




# A qualitative photographic analysis of Guardian figures in Chinese temples in Bali: visual rhetoric and cultural hybridity



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the guardian figures in Chinese temples across Bali visually represent cultural hybridity between Chinese religious traditions and Balinese symbolic aesthetics. Using a descriptive-interpretive qualitative approach based on the idea of visual rhetoric, this study examines seven temples across Balinese regencies. Photographic documentation and ethnographic interviews with temple representatives and craftsmen were conducted to collect data. In this sense, photography is a documentation tool, yet also a visual analysis method, providing a deeper interpretation of cultural negotiation. This study shows that while the guardian figures within the Chinese temples in Bali retain core Chinese iconographic elements, such as mythological animals and heroic deities, they also adopt Balinese traditional ornaments. Due to influenced by the both Chinese and Balinese heritage of the Chinese-Balinese community, these visual adaptations demonstrate a conscious integration of Balinese cultural identity within Chinese sacred forms. In this sense, guardian figures play a significant role as visual intermediaries within sacred spaces, representing both protective symbolism and the spatial hierarchy of the temple's design. Ultimately, this study contributes to the understanding of transcultural religious design and provides insights into the role of visual culture as a medium of spiritual expression and the construction of hybrid identity within a multicultural urban environment.



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## 1. Introduction

Chinese people in Bali have a long-established relationship with Balinese people and culture since the pre-colonial period. The Chinese community in Bali has blended into Hindu-Balinese society's daily life and culture in varying degrees – socio-culture (*e.g.*, the Chinese in Carangsari and Padangbai villages are all registered as desa pakraman members, thus obligate to follow the *awig-awig* or traditional customary laws and regulations) [1]–[3]; arts, folklore, dances (*e.g.*, the evidences of *geguritan Sampik* and *Ingtai* folklore, Baris Cina dance, *Gong Beri* musical instruments, also *Barong Landung* puppets and dance) [4]–[8], architectures (*e.g.*, the gate design of *candi kurung* that takes the form of three-tiered pagoda, and the use of Chinese ornaments in some individual buildings within the Karangasem Palace) [8]–[12]; rituals and rites (*e.g.*, the veneration to *subandar* shrine and the use of *kepeng money* as ritual objects along with Balinese traditional offerings) [13], [14]. This integration is followed by the desire of the Chinese community to preserve and maintain their shared heritage culture in a Chinese temple, a religious place, yet it also functions as a social and cultural space. By this, Chinese temples in Bali combine Chinese and Balinese traditional elements within their building design. Basically, Chinese temples in Bali are designed according to Chinese traditional architecture precepts

[15]–[21], emphasising Chinese vivid colors and Chinese features, in particular heroic or divine statues and paintings that are displayed at the entrances of the Chinese temple and believed as the guardians of the temple. Interestingly, in Bali, such figures are not only positioned within traditional Chinese gates but are also integrated with local Balinese architectural features, such as the *Kori Agung* gate. As can be exemplified in Fig. 1, a pair of guardian figures in a Chinese temple in Denpasar City is placed at the front of a Balinese traditional gate of *Kori Agung*.



**Fig 1.** A Pair of Guardian Figures at the Entrance of Oong Tay Jen Temple in Denpasar City

There are a number of recent studies about Chinese temples in Indonesia focused mostly on architectural layout [22]–[25], general artistic hybridity [26], and sociological dynamics of intercultural adaptation [27], [28]. Despite these existing studies, research on Chinese temples in Bali – particularly the visual rhetoric and symbolic meaning embedded in guardian figures – remains underexplored. In addition to this, scholars like Lip [16], [18], and Jiang [20] have also provided extensive insights on Chinese temple architecture and the cosmological role of guardian figures in the traditional Chinese context. Meanwhile, Balinese architecture and ornamentation have been widely explored by Gelebet [29] and Pratama *et al.* [30], particularly their symbolic role in sacred and domestic spaces. Nevertheless, there is a noticeable gap in how these two traditions interact visually and symbolically, specifically in hybrid figures of the temple guardians. In other words, the literature lacks a critical examination of how guardian figures in Chinese temples in Bali visually represent a negotiation of cultural identity between Chinese cosmology and Balinese religious aesthetics.

This study investigates the particular visual adaptations of guardian figures at Chinese temples in Bali by identifying the concrete visual elements, such as the incorporation of Balinese ornamental forms, colors, and dimensions that reflect the integration of Balinese cultural aesthetics into traditionally Chinese religious figures. The research focuses on how these visual elements embody the hybrid identity of Chinese-Balinese communities and understanding the cultural negotiation reflected in these hybrid guardian forms in Chinese temples across Bali. Therefore, this study addresses that gap by focusing on the visual and symbolic characteristics of guardian figures found at the entrances of Chinese temples in Bali. Using visual content analysis and rhetorical interpretation, this study seeks to aims to determine: (1) what traditional Chinese visual features have been preserved or maintained? (2) What specific Balinese visual elements are adopted? and (3) how do these figures convey cultural adaptation and religious function within a hybrid sacred environment? Ultimately, it is necessary to investigate the visual elements of guardian figures in Chinese temples in Bali to provide an understanding of how these figures mediate religious messages and how they reflect the intersection of Chinese and Balinese traditions. This study offers a new approach to understanding the visual imagery of guardian figures in Chinese temples in Bali by highlighting the discourse on cross-cultural sacred space design, religious hybridity, and visual narrative construction in multicultural settings.

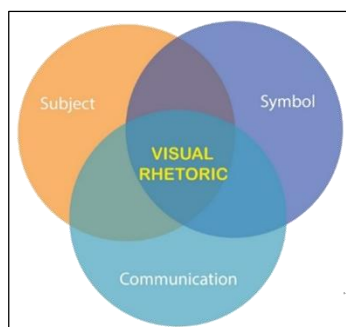
## 2. Method

This study focuses on identifying and interpreting the visual and symbolic elements of the guardian figures of Chinese temples in Bali, emphasising how Balinese cultural elements are adopted into traditionally Chinese religious iconography. Therefore, this study employs a descriptive-interpretive qualitative approach, guided by visual rhetoric theory [31], to explore how visual forms communicate spiritual and cultural meanings. Seven Chinese temples distributed across different regencies in Bali - Denpasar, Badung, Gianyar, Klungkung, Tabanan, Buleleng, and Jembrana - are the objects of this study (Fig. 2). These Chinese temples were selected using purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) the presence of visible guardian figures (either in 2D paintings or murals or 3D sculptures), (2) visual evidence of Balinese ornamental or symbolic integration, and (3) accessibility for photographic documentation and ethnographic engagement. In addition, temples were chosen to reflect diversity in historical background and cultural integration to increase representativeness and variation in local adaptations.



**Fig 2.** The Location of Chinese Temples in Bali

Data collection in this study was carried out using photographic documentation, capturing their forms, colors, and dimensions. The photographic documentation used a digital SLR camera (Nikon D7100) with fixed settings (ISO 200, f/2.8, natural lighting) to maintain image quality and consistency. Each guardian figure was documented from multiple angles (frontal, side, close-up on ornaments, and contextual placement at entrance areas). In this sense, photography is considered an appropriate visual medium for this study as it enables conveying meaning through subjects, symbols, and communication. This is parallel to the three rhetorical elements - subject, symbol, and communication - that are used as the framework for analysis in this study (Fig. 3). Specifically, these three elements provide the analytical framework to identify, investigate and understand how these guardian figures act as visual elements that mediate spiritual messages and traditional Chinese culture expressions. Complementary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with temple representatives, community leaders, and temple craftsmen involved in the temples' design or construction process. Field notes and sketches were used to support contextual observations.



**Fig 3.** The three components of visual rhetoric

The visual data in this study were constructed into a visual matrix table as a practical tool according to their forms (the general shape and identity of the figure), colors (the dominant and secondary color tones used, which were later interpreted through Chinese and Balinese symbolic frameworks), and dimensions (whether the figure is presented in two-dimensional (painting or mural) or three-dimensional (sculpture or relief) form to identify and understand the significant features of these guardian figures. This study used a systematic visual content analysis, focusing on three core components of visual rhetoric: (1) subjects (what is visually presented?); (2) symbols (what the elements mean within cultural frameworks?); and (3) communication (how meaning is conveyed to the viewer or community?). The analysis was conducted directly by the researcher using a systematic procedure, combining empirical visual observation, derived from photographic documentation and field notes, with theoretical frameworks drawn from visual rhetoric, Chinese cosmology, and Balinese symbolic systems. Semi-structured interviews and informal dialogues with temple representatives, local craftsmen, and community elders who possess cultural and religious knowledge relevant to the visual elements under study were also conducted to enhance interpretive validity and minimize subjectivity. The verbal testimonies obtained from these sources were instrumental in validating symbolic interpretations, elucidating the cultural rationale behind specific design features, and affirming the intentional incorporation of Balinese visual motifs within the context of Chinese religious iconography. This triangulated approach ensured that the analysis remained both culturally grounded and methodologically transparent.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. The Significance of Gateways and Guardian Figures in Chinese Architecture

Entrance has a uniqueness in visual and perceptual, as it functions as the primary nexus for transit and circulation, connecting interior and exterior domains, also from secular to sacred area [20], [32], [33]. Traditionally, the entrance can also be viewed as a focal point within an area or a building, placed in the central axis line and generating an imaginary line and reflecting a sense of monumentality and sacredness [17]. This axiality principle also generates the symmetrical balance of the space and territory. In Chinese culture, entrance is not merely tangible, but it is also a transition point for the dead, the spirits, and fortunes in making a connection between the spiritual and physical realms [20]. Thus, in this sense, it is common to place guardian figures either flanking the entrance or painted on the door of a Chinese temple. In other words, entrance into a Chinese temple contributes not merely utilitarian but also aesthetic value and reflects religious value. The veneration of door gods (*men-shen* 門神) in Chinese culture has been developed since the myth about the existence of two demigods - *Shentu* (神荼) and *Yulei* (郁垒) – spread (Fig. 4). It is believed that they stand at the gate of ghosts within the enormous celestial *tao-mu* (桃木) or the peach tree to superintendence over all the ghosts [34], [35]. Since then, the Chinese people practice this belief by displaying a guardian gate visual in the form of a statue or painting within the residence or a Chinese temple to protect the household from evil. Appearing in pairs, most images of door gods take the form of Shenlu-Yulei and Shubao-Yuchi Gong and heroic forms, for instance, Zhong Kui, Qin Shubao, Yuchi Gong, Wei Zheng, Mu Guiying, and Guan Gong [20], [36].

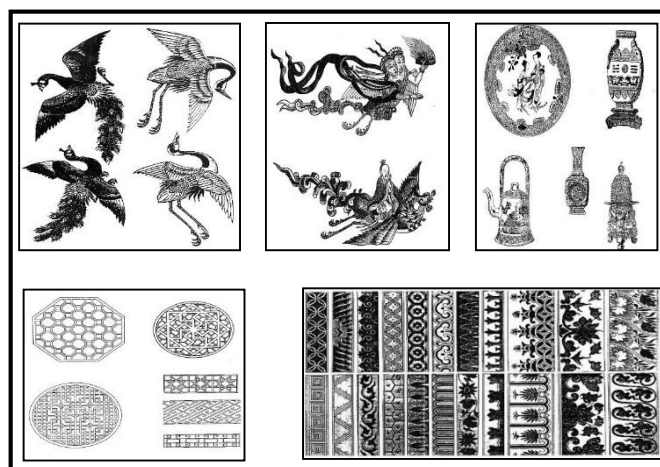
The symbolic role of gates is further emphasized through their layout, ornamentation, and colour scheme. According to Lip [16], [18], [37], traditional Chinese gates adhere to the principles of *Feng Shui*, aligning spaces with cosmic energies and directing the flow of *chi* to cultivate spiritual harmony. The gates are meticulously designed to create a balance between form and function, making their placement, orientation, and decoration integral to their role as spiritual thresholds. The colours applied to gates and their ornamentation also carry profound meanings. These colours are: (1) red colour, associated with the fire element and represents truth and sincerity, also prosperity, good fortune, and happiness; (2) yellow or gold colour, associated with a royal colour and the earth element representing grandeur, power, and authority; (3) green colour, associated with the wood element and used to symbolise longevity; (4) black colour symbolises darkness and is associated with the water element; (5) white colour, associated with the gold element and having meaning for mourning, sorrow, and death; and (6) blue colour symbolises heavenly blessings and represents the colour of sky.





**Fig 4.** The Illustration Images of *Shentu* (left) and *Yulei* (right)

In addition to colour, the significant characteristic of Chinese temple design is depicted through the utilization of ornaments and colours. Basically, there are seven types of Chinese traditional ornaments (Fig. 5), as following [37], [38]: (1) Mythical creatures such as dragons, lions, and phoenixes, symbolizing immortality, protection, and cosmic balance; (2) Botanical forms such as bamboo and pine, denoting resilience, immortality, and the continuity of life; (3) Human or heroic figures representing divine immortals or ancestral warriors; (4) Natural forces (thunder, lightning) and geometric patterns that signify cosmic order and spirituality; (5) Chinese auspicious words and motifs (such as the character for 'fortune'), highlighting wishes for prosperity, protection, and communal well-being.



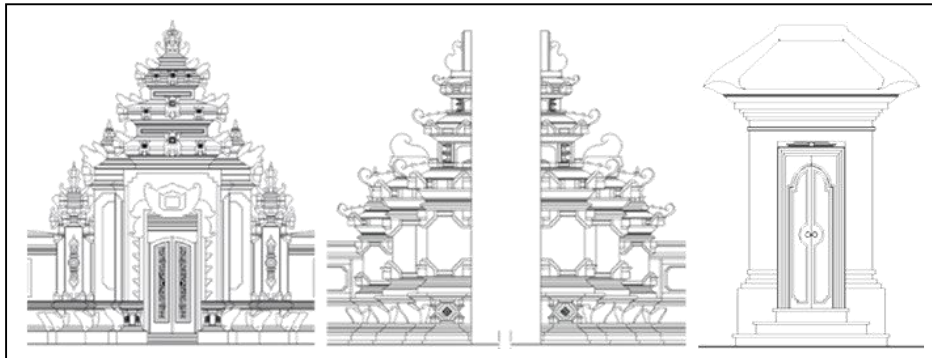
**Fig 5.** The Example of Chinese Traditional Ornaments

These decorative elements and colour schemes are intentionally aligned with Feng Shui practices and traditional Chinese spiritual aesthetics, making the gate an architectural statement that is simultaneously a devotional site, an expression of heritage, and a conduit for cosmic energies. As Kohl [21] and Matthews [37] emphasize, every visual component - from the layout of gates to the details of ornaments and the symbolism of colour - operates in concert, making the gate itself a sacred icon. In this sense, the gate operates not merely as a barrier or point of entry, but as an active mediator between the earthly and the spiritual worlds, a site where heritage, belief, and communal identity converge.

### 3.2. Gateways as Ritual Spaces in Balinese Architecture

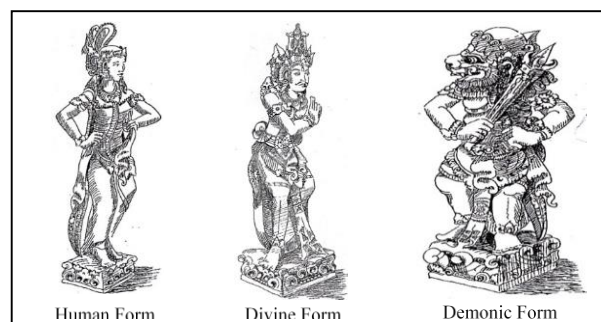
In the traditional architecture of Bali, there are three types of Balinese traditional gates distinguished by their size, form, and number of entrance openings (Fig. 6) [29]. The first type is *kori*, the highest stratum level of the Balinese traditional entrance type, and is used to enter the inner courtyard and is usually opened during the auspicious days or temple festivals to

welcome the deity(s). The second type is *candi bentar*, a similar form to kori, but the entrance in the middle splits the gate into two parts. This divided entrance is the manifestation of a cracked mountain that will capture every negative effect passing through it. A *candi bentar* is usually placed as the main gate connecting the outer and middle courtyards. Last is *angkul-angkul*, the simplest Balinese traditional gate, with the entrance opening in the middle and designed with a hipped roof. This simplest type of Balinese traditional gate is usually used as the side entrance from the outer to the middle courtyards.



**Fig 6.** Kori (left), *candi bentar* (middle), *angkul-angkul* (right)

The notion of the gate is intrinsically interconnected to the *Tri Mandala* spatial layout of Balinese temples that are divided into three zones - *nista mandala* (outer area), *madya mandala* (middle area), and *utama mandala* (inner area). The gate signifies the boundary between these zones, acting as both a literal and symbolic portal for devotees and deities alike [29]. Its placement, design, and ornamentation are meticulously calculated to embody a spiritual significance that guides worshippers from the temporal, earthly realm into the spiritual, sacred space. In addition, the colours in Balinese traditional architecture essentially comprise natural and painted colours [29], derived from the use of natural materials, such as red brick or sandstone, depending on the availability of local material resources. To guard this threshold, traditional Balinese gates feature statues and reliefs imbued with spiritual potency. Guardian figures in Hindu-Balinese temples are depicted in human, divine, and demonic forms, each symbolizing different aspects of spiritual protection [29], [39], [40]. In this sense, human figures represent loyal warriors, divine figures embody sacred power and purity, and demonic figures - such as *Bhuta Kala* - serve to ward off evil with their fierce, intimidating features (Fig. 7). This variation reflects the Balinese concept of *Rwa Bhineda* (cosmic duality) and supports the temple's spiritual structure by maintaining balance between positive and negative forces within sacred space.



**Fig 7.** Guardian Figures in Hindu-Balinese Temples

In addition to this, figures such as the *Barong* - a lion-like mythological beast - and the *Karang Boma* - a monstrous, protective entity with bulging eyes and sharp teeth - dominate the iconographic programme of the gate. The *Barong* is a symbol of communal protection and spiritual balance, representing the force of *dharma* (cosmic order) against *adharma* (disorder). The *Karang Boma*, is typically designed in atop gates and temple walls, reflecting a visual and

spiritual warning, warding off malevolent forces and safeguarding holy spaces [4], [40] (Fig. 8). These images operate within the Balinese belief in the dual nature of reality - the *sekala* (visible) and the *niskala* (invisible) - ensuring that both the tangible and spiritual dimensions of a site remain in balance.

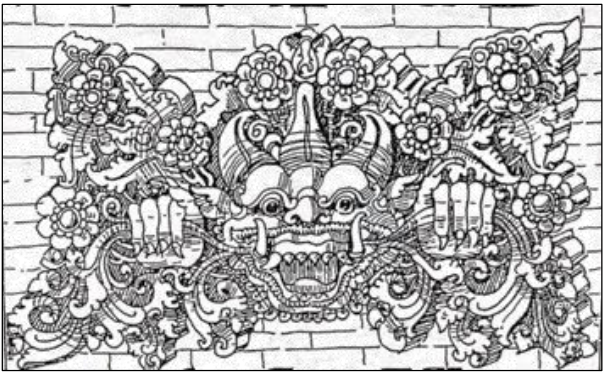




Fig 8. The Figure of Karang Boma

In this sense, the Balinese traditional gates imply not merely as architectural elements but also as sacred narratives that reflect deep spiritual truths. It reflects the profound role of architectural design in mediating between the spiritual and earthly worlds within Balinese religious life. The gates' design is completed with intricate *patra* and *kekarangan* ornaments - decorative elements inspired by nature, symbolizing the life-sustaining forces of the earth and aligning sacred spaces with the cosmic order [29].



















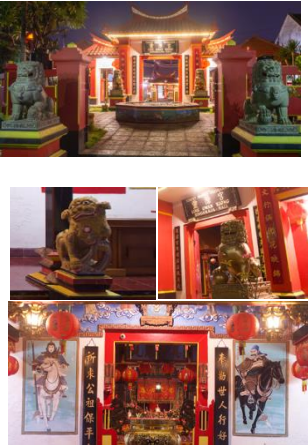










3.3. The Variation of Visual Elements of Guardian Figures in Chinese Temples in Bali

The figures identified in this study are sacred figures located at the outer gate or entrance area of Chinese temples and at the doors of buildings in the Chinese temple's complex. Identification is focused on the forms, colors, and dimensions of the figures, so that variations in the shape of the figures of gods and goddesses, heroic figures, and mythological animals are obtained. The color variations used include red, yellow/gold, blue, green, black, and white, and the dimensions of the Chinese temples' guard figures are in the form of two-dimensional and three-dimensional shapes. These variations are described in more detail in Table 1.

Tabel 1. The Variation of Form, Colour, and Dimension of Guardian Figures in Chinese Temples in Bali

Chinese Temple	Form	Colour	Dimension
Denpasar Oong Tay Jen			2D & 3D



Chinese Temple	Form	Colour	Dimension
Badung Caow Eng Bio		     	2D & 3D
Gianyar Amurva Bhumi		   	3D
Klungkung Zhong Yi Miao			3D
Tabanan Kong Co Bio Batu Meringgit		  	3D
Singaraja Ling Gwan Kiong		     	2D & 3D
Negara Cung Ling Bio		  	3D

3.4. Subjects: The Visual Forms

The guardian figures variations in Chinese temples across Bali regencies can be categorised according to their positions within the temple complex - at the gates of the complex and on the door leaves of the temple buildings (Fig. 9). At the gates, the guardian figures are depicted as lion statues and placed it in symmetrical pairs - the male lion on the left and the female lion on the right - symbolizing the dualistic balance of *yang* and *yin* energies. The male lion is depicted with a paw resting upon a sphere, representing power, strength, and protection. The female lion



is shown nurturing a cub, embodying care, life, and continuity. This pair of lion statues signifies the harmonious interplay between opposing forces - masculinity and femininity, earth and heaven - a fundamental tenet of traditional Chinese cosmology [41].



**Fig 9.** The Chinese Lion (left), Goddesses (middle), and Heroic Figures (right)

The guardian images at the door leaves of the Chinese temple predominantly delineate gods, goddesses, and heroic figures. These images are designed in two-dimensional reliefs or painted murals. The gods' and goddesses' figures are in authoritative postures and serene, holding ritual objects such as ceremonial candles, incense sticks, or flutes. These attributes reflect their role as intermediaries between the men and spiritual realms, whilst their serene expressions signify spiritual integrity, benevolence, and wisdom. In addition to this, the heroic figures are typically designed in dynamic and commanding stances, carrying weapons or depicted astride horses. These heroic figures' expressions represent martial strength, vigilance, and the protective role in preserving the security and sanctity of the temple space. In the sense of color, both the guardian statues and images use predominant colors of red, yellow or gold, black, and white. These colors adhere to traditional Chinese visual precepts, representing both symbolic and functional roles within the temple context.

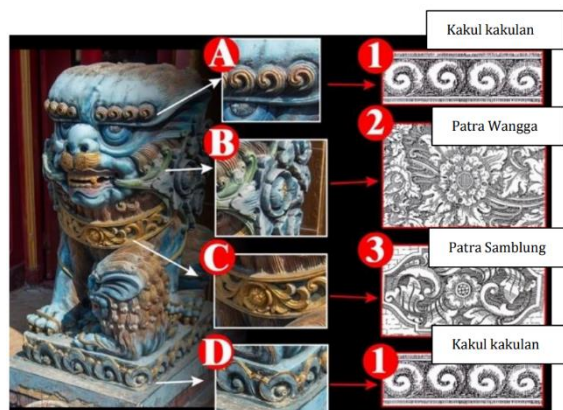
### 3.5. Symbols: The Evolution of Meaning Through Cross-Cultural Ornamentation and Color

The adoption of Balinese traditional elements can be identified through the use of Balinese lion expression and Balinese traditional ornaments. Fig. 10 depicts a lion figure that resembles the Balinese lion of *barong* in the shape and color of the eyes. In this sense, *barong* has a parallel shape and form in Hindu-Balinese and Buddhism, also believed to provide protection to their adherents from negative energies [42].



**Fig 10.** The Chinese Lion Resembles *Tapel Barong*

Fig. 11 shows the adoption of Balinese traditional ornaments in the form of plants *kakul-kakulan* on the eyebrows or base of the statue, *patra wangga* on the side of the face, and *patra samblung* attached to the neck necklace.



**Fig 11.** The Chinese Lion Adopts Balinese Traditional Ornaments in the Form of Plants

Fig. 12 shows the facial expression of *karang boma* and adopts *patra mas-masan* ornaments on the necklace. All of those Balinese traditional ornaments adopt plants (*kakul-kakulan*, *patra wangga*, *patra samblung*, *patra mas-masan*) and animal (*karang boma*) forms, representing three essential components – humankind, animal, plant – in the realm of men [29]. In this sense, *karang boma* is a Balinese traditional carving ornament taking the form of a giant monster head showing its hands, fingers, and sharpened nails, and surrounded with floral patterns.



**Fig 12.** The Chinese Lion Shows the Facial Expression of *Karang Boma* and Adopts *Patra Mas-Masan*

In addition to this, the symbolic meanings of color in both cultures have reflected compatibilities. In traditional Chinese culture, red signifies prosperity, protection, and spiritual strength; black symbolizes the unseen or hidden realm and serves as a potent deterrent to malevolent forces; gold conveys immortality, sacred status, and imperial heritage; white signifies purification and spiritual renewal [16], [18]. In Hindu Balinese, the symbolic resonance of these colors assumes new depth within the *Rwa Bhineda* concept, wherein balance is sought between opposing forces. Red, representing prosperity and spiritual strength, assumes an added role in ritual offerings, aligning with its association with holy spaces and sacred energy. A significant symbol of immortality in traditional Chinese temples, gold also resonates in Balinese sacred places as a symbol of spiritual sovereignty and pure brightness. Similar to how black in Chinese culture denotes hidden or unseen spiritual powers, black-and-white *poleng* cloth in Balinese culture represents the interplay between holy and profane, life and death, order and chaos. In contrast, white, which symbolises spiritual rebirth and immortality, takes on a more significant significance in the Balinese culture, congruent with the sanctity and purification connected to sacred rites and sacrifices. Those Chinese lions' visual designs were

also determined considering the Chinese-Balinese community has become accustomed to the application of Balinese traditional ornaments in their daily life. Moreover, they also adopted the Balinese traditional ornaments in their residences or other buildings.

*"Sudah dari dulu kami pakai ornamen Bali di kongco. Bentuk-bentuk seperti patra, barong, karang boma itu biasa dipakai. Karena memang kita hidup di Bali, jadi unsur Bali itu juga bagian dari identitas kami di sini. Tidak ada masalah, malah jadi ciri khas kami di Bali" (personal interview with the coordinator of the Chinese temple, 8 October 2024).*

Translate:

*"We have been using Balinese ornaments in Chinese temples for a long time. Forms such as patra, barong, and karang boma are commonly used. Because we live in Bali, Balinese elements are also part of our identity here. There is no problem, in fact it has become our characteristic in Bali" (personal interview with the coordinator of the Chinese temple, 8 October 2024).*

In addition to this, the Chinese-Balinese community hired local craftsmen to design and construct the Chinese lion guardian figure. Guided by the design reference(s) provided by the local community, the local craftsmen sometimes suggested including Balinese traditional ornaments in the design or during the construction for the Chinese-Balinese community. Despite the local craftsmen giving space to improvement by the Chinese-Balinese community, they maintained the significant characteristics of the Chinese lion design.

*"Kami yang mengerjakan patung-patung dan ornamen di kongco ini memang orang Bali semua. Biasanya kami diberi contoh gambar, tapi tidak harus sama persis. Masih bisa kami olah lagi, yang penting bentuk dasarnya tetap kelihatan. Jadi kami masih bisa berkreasi, pakai gaya Bali juga tidak masalah" (interview with craftsman, December 14, 2024).*

Translate:

*"Those who worked on the statues and ornaments in this temple are all Balinese. Usually, we are given sample pictures, but they don't have to be exactly the same. We can still process them further, as long as the basic shape is still visible. So we can still be creative, using Balinese style is also not a problem" (personal interview with the craftsman, 14 December 2024).*

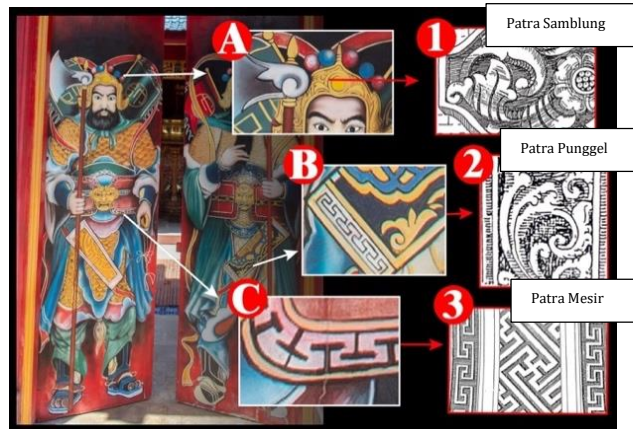
The use of other traditional Balinese elements can be identified through the guardian figures of the Chinese temples in Bali, both in 2D (paintings/drawings) and 3D objects (statues). As depicted by Fig. 13 and Fig. 14, the form of Balinese traditional plant ornaments is on the crown decorations, belts, and clothing decorations, adopted along with the spear weapon, as in the Balinese traditional of *Baris Tombak Dance*. This dance is a variation of *Baris Gede Dance* – a category of Baris Dance using a long spear as a war weapon. Baris Dance is performed as religious and heroic dances [30]. The adoption of the spear weapon as depicted in Fig. 9 was determined by the Chinese temple founder's background as the offspring of Balinese parents and practicing the Hindu-Balinese system of belief. The Chinese temple founder initiated the pair of divine figures at the Chinese temple holds Balinese traditional spears to represent the Balinese heroic element.

*"Kenapa waktu itu saya pilih tombak sebagai atributnya, karena saya memang terinspirasi dari tari Baris Tombak. Saya orang Bali dan dari kecil sudah akrab dengan budaya dan tarian-tarian Bali, termasuk tari Baris. Dalam tradisi Bali, tombak itu bukan sekadar senjata, tapi simbol keberanian dan kepahlawanan. Jadi saya rasa pas kalau dipakai untuk menggambarkan karakter tokoh di kongco ini" (personal interview with the Chinese temple founder, 8 October 2024).*

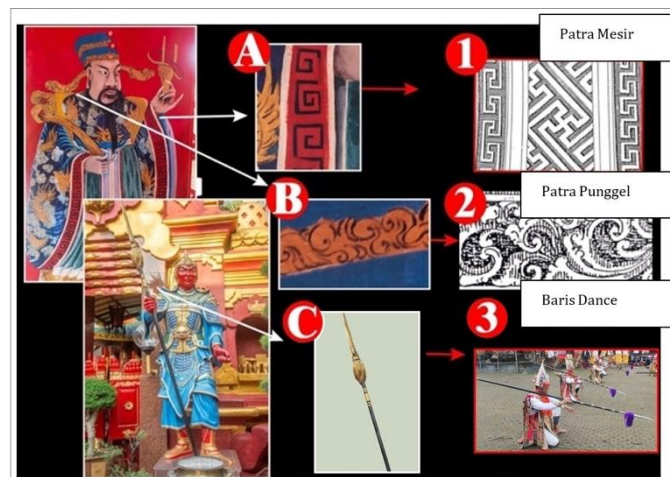


Translate:

*"Why did I choose a spear as an attribute at that time, because I was inspired by the Baris Tombak Dance. I am Balinese and since childhood I have been familiar with Balinese culture and dances, including the Baris Dance. In Balinese tradition, the spear is not just a weapon, but a symbol of courage and heroism. So I think it is fitting if it is used to describe the character of the figure in a Chinese temple" (personal interview with the Chinese temple founder, 8 October 2024).*



**Fig 13.** The Chinese Lion Shows the Facial Expression of *Karang Boma* and Adopts *Patra Mas-Masan*



**Fig 14.** The Chinese Lion Shows the Facial Expression of *Karang Boma* and Adopts *Patra Mas-Masan*

### 3.6. Communication

The placement and design of the guardian figures within Chinese temples across Bali illustrate a spatial and hierarchical communication that operates on both ritualistic and symbolic levels. At the gates of the temple complex, lion statues assume their role as sacred protectors, signifying the threshold between the profane and sacred realms. Whilst the depiction of gods, goddesses, and heroic figures at the door leaves of the temple buildings reflects a higher level of sacred status within this hierarchical structure, representing the intimate sphere of spiritual interaction and devotional practice. The spatial hierarchy within the Chinese temple also resonates with the Balinese *Tri Mandala* layout notion - the outer courtyard (*nista mandala*) functions as a space of purification; the middle courtyard (*madya mandala*) as an area for ritual preparation; and the inner courtyard (*utama mandala*) as the sacred space. In this sense, the guardian statues that embody Chinese and Balinese characteristics play a significant role as mediators within this spatial context. They enable worshippers to transition from the worldly realm to a sacred space, in parallel with traditional Chinese symbolic gestures, with the deeply embedded spiritual order of Bali. Furthermore, this symbolic interaction is



heightened by ceremonial offerings. Offerings to guardians and deities are customarily made in China as a way to show filial devotion and veneration while requesting protection and blessings. Whilst the Balinese believe that humans and the spiritual world are reciprocal, and offerings like *canang sari*, which are made of flowers, leaves, and fruit, represent a person's spiritual sacrifice and thanksgiving to the gods in Bali [5], [42], [43]. These offerings allow devotional practices to converge when put on Chinese lion statues and temple gates, fusing Balinese and Chinese ritual expressions into a seamless, lived experience (Fig. 15).



**Fig 15.** The Mixture of Offerings on the Chinese Lion

One essential means of visual communication in these contexts is the use of colour. The Balinese symbolic order resonates with the traditional Chinese colour scheme of the sculptures, which includes red for defence and spiritual strength, gold for immortality and sacred status, black for spiritual depth and invisible energies, and white for purification. In this sense, the areas where these statues are placed serve as forums for intercultural spiritual discourse because of the way these colour schemes and their manifestation on the statues create a multi-layered visual language that cuts across all cultural boundaries. In addition to this, as a Chinese and Balinese descendant, the Chinese-Balinese community also communicates the Balinese culture by adopting traditional Balinese ornaments without dominating or influencing the actual form, thus the significant characteristics of Chinese traditional features are maintained. This means that the guardian figures of Chinese temples in Bali are an ongoing dialogue between Chinese and Balinese cultures, representing ancestral religious and cultural forms.

*“Budaya Bali dan budaya Tionghoa sudah seperti dua sisi dari kehidupan kami. Kami tidak mencoba mencampur secara sembarangan, tapi lebih pada bagaimana keduanya bisa hadir berdampingan. Misalnya dalam dekorasi atau acara keagamaan, kami tetap jaga keaslian masing-masing unsur. Tidak ada yang lebih dominan, semua saling menghormati,” (personal interview with the coordinator of the Chinese temple, 14 December 2024).*

Translate:

*“Balinese and Chinese cultures are like two sides of our lives. We do not try to mix them carelessly, but rather how both can exist side by side. For example, in decorations or religious events, we maintain the authenticity of each element. No one is more dominant, everyone respects each other” (personal interview with the coordinator of the Chinese temple, 14 December 2024)*

#### 4. Conclusion

The guardian figures within the Chinese temple in Bali in this study demonstrate a deliberate visual negotiation between Chinese iconographic traditions and Balinese cultural elements, resulting in the hybrid form of guardian figures. In this sense, these guardian figures are designed according to traditional Chinese cosmology, yet also adopt the Balinese traditional

ornaments in the form of *karang boma*, *patra* ornaments, and *Baris* dance attributes. The hybrid form of guardian figures within the Chinese temple in Bali is influenced by the combined ancestry of the Chinese-Balinese population, rather than a surface-level fusion. It can be seen as the community's approach to preserving their traditions and adapting to the local culture. In this sense, the Balinese traditional ornaments are not adopted as mere ornaments, but it is also embed the symbolic meaning, in particular the transformation from metaphysical guards to dualistic guardians in keeping with local mythology. In addition to practically advancing art, design, and cultural preservation, this research adds to the scholarly conversation on cultural hybridity and visual rhetoric in sacred architecture. In addition to being a resource for recording hybrid heritage in modern settings, it promotes culturally sensitive design methods. The study's limitations include its emphasis on visual analysis rather than comprehensive anthropological data. Future studies should look at ritual usage and interpretation by the larger community to improve our knowledge of symbolic change in mixed religious settings.

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### Declarations

- Author contribution** : RDSD: conceptualize and design the study research idea, analyze data, and write an article, FH: develop research method, theoretical framework, analyze data, and write an article, ABS: develop research method, theoretical framework, analyze data, and write an article, GARP: data collection and write an article.
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