

# Aesthetical and Philosophical Values of Mu Yi (Wooden Fish) in Vihara Buddhi Bandung

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**Abstract:** Vihara Buddhi, formerly known as “Female Temple”, is a sacred place where Chinese people in Indonesia worship their Gods and do their rituals. Chinese Indonesians adhere to *Sanjiao* teaching. Sanjiao means Three Teachings; a syncretic form of three main religions or teachings: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. This form is strictly adhered by mostly Chinese Indonesians. Vihara Buddhi is located in Bandung, and operated by a group of priestesses called *Zhai Ji*, came from marginalized women of Hakka Tribe. As a result of syncretism in *Sanjiao* teachings, there are many kinds of ritual objects as artifact in the temple, derived from Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. The most important amongst those artifact is (*Mu Yi*) wooden Fish, it is the most popular artifact and ritual object amongst Chinese Indonesian. Research questions: 1. What is the aesthetical value of wooden Fish in Vihara Buddhi, Bandung? 2. What is the philosophical value of the wooden Fish in Vihara Buddhi, Bandung? In this research i use qualitative methods: Direct observation, data collecting and interview. I use Eastern Aesthetic theory as an ideal approach to have a comprehensive result. The results confirm the aesthetical value of wooden Fish shown in the material and style of the artifact. The artifact is made from deep polished wood. Its round and hollow shape is designed in a certain way to fulfill its function as a ritual object which gives a certain sound when it is struck. The style of the artifact is similar to Japan wooden fish (*mokugyo*), and is different with Korea wooden fish (*moktak*). Philosophical values contained in the wooden fish is related to symbolic in Chinese Buddhism about wakeful attention, wealth and abundance.

**Keyword:** *Aesthetical Value, Philosophical Value, Wooden Fish, Sanjiao, Female Temple*

## Introduction

San Jiao or Three Teachings is the manifestation of syncretism of Chinese people’s three main beliefs: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism (Kwa Tong Hay, 2013: 20). Depictions of Buddha, Confucius, and Lao Tze, the prominent leaders of each respective belief, are usually placed highly on the altar. The spirit of Chinese people has long been aligned with that of modern spirituality, which sees one goal albeit different beliefs. In Mandarin, this is called 三而一也 (“san er yi ye”): “three is one”, or 含三为一 (“han-san wei-yi”): “one which consists of three”. The founder of Three Teachings, Lin Chao En (1517-1598), lived during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) in China. His teaching of blending Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, peaks in the 16th century (Perkumpulan Tridharma: 2015), when an important literature is written and titled *Xiyouji* by Wu Cheng En; it is the story of a mythical monkey king named Sun Wukong. The story is filled with Tao belief (spirits and spiritual realms), but the main character is a Buddhist monk named Tang Xuanzang who sets off to India (the West) to seek for the Buddhist holy bible. Wu Cheng En himself is a Confucian writer (Bidang Litbang PTITD, 2007: 11).



**Figure 1.** Display of San Jiao altar, left to right: statue of Kong Hu Chu, Buddha, Lao Zi.  
([www.tridharma.co.id](http://www.tridharma.co.id))

The influence of *San Jiao* teachings in China slowly diminishes along with the introduction of Communism, which later takes off to become China's main ideology. Nevertheless, it is practiced in other countries where Chinese descendants live, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, and Indonesia. Currently in Indonesia, *San Jiao* teaching is officially known as Three Teachings and *Kelenteng* (temple) is recognized as a religious site called *Tempat Ibadah Tri Dharma (TTID)*/ Three Teachings place of worship (Tanggok, 2017: 27). Both policies are legitimized by the Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs on 19 November 1979. "*Kelenteng*" is an Indonesian name for a place of worship used by Chinese descendants in Indonesia. According to Sugiri Kustedja (2017: 3), the word "*Kelenteng*" is only used in Indonesian language and is not found in the Chinese vocabulary. Some linguists argue that the word comes from the "*teng-teng*" sound from inside the building whenever a ceremony is held. It is the sound of bells during reading of Buddhist *paritta* or ceremonies' main event (Kwa Tong Hay, 2013: 2). Alternatively, some people use the term "*pekong*". A *Kelenteng* is usually built by people who have the same family name and live in the same area (Tanggok, 2017: 27).

Over the years, political situations in Indonesia have always impacted the existence of *Kelenteng* as the place of worship for Chinese descendants. During the Old Order under Soekarno's regime, the government recognizes *Konghucu* as a religion, along with Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In the beginning of Soeharto's reign, *Konghucu* is still recognized; however, the government retracts the recognition in the 70s. This policy is effect of the G30S/PKI tragedy, which leads to a lot of *Kelenteng* buildings being forcefully closed. A practical solution for the problem is to provide a place to worship Buddha inside the building; permissions then are issued to change the name from *Kelenteng* to *Vihara*. This happened mostly in West Java, whereas in Central and East Java the name changes into *Tempat Ibadah Tri Dharma (TITD)* (Kustedja, 2017: 3).



Figure 2. Main gate of Tempat Ibadah Tri Dharma in Madura, East Java. ([www. situsbudaya.id](http://www.situsbudaya.id))

One of the kelenteng buildings that changes its name to Vihara is Vihara Buddhi that is located in Jl. Cibadak no. 281, Bandung, West Java. Vihara Buddhi is known as “Female Kelenteng” (this term shall be used in the article from this point on), which has been managed by a group of Hakka women who were marginalized since they were born. Based on the interview with the Director of Vihara Buddhi, which is also a Zhai Ji named Ms. Athien, the place was built in 1957 in Bandung. Ms. Athien works there because her father promised a daughter to the goddess, Guan Yin.



Figure 3. Main Gate of Vihara Buddhi, Bandung, West Java. (Tjutju Widjaja)

*Zhai Ji*, in Hakka dialect means “vegetarian sister”, refers to a group of female worshippers from Hakka sub-ethnic group in Meizhou; they are exclusively from this area. They are influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism; however, they do have a strong Buddhist tendency, that is why they are known as the “people’s Buddhism” (*Buddha Rakyat*). This group of worshippers live in a monastery and they are known as “*an*”; they can be considered as nuns although they are not bounded by any official Buddhist institutions. Along with Hakka diaspora, the *Zhai Ji* women are dispersed all the way to Indonesia. Consequently, we can find *Zhai Ji* temples in major cities, such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, Semarang, Tegal, and Bandung; even in rural areas in Central Java.



Figure 4. A group of Zhai Ji performing death ritual. (Tjutju Widjaja)

These *Zhai Ji* women were born in the late 19th century, when China was collapsing due to problems of drug addiction, Western countries' aggression, overwhelming corruptions, and failing economy. These problems have caused people to suffer, especially women. Among the poorest are the women of Hakka; they are unappreciated and have to work hard to provide for their families. Above all, they are also victims of domestic abuse. This condition has touched a *xianghua* monk to educate those marginalized women, be them widows, housewives, or children whom are abandoned.

They are taught literary skills, rituals, and five principals of wushu to serve other people in their daily lives or matters of death. In some cases, they are also believed to have powerful connection with the spiritual realm. These powers have earned them a higher degree than men and a recognition as 'ji' or 'ma'. From direct observation through visits to the Female Kelenteng of Vihara Buddhi and interview sessions with the head of *Zhai Ji*: Ms. Athien, there is one of the most important artifact amongst many artifacts: It is the (*mu yi*) wooden fish, placed on the main altar. This research aims to discuss aesthetic and philosophical values of the wooden fish. It attempts to reveal the aesthetic and philosophical values of the wooden fish, so that it deepens and preserves the Chinese culture specifically in Bandung.



Figure 5. Wooden Fish (Mu Yi), in the main altar of Vihara Buddhi, Bandung. (Tjutju Widjaja)

Year 2013, the book: "Dewa Dewi Kelenteng" (Gods and Goddesses of Chinese Temples), by Kwa Tong Hay. This book discusses the identity of Gods and Goddesses that are commonly found in the Temple. There is an explanation of the various religious, philosophical, historical, mythical and legendary values associated with each of the gods and goddesses characterized by

popular Chinese religious beliefs. In addition to the identity of God and Goddess, there is no explanation about other types of ritual objects commonly used in the Women Temple. It is necessary to conduct research that analyzes other ritual objects that are used in the temple other than the Gods and Goddess categories, along with the explanation of the aesthetic aspect.

Year 2017, book: “Klenteng xie tian gong (hiap thien kiong, Vihara satya buddhi) & tiga luitenant Tionghoa di Bandung” (Xie Tian Gong Temple & The Three Chinese Luitenant) , by Sugiri Kustedja. This book discusses one of Chinese Temples in Bandung with explanation of its architecture and its meaning. There is an explanation about the historical background of Chinese Temple in Indonesia along with the socio-political conditions that affect it. There are also explanations about the artifacts in the form of God and Goddess statues, from the aspects of identity and religious values. There is no explanation of Female Temple and the artifacts contained therein.

Chinese culture has become an integral part of identity of the Indonesia nation. Preservation of Indonesian culture means preserving the Chinese culture that is an integral part of the history of the Indonesia nation. The existence of the Female Temple and Zhai Ji and the artifacts in it is an important element for the Chinese Indonesian society because it contains the values of art, culture, ethics and religion that is still firmly adhered by the Chinese people in Indonesia. The problem is the lack of research on the Female Temple, Zhai Ji and the artifacts, so that the literature on the subject is very difficult to find in Indonesia.

## **Method**

This research employs a qualitative method. It is done descriptively using analysis of different data, theories, and observation to support the findings. Data is achieved through three methods: literature study, interview, and direct observation of the wooden fish in Vihara Buddhi. Literary data includes knowledge of the religion, aesthetics, history, mythology, and creation process; it is done through analysis of books and journal articles. The interviews are done with the Zhai Ji who leads the kelenteng, whereas the observation is focused on gathering visual data of the wooden fish.

## ***Theoretical Bases***

### *Extrinsic and Intrinsic Values of Art*

Every artwork embeds two artistic values, both intrinsically and extrinsically. Intrinsic values relate to visual aspects of an artwork, while extrinsic ones refer to ideas, emotions, and concepts behind that. These different values are based on a theory by Jakob Sumardjo (2000: 169), in his book titled “Filsafat Seni”:

*“Intrinsic Aspects is shaped by the art medium or material. The visual aspects include all characters of its main medium.... In literature, the main medium is language that shapes images (in the reader’s mind). In music, it is sounds and voices. On the other hand, the use of art materials is based on the artist’s ideas, thoughts, and emotions. So, it is impossible to separate the intrinsic aspects from its extrinsic ones. The extrinsic aspects of art (ideas and emotions) can only be captured by other people through its intrinsic manifestations.”*

The wooden fish is analyzed with theories of aesthetic values, both intrinsic and extrinsic ones. Intrinsic values of the statue include all visual aspects, such as dimension, materials, style, and techniques, along with the visual composition used in the creation, which lead to its

aesthetic values. The extrinsic values of wooden fish include the history, mythology, and its position as a mythical creature, which lead to its philosophical values.

### *Religious Basic Tenets of Mythical Aesthetics*

Most artifacts in Vihara Buddhi function as attributes of religious rituals, so does the wooden fish observed in this research. It considers the wooden fish to be an artifact of a mythical culture. Consequently, to unearth their aesthetic values, religious basic tenets of mythical aesthetics are used. Mythical aesthetics is a concept thought by Jakob Sumardjo (2000: 319). Sumardjo compares mythical culture with that of the modern:

*“The way of thinking in mythical culture is different to the modern ontological way of thinking. In mythical culture, human is one with nature outside of himself. This life is considered to be a Great unification of human and society, human and nature, human and spirits, human and the whole universe. Human has to harmonize him/herself with the universe, if he/she wants to survive this mortal life. Human unites with objects outside him/herself, and there he/she finds him/herself.”*

Then, he elaborates on the logic of mythical culture (Soemardjo, 2000: 320):

*“Mythical logic is different to ontological logic. The logic of myth and folklore is different to the logic of modern novel. In mythical logic, it is suitable to think that human can be born out of the sweat of a God. This is because in the realm of Gods, the outer world, everything is omnipotent, possible, whereas human is mere mortal...”*

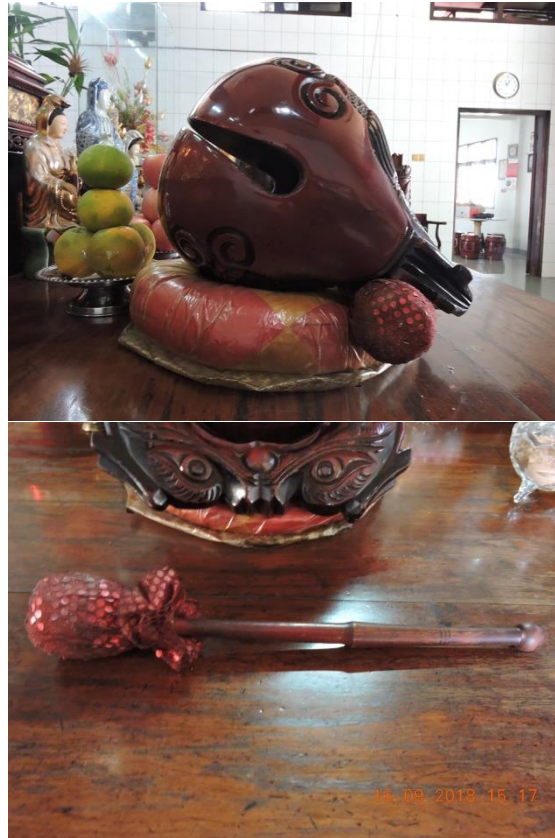
Jakob Soemardjo (2000: 321) explains about the mythical aesthetics:

*“The mythical realm has its own aesthetic which is different to the aesthetics of ontological world. The performance of riddles in Sundanese land is not merely a royal verbal art for kings and heroes of the Old Pajajaran Kingdom, but also an attempt to bring in mythical characters from the outer world to the realm of human. The event is not about the aesthetic of performing; it is a religious cosmic unification. The fail of riddle, for example, is never an aesthetic fail. Worse than that, (it is considered as a) religious fail (that) bears consequences for the people.”*

Hence, mythical aesthetics sees artwork as unified with the cosmology identic to the artist’s belief or the belief of people who live around it.

### **Data Description**

The wooden fish in the main altar of Vihara buddhi Bandung has the following dimensions: Length: 58 cm. Width: 58 cm. Height: 35 cm and has 10kg weight. The stick has 46,5 cm length and has 0,25kg weight. Both parts of instrument are made from wood. This ritual object is made of wood, shaped into round form and hollow. It seems that this wooden fish had been created using carving and chiseling techniques. All parts of the wooden fish are shiny brown, as a result of the wood varnish used for finishing. The front area of the wooden fish is decorated with two fish-shaped carving, facing each other, biting a pearl. This section also functions as a handle. The back section of the wooden fish is almost plain, without decorations. There is an acoustic hole in the form of a horizontal line to make sound when the wooden fish is struck. This hole can also be used to place the stick when not in use.



**Figure 6.** Left: Side view of the wooden fish. Right: The stick used to strike wooden fish. (Tjutju Widjaja)

## **Result and Discussion**

### ***Analysis on Aesthetical Values***

Wooden fish is hand-carved out of a single block of wood, then hollowed out, smoothed, carved with symbols, then lacquered or varnished. Small wooden fish sit on a cushion to make sure the sound is pleasant. Larger wooden fish normally rest on a temple stand. When struck by a wooden mallet, with or without felt or rubber striking tips, the sound is entirely unique (budhaweekly.com). The original type of wooden fish is literally in the shape of a fish. Along with a large temple bell and drum, It is usually found suspended in front of main gate of Buddhist monasteries. When proceeding with various duties (such as eating, lectures or chores), a monk and a supervisor utilize the instrument to call all monastics to go to their tasks. Historically, this was the first wooden fish developed, which gradually evolved into the round wooden fish (wikipedia.com).



**Figure 8.** Original version of wooden fish. (www.terebes.hu)

Wooden fish at Vihara Buddhi is a type of a later development of the original wooden fish. The shape is designed to adjust its function as a specific sound or musical instrument. The style of carving on this instrument is not yet known, there are some design similarities in carvings between mu yi (Chinese wooden fish) and mokugyo (Japanese wooden fish): Both have dragon-like fish heads, and this part is also has a function as handle. The author assumes that the shape of a dragon-like fish head is a result of strong influence from Chinese culture, dragons are mystical animals that are highly adored in China. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the legend of wooden fish is originated from China.



**Figure 9.** Left: *Mu Yi* at Vihara Buddhi. Right: *mokugyo*. Green marks: Dragon-like fish heads, biting a pearl (red mark). (Tjutju Widjaja)

### *Analysis on Philosophical Values*

- Karma

The legend of wooden fish is full of values taught in Buddhism teaching such as karma. Yifi (2002: 297) explains the most popular version amongst many legends about wooden fish, related to the life of Xuanzhang, a Chinese Buddhist monk and his pilgrimage to India:

*“Perhaps the least accepted explanation of the origin of the wooden fish is the one relating to the life of Xuanzang (602-664) as recorded in Zhigu qu. It is said that while returning home from India, Xuanzang stopped at Sichuan, when he was invited to a funerary feast sponsored by a rich man whose three-year-old son had been drowned by his malicious stepmother. Much to*



*the dismay of all those present, Xuanzang demanded that he be given a large fish to eat. The rich man complied, asking that such a fish be caught and brought before their honored guest. Presented with his meal. Xuanzang cut open the stomach of the fish, revealing the lost child still alive inside it. Xuanzang then instructed the rich man to have a piece of wood carved in the shape of a fish and hung it in the temple.”*

Another explanation on [www.visiontimes.com](http://www.visiontimes.com) in the article entitled “ The Legend of the Wooden Fish in Buddhism” about the legend says, quoting Xuanzang’s words in the book, that the rich man’s child is still alive because of karma:

*“This is karma because the child obeyed the precept of not killing in its previous life. Therefore, he was able to survive even though he was swallowed.”*

The rich man asked Xuanzang how he could repay the fish, Xuanzang answered:

“The fish was sacrificed to save the child. There should be a piece of wood carved into the shape of a fish, and suspended in the Buddhist temple. Knock the wooden fish when serving meals. Thus, this great favor can be paid back.”

- Syncretism of Buddhism and Confucianism

In Confucianism, the wooden fish is struck at specific intervals to signify certain stages of ceremonies at temple. In Buddhism, it is struck during chants of Buddha's name ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

- Symbol of wakeful attention

Another legend says the true meaning of the wooden fish should be like the rule found in Bai Zang Qing Gui, Master Bai Zang’s Monastic Regulations: Buddhist monks must knock the wooden fish during sutra chanting. The reason for this regulation is that fish never close their eyes, which means that monks should be ever vigilant to maintain their virtue and study diligently. In other words, the wooden fish is an important instrument used as a reminder for monks to be ever diligent ([www.visiontimes.com](http://www.visiontimes.com)).

- Symbol of Unity

A carving of two fish heads embracing a pearl on the handle is a symbol of unity ([www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com))

## ***Discussion***

Wooden Fish Vihara buddhi is a representation of Chinese aesthetics, it is evidenced by the presence of dragon head shape on the fish carvings contained in the artifact, the author assumes that the shape of a dragon-like fish head is a result of strong influence from Chinese culture, dragons are mystical animals that are highly adored in China. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the legend of wooden fish is originated from China. The wooden fish serves the function as a ritual object in *San Jiao* rituals, it works as an instrument used in the reading of sutras and other rituals. The wooden fish represents the wisdom values in Buddhism teachings such as karma, unity and diligence, the representation of these values is related to the legend about the origin of wooden fish and the symbol of fish itself in Buddhism. The using of wooden fish in Confucianism and Buddhism and the placement of wooden fish on the main altar in Vihara Buddhi is a manifestation of the *San Jiao* teaching, because the wooden fish is a ritual object and an important instrument both for Buddhism and Confucianism, although its originated from Buddhism, the using of wooden fish in Confucianism is a result of acculturation. Art in the traditional life of Chinese society is an inseparable aspect of their beliefs

## Conclusions

Based on the analysis, the visualization of wooden fish in Vihara Buddhi holds aesthetical values related to its function as ritual object and instrument. The process of material selection and the shape is specifically designed to meet its function as an instrument used in rituals. Wooden fish is hand-carved out of a single block of wood, then hollowed out, smoothed, carved with symbols, then lacquered or varnished. Small wooden fish sit on a cushion to make sure the sound is pleasant. Larger wooden fish normally rest on a temple stand. When struck by a wooden mallet, with or without felt or rubber striking tips, the sound is entirely unique. The dragon-like shaped fish head carving on the wooden fish is related to the Chinese culture. Wooden fish at Vihara Buddhi is a type of a later development of the original wooden fish, it has dragon-like fish heads, and this part is also has a function as handle. The author assumes that the shape of a dragon-like fish head is a result of strong influence from Chinese culture, dragons are mystical animals that are highly adored in China. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the legend of wooden fish is originated from China.

Wooden fish also holds philosophical values of Buddhism, the legend of wooden fish is full of values taught in Buddhism teaching such as karma. Yifi (2002: 297) explains the most popular version amongst many legends about wooden fish, related to the life of Xuanzhang, a Chinese Buddhist monk and his pilgrimage to India. Another legend says the true meaning of the wooden fish should be like the rule found in Bai Zang Qing Gui, Master Bai Zang's Monastic Regulations: Buddhist monks must knock the wooden fish during sutra chanting. The reason for this regulation is that fish never close their eyes, which means that monks should be ever vigilant to maintain their virtue and study diligently. In other words, the wooden fish is an important instrument used as a reminder for monks to be ever diligent ([www.visiontimes.com](http://www.visiontimes.com)).

The placement of Wooden fish in Vihara Buddhi as a special ritual object is a manifestation of Sanjiao teaching. The using of wooden fish in Confucianism and Buddhism and the placement of wooden fish on the main altar in Vihara Buddhi is a manifestation of the San Jiao teaching, because the wooden fish is a ritual object and an important instrument both for Buddhism and Confucianism, although its originated from Buddhism, the using of wooden fish in Confucianism is a result of acculturation.

This research will be beneficial for Chinese people, especially who live in Indonesia; other researchers in art and culture, especially who focuses on Chinese Indonesian art; religious practitioners and believers of the Three Teachings; historians, especially who study the implications of policies in the New Order on the existence of Kelenteng and Three Teachings. There are not many studies that focus on Three Teachings, Female Kelenteng, and Zhai Ji, especially that use artistic and cultural paradigms, even though those aspects cannot be separated from daily lives of Indonesians. The result of this research is expected to give contribution to the preservation of Chinese art and culture in Indonesia as an attempt to celebrate Indonesia's diversity.

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