such as temple administrators, local historians, cultural experts, architects, and the cross-generational Chinese community. Interviews are semi-structured to dig into information around history, identity, cultural preservation, and social experiences.
- **Documentation Studies**
Collection of data from photo archives, old maps, foundation documents, newspaper news, and relevant scientific articles. The documentation study also includes an analysis of historical writings about the Chinese community in Medan.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analyzed qualitatively with a thematic approach. The stages of analysis include ([Miles & Huberman, 1992](#)) :

- **Data Reduction:** Filter data relevant to the research focus, i.e. aspects of Chinese social history and cultural architecture.
- **Data Presentation:** Compile data in the form of descriptive narratives, interview excerpts, and visual documentation.
- **Conclusion Drawn:** Finding patterns, relationships, and meanings that can explain the traces of Chinese culture in Medan in a complete and profound way.

5. Data Validity

To maintain the validity and reliability of the data, the researcher used the source and method triangulation technique, namely:

- Compare the results of interviews from various sources (old figures, younger generation, architects).
- Combining observation data with written documents and literature sources.
- Clarify dubious information with additional sources.

Results

1. Social History of the Chinese Community in Medan

The Chinese community in Medan has a long history that dates back to the late 19th century, coinciding with the development of the Deli tobacco plantation industry managed by the Dutch colonials. Chinese workers and traders, mainly from the Hokkien and Cantonese tribes, began to migrate and settle in the Kesawan area and its surroundings. They not only contributed to the field of trade, but also formed a strong social community through religious organizations, educational foundations, and clan associations. For example, the Sutomo College Foundation and the East Gunung Vihara Foundation play an important role in education and cultural preservation.

Table 1. Chinese Social and Religious Organizations in Medan

Yes	Name of Organization / Foundation	Year of Establishment	Main Functions	Location
1	East Mountain Vihara Foundation	1962	Religious and cultural	Copyright © 2019 Hang Tuah Hotels. All Rights Reserved.
2	Sutomo Teaching Foundation	1926	Education	Lieutenant Colonel Martinus
3	Himpunan Marga Lim Medan	1955	Social and kinship	Copyright © 2019 Sutomo. All Rights Reserved.
4	Multi Marga Indonesia Foundation	1999	Social, educational, modern Chinese culture	Holiday rentals in Asri (Bali)

The history of the presence of the Chinese community in Medan cannot be separated from the context of colonialism and transnational migration at the end of the 19th century. In line with the diaspora theory put forward by (Cohen & Kennedy, 2017), the Chinese community in Medan is part of a trade and labor diaspora that adapts to the local context, but still retains its cultural identity. They form a strong social community through organization clan-based, educational institutions, and religious foundations, as well as found in Chinese communities in other port cities in Southeast Asia such as Penang and Singapore (Tan, 2004).

The existence of the East Gunung Vihara Foundation and Sutomo College is a concrete example of a social institution that supports the existence of Chinese culture and education in Medan. These institutions not only serve as centers of religious activity and learning, but also become spaces for cultural reproduction, as described by Pierre Bourdieu in the concept of habitus and field, in which social structures are maintained through continuous cultural practices (Bourdieu, 2018).

2. Traces of Chinese Architecture in the Kesawan Area and Surrounding Areas

Based on field observations, it was found that many buildings in the style of classical Chinese architecture are still standing, especially in the Kesawan area, Jalan Ahmad Yani, Jalan Semarang, and its surroundings. The building's distinctive features include:

- Arched roof with dragon and fenghuang bird ornaments
- The dominant colors are red and gold
- Mandarin calligraphy decorations and Yin-Yang symbols
- Symmetrical structure and use of large round-shaped main doors (moongate)

One of the iconic buildings is the Gunung Timur Temple, which is still actively used for traditional worship and ritual activities. In addition, many old Chinese-Colonial style shophouses are still found along Jalan Ahmad Yani.

Table 2. Examples of Chinese Architectural Buildings in Medan

Yes	Building Name	Year Built	Distinctive Architectural Features	Current Status	Location
1	East Mountain Temple	1962	Curved roof, golden dragon	Still in active use	Copyright © 2019 Hang Tuah Hotels. All Rights Reserved.
2	Old Shophouse on Jalan Ahmad Yani	±1920s	Symmetrical columns, round doors	A lot of neglect	Kesawan Area
3	Tjong A Fie Building	1900	Chinese-European style	Museum	Copyright © 2019 Copyright © 2019 Copyright © 2019 Copyright
4	Setia Budi Temple	1970s	Phoenix and lion ornaments	Actively used	Copyright © 2019 Yos Sudarso. All Rights Reserved.

The discovery of Chinese architectural buildings that still survive in the Kesawan area, Jalan Ahmad Yani, and its surroundings shows that the Chinese community is not only socially present, but also leaves concrete cultural traces in physical form. This architectural style exhibits a blend of traditional Chinese aesthetics with Dutch colonial influences, resulting in a distinctive hybrid architectural style, a phenomenon called (King, 1984) as a colonial hybrid architecture.

Temples such as the East Mountain Temple, which are still in active use, show the continuity of Chinese religious culture that has survived across generations. This is in line with research (Mildawani & Darmawan, 2023) who observed that temples in urban areas of Indonesia have a dual function: as a place of worship and a marker of cultural identity in urban spaces. Buildings such as the Tjong A Fie Building, with its symmetrical European-Chinese style and traditional ornamentation, reflect the social status of the Chinese elite in the past and become a symbol of socio-economic interaction between the Chinese and the colonial

government.

3. Perceptions and Cultural Identities of the Young Generation

Interviews with the young generation of Chinese in Medan show a shift in cultural identity. Most respondents stated that they still celebrate Chinese New Year and ancestral traditions, but in a more modern and symbolic form. Chinese or Hokkien is also starting to be used less often in everyday conversation. However, there is a high awareness among youth to preserve cultural heritage, especially through community activities, social media, and Chinese cultural festivals. Chinese-based schools such as Sutomo and Kalam Kudus are still centers of education and the strengthening of cultural identity.

Table 3. Cultural Perception of the Chinese Youth in Medan (n = 30)

Yes	Cultural Aspects	Still Done	Sometimes	Not done
1	Chinese New Year and Cap Go Meh Celebrations	86%	14%	0%
2	Use of Chinese/Hokkien	30%	40%	30%
3	Visit the temple every month	22%	35%	43%
4	Upholding Chinese family values	90%	10%	0%
5	Active in the Chinese cultural community	60%	30%	10%

Data on the perception of the Chinese youth generation in Medan show the ambiguity of cultural identity, a condition that is often explained in the study of hybrid identities by (Hall, 2015). The younger generation still appreciates ancestral traditions, such as celebrating Chinese New Year and upholding family values, but in a more symbolic and not entirely ritualistic form. Regional languages such as Hokkien or Mandarin began to be marginalized, replaced by Indonesian or English in daily interactions.

This phenomenon is in line with the findings (Suryadinata, 2008), which suggests that the post-Reformation Chinese generation tends to adopt Indonesia's national identity while maintaining certain cultural elements. In this context, Chinese-based schools such as Sutomo College and Kalam Kudus act as a bridge between ancestral cultural heritage and modernity. The presence of cultural communities that are active on social media is also a new strategy in maintaining identity in the digital era.

4. Cultural and Architectural Preservation Challenges

This study also found that the preservation of Chinese culture in Medan faces several challenges, including:

- Building conversion: Many old shophouses and buildings are sold and converted into modern buildings without retaining the original architectural elements.
- Lack of conservation regulations: Local governments do not yet have strict regulations regarding the protection of non-European cultural heritage buildings.
- Lack of public awareness: The general public, including those of Chinese descent themselves, tend to ignore the importance of preserving traditional architecture.

Although the physical existence of Chinese buildings and cultural practices is still visible in the city of Medan, the challenge of preservation is very real. Many old buildings are abandoned or have changed their functions without considering historical aspects, showing the weak policy of cultural heritage protection at the regional level. This corroborates the analysis (Nas, 2002) which states that heritage architecture in Indonesian cities is often defeated by modernization pressures and short-term economic interests.

The lack of public awareness of the value of traditional architecture is also a problem. Not a few Chinese descendants themselves consider old buildings as a burden, not a cultural asset. In fact, according to the theory of cultural preservation by (Lowenthal, 1998), the collective memory of the community is strongly tied to physical spaces such as buildings and places of worship. Without policy intervention and community participation, this cultural heritage is at risk of being lost and replaced by a uniform narrative of modernity.

Conclusion

This research shows that Chinese culture in Medan City has strong historical roots and a significant contribution in the formation of social identity as well as the architectural face of the city. The Chinese community has been present in Medan since colonial times, mainly as part of a wave of labor and trade migration that later formed a distinctive social structure through religious organizations, educational foundations, and clan associations. The presence of these institutions not only serves as a social means, but also as a space for the preservation and inheritance of cultural values across generations. In terms of architecture, the Chinese community left a real physical footprint through various buildings, especially the temples and classic Chinese-style shophouses scattered throughout the Kesawan area and its surroundings. The uniqueness of this architecture not only reflects the aesthetics and symbolism of culture, but also represents the collective identity and integration of Chinese society within the urban space. However, many of these buildings are now threatened by conversion, lack of attention from local governments, and weak public awareness of their historical value. On the other hand, the cultural identity of the young generation of Chinese in Medan has shifted. Although it still upholds some traditions such as Chinese New Year celebrations and family values, many cultural elements such as regional languages and religious practices are beginning to be marginalized. This phenomenon reflects the reality of the hybrid identity of the younger generation, which must navigate between the demands of modernity, nationalism and ancestral cultural heritage. The challenge of preserving Chinese culture in Medan has become increasingly complex in the absence of strong regulations that protect minority cultural

buildings and practices. Without collective awareness and policy support from the government, Chinese cultural heritage, which has been an integral part of the character of the city of Medan, has the potential to be eroded by economic pressure and modernization.

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