

Cheng Ho Mosque of Palembang As A Symbol Of Cultural Acculturation

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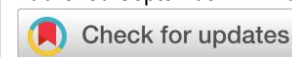
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ABSTRACT

This research examines the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang as a symbol of cultural acculturation and a space for tolerance within a multicultural society. The mosque possesses unique architectural features that blend Islamic, Chinese, and local Palembang elements, serving as a medium for non-verbal visual communication. The study aims to analyze the semiotic meanings of the mosque's ornaments, explain the community's decoding process of these symbols in forming a "Third Space," and identify the effectiveness of social interaction within this space in reducing stigma toward the Chinese ethnic group. The research employs a descriptive qualitative method using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis (denotation, connotation, and myth) and the Miles and Huberman data analysis model. Data collection techniques include non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The findings are expected to reveal how the symbolic integration in the mosque's architecture can dissolve ethnic identity boundaries and strengthen social harmony in Palembang.

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1. Introduction

The city of Palembang is one of the oldest cities in Indonesia, boasting a long history as a strategic trading hub, an international shipping center, and a convergence point for various domestic and foreign ethnicities such as Malay, Arab, Indian, and Chinese (Oktari, 2026). The intensive interactions that have taken place since the era of the Srivijaya Kingdom have not only resulted in mere economic exchange, but have also shaped a continuous process of cultural communication across generations (Sari, 2024).

From the perspective of modern communication science, cultural communication is understood as the process of exchanging messages, values, norms, and identities among different cultural groups, thereby fostering mutual understanding, reciprocal adaptation, and harmonious social relations (Abdillah et al., 2025; Sugiyartati et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2022). This cultural communication is not limited to verbal channels, but is strongly manifested through nonverbal communication such as language, traditions, arts, spatial design, architecture, color codes, visual symbols, and various other cultural expressions (Angkasa & Kamil, 2025; Sendana et al., 2025; Junaid & Andini, 2025).

The dynamics of this intercultural communication culminate in the process of cultural acculturation, which is the encounter of two or more cultures that influence one another without losing the essential identity of their respective original cultures (Lael & Susanti, 2025; Dalyan et al., 2025; Muslimat et al., 2023). Acculturation is not a form of unilateral dominance by a particular culture, but rather a creative adaptation process that gives birth to a new cultural entity. Amidst the multicultural society of Palembang, this manifestation of acculturation can be clearly observed in various aspects of daily life, ranging from language dialects, rich traditional culinary arts, marriage customs, to the architectural styles of public and religious buildings. This phenomenon proves that cultural heterogeneity can transform into a powerful social capital in maintaining social cohesion (Ulya et al., 2025).

One of the most representative physical artifacts of cultural acculturation in the city of Palembang is the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Palembang Mosque. This mosque was established as a historical tribute to Admiral Cheng Ho, a Muslim explorer and diplomat from China during the Ming Dynasty in the 15th century, who led a large fleet on missions of friendship, trade, and the peaceful propagation of Islam in the Nusantara region (Syahara & Kurnia, 2025). The presence of the Cheng Ho Mosque goes beyond its primary function as a place of ritual worship for Muslims; it serves a strategic function as a living monument reflecting the harmonious intertwining of Islamic values, Chinese architectural aesthetics,

and the local wisdom of the Palembang community (Darosan et al., 2025). This fusion is clearly evident in the building structure, which combines oriental pagoda forms with mosque domes, the dominance of red, green, and golden yellow color palettes, and distinctive Chinese ornaments blended with local identity (Fuadah & Arzaqina, 2025).

Within the framework of contemporary communication science, architecture is not merely viewed as a functional shelter structure, but rather as a form of nonverbal visual communication that conveys messages symbolically (Evrillica et al., 2025). Every material element such as multi-tiered roof structures, color selection, ornaments, and spatial layouts contains a sign system that transmits specific ideological and sociocultural messages to the public. According to Roland Barthes' (1964) semiotic framework, this visual sign system can be distinguished into two layers of meaning: denotation (objective physical-visual meaning) and connotation (cultural meaning, myth, and ideology behind the sign). Therefore, the visual symbols at the Cheng Ho Mosque work communicatively to articulate messages of tolerance, pluralism, and the intersection of cross-ethnic civilizations (Jelita, 2026).

A number of recent studies over the past five years have examined the phenomenon of acculturation in religious buildings with Chinese nuances. Research conducted by Jihad & Purnomo, (2022) identified that mosque architectural acculturation functions as a medium of cultural assimilation between the Chinese community and the indigenous Muslim population without compromising the identity of either party. Similar findings are comparatively reinforced by Angkasa & Kamil, (2025), who highlighted how the designs of Cheng Ho mosques synthesize elements of Tri Dharma architectural cosmology (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism) with Islam as a representation of symbolic compatibility and cross-faith tolerance. On the other hand, research by Sri Wahyuning Septarina (published in various theoretical works on visual communication design up to 2024–2025) emphasizes that architectural ornaments and visual elements work effectively as visual communication media delivering messages of peace within a multicultural society (Indratno et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, most of those previous studies still focus on architectural physical descriptions, comparative design elements, and the macro-level historical mapping of cultural acculturation. Prior research has not yet deeply explored how the layers of visual communication signs within the architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Palembang Mosque are decoded and subjectively interpreted by the wider community through Roland Barthes' semiotic analytical lens, nor how these visual representations sociologically contribute to forming an inclusive "Third Space," reducing social prejudices, and mitigating negative stigmas against the Chinese minority community in urban public spaces (Lim, 2025).

Based on this premise, this study is focused on comprehensively examining how visual communication symbols in the architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang represent cultural acculturation, how the construction of meaning is understood by the public, and to what extent this social space plays an active role in fostering religious and ethnic tolerance.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to explore and understand social phenomena comprehensively. The aim of this qualitative study is to gather deep insights into how society constructs meaning from visual architectural symbols and how social interaction is established at Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque Palembang.

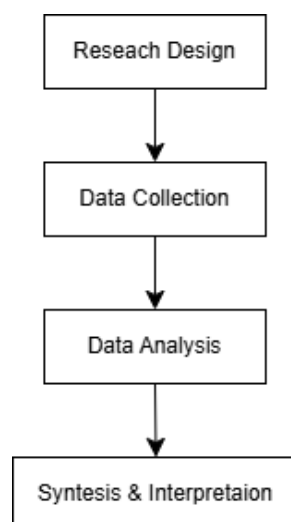


Figure 1. Methodological Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the methodological framework used in this study. This research uses a qualitative descriptive design to examine the cultural acculturation and visual communication symbols of Cheng Ho Mosque Palembang. The key participants (informants) comprising the management of PITI, local cultural experts, religious tourists, and local residents are selected using a purposive sampling technique to provide rich and balanced data. The research instruments include interview guides, observation sheets, and documentation devices supported by the researcher as the key instrument (Hidayat, 2024). Data is collected via non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Prior to interpretation, data trustworthiness is assessed using source and technical triangulation, alongside Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis and Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's data analysis model. The analysis results serve as a basis for understanding how visual communication and social interaction foster tolerance and an inclusive social space (Tjahjadi et al., 2020).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Description of Research Finding

The research results indicate that the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang, located in the Jakabaring area, is a tangible manifestation of Islamic, Chinese, and local cultural acculturation initiated and managed by the Indonesian Chinese Islamic Association (PITI) of South Sumatra. Beyond serving as a place of worship and a guidance center for Chinese-descent converts, the mosque has functionally evolved into a religious tourism destination and a hub for social interaction open to the wider public. The presence of this mosque affirms that differences in ethnic and cultural backgrounds can be harmoniously integrated into urban public spaces.

From a visual and architectural standpoint, the mosque's uniqueness is reflected in the dominance of red, green, and golden yellow color palettes, roof structures and 17-meter-tall minarets resembling pagodas, and the integration of distinctive oriental ornaments with Arabic calligraphy. Based on semiotic analysis, all of these visual elements do not merely function as decorative aesthetic components, but act as nonverbal visual communication media conveying deep messages of tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and religious values. Field findings also reveal that the mosque's management is supported by active participation and mutual cooperation (gotong royong) from the community, ranging from the construction phase to daily operations. Through a persuasive communication approach, inclusive spatial management, and high social acceptance, the Cheng Ho Mosque has successfully transformed into an effective "Third Space" that reduces social stigmas, strengthens inter-ethnic cohesion, and reinforces Palembang's image as a tolerant city.

3.2 Visual Forms and Architectural Elements

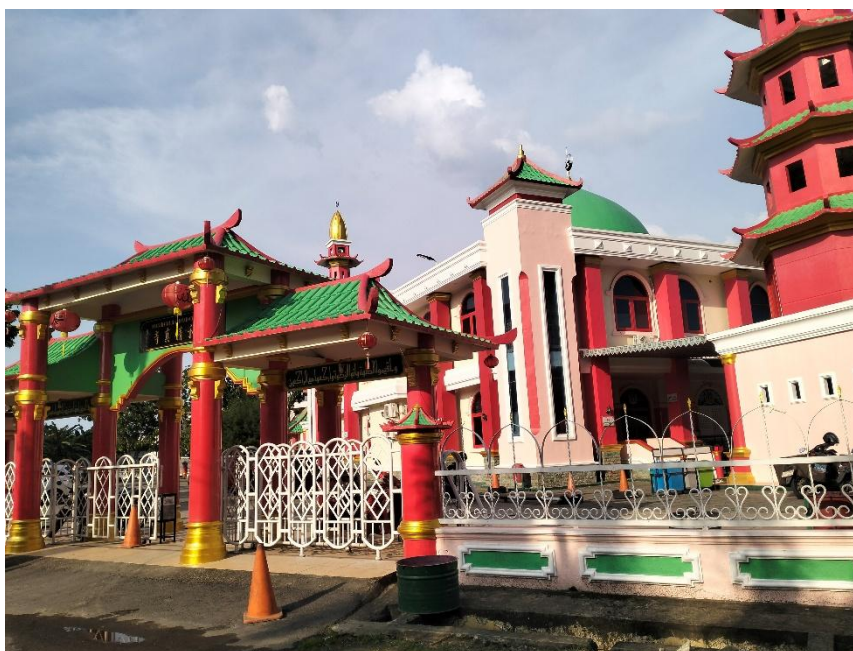


Figure 2. The architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque

The architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang exhibits a powerful visual form as a manifestation of cultural acculturation through three main components, namely the color palette, building structure, and ornaments. In terms of color, the building is dominated by red on the walls, pillars, and minarets symbolizing happiness and good fortune in Chinese culture combined with green on the domes to represent Islamic spirituality, alongside golden yellow accents symbolizing nobility. Structurally, the building adopts curved, pagoda-style roofs and 17-meter-tall twin minarets with five tiers representing the number of units and the obligation of the five daily prayers, which seamlessly blend with the main prayer hall, mihrab, and pulpit. Furthermore, ornamental elements such as geometric motifs and characteristic Chinese cloud carvings merge aesthetically with Arabic calligraphy and the inscription of Allah, thereby functioning as nonverbal communication media that convey deep messages of tolerance and religious values.

Table 1. Visual Forms and Architectural Elements Description

Visual Architectural Component	Physical Elements	Philosophical & Symbolic Meaning	Visual Communication Function
Color Palette	• Dominance of red on walls, pillars, and minarets. • Green on the main dome. • Golden yellow on architectural details.	• Red: Happiness, vitality, and good fortune (Chinese culture). • Green: Islamic spirituality and peace. • Gold: Nobility and prosperity.	Communicates messages of harmony and cultural openness without losing Islamic identity.
Structural Forms	• Curved, traditional Chinese pagoda-style roofs. • 17-meter-tall twin minarets with 5 tiers. • Main prayer hall, mihrab, and pulpit.	• 17-meter minarets & 5 tiers: Symbols of the 17 rak'ahs and the obligation of the five daily prayers in Islam. • Pagoda shape: Representation of Chinese historical and cultural identity.	Bridges traditional oriental architectural identity with the fundamental principles of Islamic worship proportionally.
Ornamental Elements	• Geometric motifs and oriental cloud carvings. • Arabic calligraphy and the inscription of Allah on	Fusion of Chinese decorative art aesthetics with Islamic tawhid values within the framework of sharia.	Serves as non-verbal communication media representing cultural acculturation values and the spirit of tolerance.

interior and
exterior
spaces.

Based on the Table 1, it is explained that the architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang combines a color palette of red, green, and golden yellow to convey cultural harmony, pagoda-style roof structures and 17-meter-tall minarets representing the number of prayer units (*rak'ahs*) and the obligation of the five daily prayers, as well as Chinese carved ornaments and Arabic calligraphy that function as nonverbal communication media to represent the values of cultural acculturation and tolerance.

3.3 Pragmatic and Social Functions of the Mosque

Based on its functional aspects, the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang holds broad pragmatic and social roles. Beyond serving as a place of worship and a representation of the Chinese-descent Muslim community, it operates as a center for guidance, consultation, and communication for converts (*mualaf*). Additionally, the mosque acts as a hub for social interaction and religious activities involving the active participation of the surrounding community since its construction phase, while successfully transforming into a religious tourism destination open to visitors from various regions without disrupting the solemnity of worship.

Table 2. Pragmatic and Social Functions of the Mosque

Functional Aspect	Implementation / Form of Application	Social Objectives and Impact
Pragmatic & Convert Guidance Function	Providing proper places of worship for Muslims and serving as a guidance center, a place for consultation, a transit space, and a communication hub for Chinese-descent converts (<i>mualaf</i>).	Providing a sense of security and continuous religious guidance for converts in learning Islamic teachings.
Social Interaction & Cohesion Function	Serving as a venue for Quranic study sessions, Islamic holiday celebrations, and community social activities dan active participation of the surrounding community through mutual cooperation (<i>gotong royong</i>) and construction contributions since the beginning.	Strengthening relationships among residents, fostering a strong sense of belonging, and reducing ethnic barriers.
Public & Religious Tourism Function	Operating as a religious tourism destination open to tourists from various regions and backgrounds and managing visitor-friendly rules and spaces without disturbing the solemnity of worship.	Introducing universal Islamic values and reinforcing the mosque's function as an inclusive public space in Palembang.

Based on table 2, the pragmatic and convert guidance function explains that the mosque provides places of worship as well as a guidance center, a place for consultation, and a communication space to offer a sense of security and continuous guidance for Chinese-descent converts. Based on the table, the social interaction and cohesion function explains that the mosque serves as a venue for religious and social activities involving community participation through mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) from the start to strengthen relationships among residents and foster a strong sense of belonging. Based on the table, the public and religious tourism function explains that the mosque is open as a tourism destination for diverse visitors with proper rules management to reinforce its position as an inclusive public space.

3.4 Distribution and Pattern of Visual Semiotics

An in-depth analysis of visual sign distribution indicates that the physical signifiers dominating public perception are the combination of the red-green color palette and the pagoda tower structure. The pattern of public meaning-making evolves hierarchically from the objective physical denotation to cultural connotations laden with values, ultimately crystallizing into a collective myth that the Cheng Ho Mosque is a natural representation of the identity "Palembang as a Tolerant City." This distribution pattern empirically proves that architecture functions not merely as a facility for ritual

worship, but has successfully transformed into an inclusive "Third Space" that is welcoming to all layers of society across faiths and ethnicities.

3.5 Discussion

Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang operates through three tiers of signification. On the denotative level, visual elements such as the dominance of red, green, and golden yellow, pagoda-style roofs, 17-meter-tall five-tiered minarets, and oriental ornaments exist as objective, observable physical facts. On the connotative level, these elements undergo an expansion of meaning, transforming into symbols of happiness, Islamic spirituality, tolerance, and cultural acculturation that have been consulted with religious scholars to ensure compliance with Islamic law (*sharia*). Furthermore, on the mythical level, the public accepts the mosque's existence as a natural reality, viewing it as a collective symbol of harmony and cross-ethnic tolerance in the city of Palembang.

The acculturation process at this mosque operates through mechanisms of cultural adaptation and selection, where Chinese elements are embraced as visual identities without altering the building's primary function as a place of Islamic worship. The community's involvement, ranging from mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) during construction to ongoing social activities, demonstrates that this acculturation is well-received and has successfully integrated into the social space of the local community.

The Cheng Ho Mosque functions as a Third Space that accommodates dialogue and cultural negotiation among Chinese, Islamic, and local Palembang identities on an equal basis. The inclusive spatial management and persuasive communication from the management have successfully reduced prejudices, diminished stigmas against the Chinese community, and strengthened the social integration of a multicultural society.

Based on the preceding discussion, it is found that the architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang functions as a visual communication medium representing the acculturation of Islamic and Chinese cultures through Barthes' three tiers of semiotics, supported by the inclusive understanding of the local community shaped by Palembang's multicultural historical background. Furthermore, the combination of visual communication and polite interpersonal approaches from the management has proven effective in strengthening tolerance, reducing stigma against the Chinese community, and establishing the mosque as a Third Space for harmonious negotiation and interaction without erasing the original identities of each culture.

4. Conclusion

This research reveals that the architecture of the Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang is not merely a physical place of worship, but a medium of visual communication and a social space that represents cultural acculturation. Based on Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, visual elements such as colors, pagoda shapes, and oriental ornaments are signified denotatively as physical forms, connotatively as symbols of harmony between Islamic and Chinese cultures, and ultimately construct a collective myth regarding cross-ethnic tolerance. This acculturation process operates through mechanisms of cultural adaptation and selection without altering Islamic law (*sharia*), fully supported by the open participation of the local community. Furthermore, the mosque has successfully transformed into an inclusive "Third Space," where visitor-friendly spatial management and persuasive communication from the management have proven effective in reducing social stigmas, strengthening social integration, and reinforcing Palembang's image as a tolerant city.

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