



**SYMBOLIC MEANING OF ARCHITECTURE AND ORNAMENTS IN THE 19<sup>TH</sup>  
CENTURY'S TAOIST TEMPLE AMONG TEMPLE COMMITTEE IN THE  
KLANG VALLEY, MALAYSIA**

By

**YEONG YIN MEI**

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

**August 2021**

**FRSB 2022 4**

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**Chair : Prof Khairul Aidil Azlin Abd Rahman, PhD**  
**Faculty : Design and Architecture**

Taoist temple is a specific religious and cultural landmark that carries symbolic meaning. The ornaments and architecture buildings serve as a conventional system and perpetual symbols, mainly to pass down to the next generation. Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that the younger generation in Malaysia hardly understood the symbolic meanings of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist Temples. This research aims to identify the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments, subsequently to assess the Temple Committee's understanding of the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments of the Taoist temples constructed in the 19th century in Klang Valley, and lastly to recommend a framework of the symbolic meaning of Taoist architecture and ornaments for knowledge dissemination. Site observational study and semi-structured interviews with the Temple Committee in ten Taoist Temples revealed the understanding of the temples physical attributes of the architecture and ornaments. In this study, architectural drawings, sketches, photographs of the samples, and voice recordings facilitated the Descriptive Analysis process. The findings show that the evolutionarily constructed architectural attributes of the samples built in the 19th century embraced less Royal symbolic meaning for the upper section. Nevertheless, it was discovered that the roof of the foyer carries a royal symbolic meaning and the upper section of the main hall depicted the Malay vernacular architecture features such the ventilated roof, which is signifying a Sino-Malay character, reflecting the man-made production during the 19th century, which was dedicated to the Chinese diaspora. Additionally, most of the ornaments discovered applied in the figural form to express the folklore tales in the theory of Theism. This study also reveals that the respondents were able to describe the simple keywords of the symbolic meaning, in religious approach and clueless for the royal symbolic meaning. Furthermore, they could not comprehensively explain the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments due to the limitation of knowledge. Therefore, the recommended framework for knowledge dissemination is to synthesize the power of relevant stakeholders with

joint efforts in a multidisciplinary capacity in order to promulgate the Chinese legacy to the future generation.





Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia  
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMAKNAAN SIMBOLIK SENI BINA DAN PERHIASAN DALAM KUIL TAO  
ABAD KE 19 DI KALANGAN AHLI JAWATANKUASA KUIL DI LEMBAH  
KLANG, MALAYSIA**

Oleh

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Kuil Tao adalah mercu tanda agama dan budaya khusus yang membawa makna simbolik. Hiasan dan seni bina berfungsi sebagai sistem konvensional dan simbol abadi, terutama untuk diturunkan ke generasi berikutnya. Walaupun begitu, penyelidikan ini menunjukkan bahawa generasi muda di Malaysia hampir tidak memahami makna simbolik seni bina dan perhiasan di kuil Tao. Penyelidikan ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti makna simbolik seni bina dan perhiasan, seterusnya untuk menilai pemahaman ahli jawatankuasa kuil mengenai makna simbolik seni bina dan perhiasan kuil Tao yang dibina pada abad ke-19 di Lembah Klang, dan untuk mengesyorkan kerangka makna simbolik seni bina Tao dan perhiasan untuk penyebaran pengetahuan. Kajian pemerhatian tapak dan wawancara separa berstruktur dengan ahli jawatankuasa kuil di sepuluh Kuil Tao mengungkapkan pemahaman tentang sifat fizikal kuil dari seni bina dan perhiasan. Dalam kajian ini, lukisan seni bina, lakaran, fotografi, dan rakaman suara dikumpulkan untuk memudahkan proses Analisis Deskriptif. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa sifat seni bina yang dibina secara evolusi dari sampel yang dibina pada abad ke-19 merangkumi makna simbolik diraja yang kurang untuk bahagian atas. Walaupun begitu, didapati bahawa bumbung ruang legar membawa makna simbolik diraja dan bahagian atas dewan utama menyerupai ciri seni bina vernakular Melayu seperti bumbung pengudaraan, yang mana menandakan sifat Sino-Melayu, yang mencerminkan hasil kerja pembuat pada abad ke-19, yang didedikasikan untuk diaspora Cina. Selain itu, sebahagian besar perhiasan yang ditemui digunakan dalam bentuk figura untuk mengekspresikan kisah cerita rakyat dalam teori Teisme. Kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa responden dapat menggambarkan kata kunci sederhana dari makna simbolik, dalam pendekatan keagamaan dan mereka tidak mengerti makna simbolik diraja. Selanjutnya, mereka tidak dapat menjelaskan makna simbolik seni bina dan perhiasan secara komprehensif kerana keterbatasan pengetahuan. Oleh itu, kerangka kerja yang disyorkan adalah untuk penyebaran pengetahuan; mensintesis kekuatan pihak

berkepentingan yang relevan dengan usaha bersama dalam kapasitas pelbagai disiplin untuk menyebarkan warisan China kepada generasi akan datang



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My humblest and most bountiful thanks to God for providing me immense strength for the opportunity to further my exciting PhD journey in UPM to eventually complete and obtain my doctorate with my dedicated and knowledgeable supervisors Prof. Khairul, Dr Atiah and Dr Nangkula, my humble gratitude for your patience, encouragement and guidance over the past four years. Without great support from my dearest supervisory team, my journey would be extremely difficult and achieving my destination would be a struggle.

I would like to express my gratitude to the committee member of the Taoist Chinese temple; Mr HP Tan, Mr Law, Mr Pang, Mr Tan, Mr Lee of their cooperation and willingness in spending their precious time in their opinion, knowledge, and relevant information sharing. It has been bountiful and crucial for my thesis.

Last but not least, I would like to express my appreciation to my juniors for the moral support and encouragement during this challenging PhD journey. Thanks Mr Cheah Yong Keat and Ms Ling Siok Kim. Of course, without financially support from MyBrain15; MyPhD, initiated by the Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi and IPS, I would not able to complete my study.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge my late father, Yeong Yew Mun, thank you for the strength entrusted to me before you leave; and my mother, Toon Choi Kow for your love, my heartfelt gratitude to my siblings, Yeong Wai Ping, Yeong Wai Soon, Yeong Wai Leong, Yeong Yin Fun and Yeong Yin Lee for their mental support and love for me to complete a successful path.

With my greatest pleasure, I would like to express my special thanks to my beloved husband Chuah Soo Keat, for his encouragement and patience, as well as his intellectual support and love. Not forgetting, my three lovely children, Chuah Xu'Enn and Chuah Xu'E and Chuah Xu Faye, for their understanding and companionship in the tremulous time that I had gone through to accomplish my thesis; if without, I may unable to achieve the glories of my academic endeavour.

This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>ABSTRAK</b>	i
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	iii
<b>APPROVAL</b>	v
<b>DECLARATION</b>	vi
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	viii
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	xiv
<b>LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS</b>	xvi
<b>CHAPTER</b>	<b>xxi</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Problem statement	3
1.3 Research Questions	4
1.4 Research Aim and Objectives	5
1.5 Significant of the study	5
1.6 Outline of the Thesis	6
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1 Introduction	8
2.2 The Background of Taoist Beliefs and Practices from Ancient China	8
2.3 The Development of Taoist Temples from Ancient China	10
2.3.1 The Introduction of Yingzao Fashi	13
2.4 Taoist Temples in the Community during the 19th Century in Malaysia	16
2.5 The differences between a Taoist Temple and a Buddhist temple	18
2.6 The Philosophy of Understanding: The Epistemology	19
2.6.1 Theoretical Review of Semiotics	21
2.6.2 The Methodology, Process and Measurement	22
2.6.3 The Philosophy of Ornaments and Symbolic Meanings	22
2.7 The Attributes of the Taoist Temples and the Development of Ornaments	25
2.7.1 The Lower Section: Podium	31
2.7.1.1 The Spatial Configuration of the Taoist Temples	32

	2.7.1.2	The Building Form on the Podium: Strategic Designs for Quadrangle	34
	2.7.2	The Middle Section: The Body Corporeal	35
	2.7.3	The Upper Section: Mythical Animals, Roof Forms and Colours	39
	2.7.4	Other Structure and Ornaments	43
2.8		The Fundamental Materials and Development of the Taoist Temples	44
2.9		Research Framework	47
2.10		The Summary of The Chapter	50
<b>3</b>		<b>MATERIALS AND METHODS / METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>51</b>
	3.1	Introduction	51
	3.2	Research Methodology	51
	3.3	Introduction of the Case Study	56
	3.4	Direct Site Observational Studies	57
	3.5	Variables of the Research	59
	3.6	Interview Sessions	60
	3.6.1	Background of Interviewees	62
	3.6.2	Questionnaire Designed for Interview Sessions	62
	3.6.2.1	Respondents' General Perception of the Taoist Temples in the Klang Valley	63
	3.6.2.2	General Built-up and symbolic meanings of the Taoist Temples	63
	3.6.2.3	Part 1: Understanding the Symbolic Meanings of the Ornaments in the Taoist Temples	64
	3.6.2.4	Part 2: Explanation of the Symbolic Meanings of the Ornaments in the Taoist Temples	65
	3.6.2.5	Social Demography	67
3.7		Analysis Method	67
	3.7.1	Descriptive Analysis (DA)	68
	3.7.2	Content Analysis (CA)	69
3.8		The Sampling: Taoist Temples and The Interviewees	69
3.9		Procedures	73
3.10		The Summary of The Chapter	74

<b>4</b>	<b>RESULTS AND DISCUSSION</b>	<b>75</b>
4.1	Introduction	75
4.2	Introduction of the Pilot study	75
4.3	The Site Observation Study: The Symbolic Meaning of the Architecture and Ornaments of the Taoist Temples	76
4.3.1	The lower section: Podium	85
4.3.1.1	The spatial configuration and the Strategy design in Quadrangle	85
4.3.2	The middle section: The Body Corporeal	89
4.3.3	The upper section: Head	94
4.3.4	Other Structures and Ornaments	103
4.4	Conclusion	106
4.5	The interview Section	108
4.5.1	Social demography	108
4.5.2	The Respondents' General Perception of The Taoist Chinese Temples in The Klang Valley	110
4.5.3	General built-up and symbolic meaning of the Chinese Temple	114
4.5.4	Part 1: Understanding the Symbolic Meaning of The Ornaments in The Taoist Temples	118
4.5.5	Part 2: Explanation of the symbolic meanings of the ornaments in the Taoist temple	119
4.6	Conclusion	124
4.7	The Summary of The Chapter	124
<b>5</b>	<b>RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION</b>	<b>126</b>
5.1	Introduction	126
5.2	Significance of the Finding	126
5.2.1	Conclusion	132
5.3	The contribution and recommendation	133
5.3.1	The Temple Committee	134
5.3.2	The Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia	134
5.3.3	The Education System	135
5.3.4	The Public and design community	136
5.4	Research limitation	136
5.5	Avenue for Future Research	137
5.5.1	The Participation of Other Professionals in The Study	137
5.5.2	The Royal Symbolic Meanings of The Taoist Temples	138



<b>REFERENCES</b>	140
<b>APPENDICES</b>	151
<b>BIODATA OF STUDENT</b>	178
<b>LIST OF PUBLICATIONS</b>	179



## LIST OF TABLES

Table		Page
2.1	Summary: The Differences Between the Taoist and Buddhist Temples	19
2.2	The Stages Discussed by Semioticians	21
2.3	The Descriptions of the Structure of the Ornaments	25
2.4	Ornaments in the Lower Section	32
2.5	Ornaments in the Middle Section	37
2.6	The Ornaments in the Upper Section	42
2.7	The Ornaments for Other Structure and Ornaments	44
3.1	The Sample of the Inventory List	53
3.2	The Coding	58
3.3	The Checklist for the Ornaments to be Assessed during Site Observation	58
3.4	Inventory List for the Samples	59
3.5	The Operationalisation: Indicators	60
3.6	Interview Questions for Session A	63
3.7	Interview Questions for Session B	64
3.8	Sample to Assess Respondents' Understanding of the Symbolic Meanings of the Architecture and Ornaments of the Taoist temples	65
3.9	Sample to Assess Respondent's Ability to Explain the Symbolic Meanings of the Architecture and Ornaments of the Taoist Temples	66
3.10	Auxiliary Questions for Session C, Part 2	66
3.11	The Research Components Manifested Perception and Understanding	68

3.12	Lists of Chinese Temples in the Klang Valley	71
3.13	The Summary of the Chinese Temples in the Klang Valley	72
4.1	There Are 2 Ways to Distribute the Questionnaire to Potential Respondents	75
4.2	The Summarisation of the Ornaments and Architecture Attributes for on- Site Observational Studies, with the Royal Symbolic Meanings	79
4.3	The Motif and Pattern for Ornaments and Structures	81
4.4	The Lower Section with the Ornaments and Structures in Royal Symbolic Meanings	85
4.5	Middle Section Shows the Majority of Floral, Figural and Animals Are Used as an Ornaments	92
4.6	Majority of the Auspicious Ornaments are Found Majority with the Application of Floral, Figural and Animals	95
4.7	Many of the Ornaments and Architecture Attribute Used Motifs and Patterns of Plants and Animals	104
4.8	Group Statistics for Gender	109
4.9	Summary of the Symbolic Meaning the Negative Keywords, Highlighted in Red Were Derived and Explained by the Respondents	120
4.10	The Stages Discussed by Semiotician	121
5.1	The Summary of Ornaments Found in the Samples with The Design Principle: Floral (MRF), Figural (MRFg), Unity (PU) and MG (Geometric)	128

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1.1	The Tin Rush Era of Mining Trade in the Klang Valley During The 19th Century	2
1.2	Research Flow	7
2.1	Timeline for Chinese dynasty	12
2.2	The Mythical Animals	14
2.3	Yingzao Fashi vol 29:8 Documented Entwined Dragons on the Columns	14
2.4	The Floral Motif with Indicated Colours to be Drawn on the Beams	15
2.5	Epistemology Consists of Three Criteria, and a Person with Knowledge is Explainable, and Therefore Justify the Understanding	21
2.6	The Order Diagram: The Convention System of Western Architecture	23
2.7	The Function of the Ornaments	24
2.8	The Motifs and Patterns	25
2.9	The Hierarchy of the Spaces Imposed on the Four Cardinals	26
2.10	The Hierarchy of Space for Physical Attributes in the Form of Vertical Classification in the Lower, Middle and Upper Sections	26
2.11	The Hierarchy of Space for Physical Attributes in the Form of Vertical Classification in the Lower, Middle and Upper Sections	27
2.12	The Development of the Brackerting System, Dougong, from the Tang Dynasty to the Ching dynasty	28
2.13	Various Roof Forms Symbolising the Hierarchy of the House Owner. Images Highlighted in RED were Solely Applied for the Royal Families or Taoist Temples	29
2.14	Simpler Version of the Motifs in the form of Animism	30

2.15	Left: Ceremonial Bronze Gui, Late 11th–Early 10th-century BC, in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Source: Pletcher (1999), Right: Square Yi (Western Zhou, height 40.7 cm)	30
2.16	Left: Chinese Bronze Bell, Late Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE) in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Source: Pletcher (1999). (Right) Ding, in a Bird and Geometric Motifs (height 20.8 cm)	30
2.17	Qinian Temple. An imperial Taoist Temple in Northern China, Beijing	32
2.18	Typical Plan in Symmetrical Design Running in North South Orientation. Image 1-the Remains of the Palace on Zhouyuan. Source: Institute of Archaeology of the CASS (1984). Image 2-The Illustration of the Great Shangqing Palace	33
2.19	The Schematic of Air Ventilation for the Courtyard in A Quadrangle Building	35
2.20	The Adaptation of Materials for a Shelter	45
2.21	Eighth Grade of Cai for Different Ranks of Building	46
2.22	Climatic Design of the Traditional Malay house	47
2.23	Two Cores, the Architecture Attribute and the Ornaments Were Constructed in the Taoist Temple	48
2.24	Research Conceptual Framework	49
2.25	The Summary: Development of the Ornaments	50
3.1	Framework for Research Process Illustrated Diagrammatically	51
3.2	Research Methodology Framework	55
3.3	The Process of Conducting the Interview Sessions	61
3.4	The Images for Session B	64
3.5	Targeted Sampling for the Research	70
4.1	In total, 10 samples located within Klang Valley	77
4.2	The Summary for Ten Samples. Among Four Section, Upper Section Consists Less in Royal Symbolic Meanings	78

4.3	The Ornaments and Structures Carry Royal Symbolic Meaning, However, the Graph Shows Less Symbolic Meaning for Upper Section	80
4.4	The Summary for Ten Samples. Sample 2 Found Consists Most Ornaments and Structures Carry Royal Symbolic Meanings, and Sample 10 Consists Less	81
4.5	Summary of the Motif and Pattern of the Ornaments and Structures Show Majority Found in MRFG, Followed by MRF, and Less in PU and MG	83
4.6	Summary of the Motif and Pattern Among 24 Ornaments and Structures Show Majority Found in MRFg, Followed by MRF, and Minority in PU and MG	84
4.7	The Comparison of Podium Height of the Temple in China and the Sample of the Study	85
4.8	Typical Plan in Symmetry Design. Image A-The Remains of the Palace on Zhouyuan. Source: Institute of Archaeology at the CASS, 1984. Image B- Xian Shi Shi Ye Gong, Serendah, Ulu Selangor	87
4.9	The Layout Configuration for the Ten Samples	88
4.10	The Ornaments and Structures Carry Royal Symbolic Meaning	90
4.11	Left: Chinese Bronze Bell (1907) From Fu Ling Temple, Selangor. Right: "Yun Pan" (云板铭文), (1883) From Long Gu Bang Temple	91
4.12	Examples of Ornaments Found in the Middle Section of Which are of Figural (MRF), Figural (MRFg) and Unity (PU)	93
4.13	The Result of the Upper Section is Found to be Constructed of Less Royal Symbolic Meaning	95
4.14	Chi Wen in Animal Form (PU) Found on the Roof of Guanti Temple	96
4.15	Color Samples of the Roof Tile, Obtained from the Ten Samples, Mapped with the NCS Notation, Color Circle	97
4.16	Color Samples of the Roof Tile Found from the Building, During Ching Dynasty	98

4.17	Mystical Animals Taken from the New Ornament, Kuantan Temple, KL and Xian Shi Temple, Seremban	100
4.18	Yingzao Fashi vol 29:8 Documented the Entwined Dragon on the Column	100
4.19	The Roof of the Samples. Sample 1 Drawn by Amir Fauzan (2016)	101
4.20	The Samples Found in the Characteristics Attribute of the Courtyard and Indigenous Vernacular Architecture	103
4.21	The Ornaments and Structure Found from the Samples, in the Motifs and Patterns of Floral (MRF), Figural (MRFg), Geometric (GM) and Unity (PU)	104
4.22	Joss Paper Burner for Sample 10 (S10)	105
4.23	The Guardian Lion in the Motif and Pattern of a Single Animal (PU)	106
4.24	Pailou Which is Accompanied with the Ornament of Floral and Figural	106
4.25	The Process of Religious Development Since Ancient China	107
4.26	The Ornaments Found Within the Architecture Attributes that Carry the Characteristics of from Agosticism, Theistic and Three Religions	107
4.27	The Respondents Age Distribution	109
4.28	The Dialect Group	110
4.29	The Summary of General Perception from GP1 to GP8	111
4.30	60% of the Respondents Acknowledged the Contribution Made by the Chinese Taoist Temples to Heritage Tourism	113
4.31	The Summary of the Symbolic Meanings for General Built-Up	114
4.32	Five Clusters of Ornaments Described by the Respondents which are Mostly Found in Floral and Figural Forms	115
4.33	The Finding of "Axis running North to South"	117
4.34	The Respondents Scored Relatively High in "No idea" of the Above Chart	117

4.35	Results on the Understanding of the Symbolic Meaning of the Ornaments and Architecture Among the Respondents in a Decreasing Order	119
4.36	Commonly Understood Ornaments Represented by Temple Drum, Door God, and Deity	119
4.37	The Guardian Lion, Deities Carry a Firce Face Gesture	122
4.38	The Summary of Auxiliary Question	122
4.39	Respondents Perceived the Ornaments in the Taoist Temples Were Not Common to The Folks	123
4.40	Results that Illustrated the Respondents Interest to Know About the Research Finding	124
4.41	The Summary of Results of the Ten Samples Used in this Study	125
5.1	The Pattern and Motif for The Ornaments and Structure Found Majority in Figural and Floral, Mainly Adopted the Theory of Theistic (colored-images)	129
5.2	The Patterns and Motifs Found in the Ten Samples. Dotted Line Shows Minority Found in The Samples	130
5.3	The Framework of the Symbolic Meaning of Taoist Architecture and Ornaments for Knowledge Dissemination	132
5.4	The Summary of the Missing Yingzao Fashi	133
5.5	The Responses of the Respondents on The Retrieval of Information Regarding the Taoist Temples in Malaysia	137



## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A.D.	Anno Domini
B.C.	Before Christ
B.C.E	Before the Common Era
CA	Content Analysis
DA	Descriptive Analysis
MF	Motif in Freeform
MG	Motif in Geometric
MRF	Motif in Representational Floral
MRFg	Motif in Representational Figural
MRO	Ornament depicting object
PA	Pattern in Additive
PH	Pattern in Hypotactic
PR	Pattern in Repeating
PU	Pattern in Unity

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background

The strategic location of Malaysia has allowed it to become a corridor that enabled maritime trade activities between the East (China) and the Indian Ocean. During that period, it served as a port to routine vessel voyage crossing the mainstream through the Straits of Malacca to ship merchant goods (Widodo, 2011). Maritime traders with diverse roles such as traders, builders, fishermen, peasants and business merchants travelled to Southeast Asia in ships which resulted in the formations of habitat settlements in coastal cities in throughout Southeast Asia including the Chinese settlements in Malaysia (Widodo, 2011). The first Chinese settlement was initiated by a cluster of maritime traders during the 16th and 17th centuries, followed by a cluster of mining frontier during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Andaya & Andaya, 2001; Ryan, 1971). Nevertheless, these Chinese settlements only brought a significant impact during the 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the establishment of the mining frontiers who were descendants of the Qing dynasty (1644A.D.-1944A.D.) and peasants in mainland China (Amos, 1969). This cluster originated from the Northern and Southern China with several Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Fujian, Hakka, Teochew, Hainan, and many others (Tan, 1997).

The Chinese diaspora travelled far from their homeland due to various natural calamities, economic and political turmoil that forced them to leave (Suyama, 1962) and start a better living by working as coolies or miners in Malaysia (Hew, 2015; Kohl, 1978). The arrival of the gods and the universe sound implausible and amazing to them that worshipping the deities had alternatively offered them a stronger sense of comfort when sojourning to a new land. With their arrival, so did the Chinese architecture, and this is reflected in the Taoist temples. Colonial intrusion and occupation during the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Moffett et al., 2003) had undoubtedly introduced other indigenous western features as reflected in the designs of the temples. As a result, this biodiverse region has been beautifully woven to demonstrate the richness of its architectural landmarks, and cultural and historical traits ever since (Sodangi et al., 2013). These buildings are the ideology and reflection of the Chinese diaspora and colonial occupation in Malaysia.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Klang Valley was the most industrialized region and one of the prominent regions ushering the mining trade (see Figure 1). The rapid expansion of tin and mining production in the heyday resulted in a major influx of Chinese diaspora sojourning in this region (Yip, 1969).



**Figure 1.1: The Tin Rush Era of Mining Trade in the Klang Valley During The 19<sup>th</sup> Century.**

(Source: Yip, 1969)

The Chinese diaspora brought with them their native characters to Malaysia and intermingled in the local cultural contexts, politics, social patterns and other factors to localise themselves. Consecutively, they interwoven their design principles and elements of wisdom from China mainland, and adapted the construction techniques and materials chiefly associated with the local climate (Widodo, 2018). The modification and the adaptation of the vernacular features introduced by the Chinese community have eventually formed a new habitat with its distinctive identity (Widodo, 2009). They have created a liveable shelter including the constructions of the beautiful Taoist temples which they proudly proclaimed as the "best art production".

A Taoist temple is a forerunner of the Chinese Association in Malaysia. It is best known as a religious institution where relevant religious activities for the Chinese religion are held (C.-B. Tan, 2018). Interestingly, it was discovered that the features of the Taoist temples in Malaysia indicate that they do not have a significant influence from Southeast Asia (Munoz, 2006). Instead, the temples profoundly reflect the influence of ideologies from the Northern and Southern China (V. F. Chen, 1998; Kohl, 1978; Yeang, 1992). The physical building of Taoist temples, regarded as a nation-specific trademark featuring distinct architectures, can be distinguished based on three essential attributes: the main podium, the corporeal body and the roof (V. F. Chen, 1998; Liang & Fairbank, 1984). The attributes of the building are inseparable from the various flamboyant ornaments which carry symbolic meanings that mirror the Chinese cultural identity. The ornaments are designed based on many factors, primarily the

traditional legends and the concepts and philosophy which originated from ancient China (Lip, 1993). As acknowledged by many scholars, these potential assets have created a major opportunity for revenue and businesses in cultural tourism. They are likely to bring in positive benefits and generate a profitable return to the country (Delconte, Kline, & Scavo, 2015; Loulanski & Loulanski, 2011; Sodangi, Khamdi, Idrus, Hammad, & Ahmedumar, 2014; Zhu, Huang, & Xiong, 2020). Therefore, maintaining the cultural significance and identity of the holistic Taoist temples is pivotal.

Regrettably, although the Taoist temples have been officially regarded as an indispensable feature since the Zhou dynasty (Loewe et al., 1999), the greatest challenges and hurdles alluded by scholars have been seriously overlooked. Scholars have raised their concerns on the current scenario in China which limits the artefacts showcased openly to the public over the past century. It is unfortunate that taking photographs is prohibited in the Taoist temples given the avant-garde and digital epoch the current society is (Mann, 2008). This phenomenon is a long-standing issue as less exposure means there is a tendency of slumps in the community's understanding in perceiving the indigenous cultural significance. This is a sign of a breakdown of cultural identity, ignorance to the transcendental Chinese culture which will ultimately lead to degeneration.

This nationwide issue is a consequence of irresponsible human activities, particularly the urban transformation, destruction or refurbishment of the existing fabric (Widodo, 2018). Their lack of understanding of the indigenous cultural significance was messed up, blurred up and consecutively, created gross misunderstandings of the indigenous symbolic meanings and identity within the community. Chinese mobilisation in Malaysia is seen as a power to promulgate the indigenous cultural significance to the future generation. Scholarly research have demonstrated that although the younger generation positively recognises the importance and significance of the Taoist temples, in general, they lack the understanding and are clueless about the symbolic meanings behind these historical assets—the Taoist temples (Yeong et al., 2016).

## **1.2 Problem statement**

Armani & Arbi (2014) regard Chinese architecture in Peninsular Malaysia as the most prevailing and the ornament was regarded as a key protagonist, serve as fashionable accessories and trademark for an architecture building, not merely for beautification, it's also with a specific function (Hardwick & Wall, 2006). Despite Trilling (2001) accentuated the ornaments and architecture building serve as a conventional system and perpetual symbols, mainly to pass down to the next generation once the community becomes more familiar with it, nevertheless, the younger generation in Malaysia had found hardly understood the symbolic meanings of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist Temples. It also discovered there is a challenge for the Temple Committee to sustain the

design identity for Taoist temples due to their shortage of knowledge in the relevant field (YM.Yeong et al., 2016; YM.Yeong, Rahman, Ismail, & Utaberta, 2020). This consequently becomes an obstruction for the community to pass down the relevant knowledge to the next generation. This phenomenon was aligned with Glăveanu (2014) statement, the researcher emphasised that although the ornaments were ubiquitous and signalled the community's daily life, they were, however, being belittled and frequently ignored. Similarly, Mankus (2014) argued that the symbolic objects were being underestimated in light of being infrequently investigated, analysed, and examined academically, particularly concerning the roles and symbolic significance of the ornaments.

In conjunction with this phenomenon, the author has analysed various relevant studies and has found that some significance and importance of the religiosity building have been highlighted in numerous studies including the architectural identity and interior design environment. Evelyn Lip, David, and Widodo were significantly knowledgeable researchers who contributed their best philosophy to the creation of the Taoist temple in Asia, particularly in the symbolism and geomancy dimension (Lip, 1995; Kohl, 1978). Studies carried out by Evelyn covered a lot of Chinese Architectural and ornaments for the Taoist temple. Nevertheless, the samples were mainly conducted in other parts of Malaysia. David, putting a lot of effort to investigate the Taoist temple's ornaments addressed the subject matter; nonetheless, the samples were not explicitly built in the 19th century.

Chinese was declared as the second largest population in Malaysia (Kohl, 1978), indicating the classification of the Taoist temples as a dominant landmark in the society. The insufficient dissemination of related knowledge within the Temple Committee potentially creates a social gap. Since Armani and Ezrin (2014) stated that Chinese architecture in Malaysia is dominantly inspired by the architectural specimens from Mainland China, and the development of Taoist temples in the Klang Valley of Malaysia erected during the 19th century, upon the arrival of the Chinese diaspora is yet to be investigated comprehensively especially the architecture and the ornaments, the author thus defines conclusively that the essence of this research would essentially benefit the younger generation and imminently needed.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

As aforementioned in the related research problem statements, a series of research questions (RQ) have been devised for further research:

- RQ 1: What are the symbolic meaning of architecture and ornaments being used within Taoist Temples?
- RQ2: Why does the Temple Committee in Malaysia lack understanding of the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments of the Taoist Temples?

- RQ3: How to disseminate the knowledge of symbolic meaning of Taoist architecture and ornaments to the community?

#### **1.4 Research Aim and Objectives**

This research aims to assess the knowledge among the Temple Committee and consecutively identify the symbolic meanings of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist Temples in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Below are research objectives:

- RO1: To identify the symbolic meanings of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist Temples in the Klang Valley Malaysia.
- RO2: To investigate the understanding of the Temple Committee on the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist Temples in the Klang Valley Malaysia.
- RO3: To recommend a framework of the symbolic meaning of Taoist architecture and ornaments for knowledge dissemination.

The insightful contributions of this research would mark a further breakthrough. It would provide knowledge about the inhabitants, add advantage in the field of historical studies and tourism to generate a better depiction of the people concerned with the symbolics of architectural designs and ornaments built in the Taoist temples founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.

#### **1.5 Significant of the study**

The essence of this research is to consolidate the symbolic meanings of the architecture and ornaments from the ten selected Taoist temples built in the Klang Valley in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through a qualitative research technique which includes site observational study and interview survey questionnaire. The results of this research will add value to the following aspects:

- Portrays a clearer picture for the symbolic meanings of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist temples constructed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Klang Valley, Malaysia to the Chinese descendants.
- Provide insightful knowledge to the Faculty of Design and Built Environment in the public and private universities and colleges in Malaysia, primarily on Architecture and Historical Studies.



- Provide insightful knowledge to the practitioners, architects and interior designers in particular for the stages in the designing and refurbishing of Taoist temples.
- Serve as a propaganda and promotional materials for the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture Malaysia.

## 1.6 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into five chapters: Background introduction, Literature review, Methodology, Results and discussion, and Recommendation and conclusion, as illustrated in Figure 1.2 below.

Chapter 1: The first chapter briefly provides the background of the Chinese diaspora and settlements across the Southeast Asia including Malaysia, and the establishment of the Taoist temples. It clarifies the assertion of the nationwide issue and the current problem that the younger generation is facing in Malaysia, which the author opines is at an alarming state. Lastly, the author has outlined the research questions (RQ), research objectives (RO), and their significance to society.

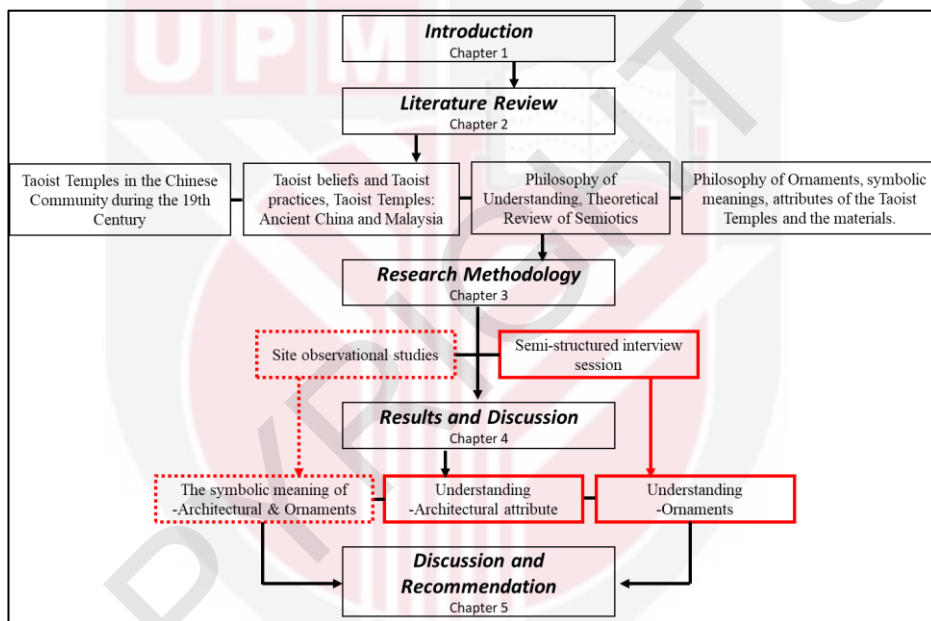
Chapter 2: Chapter Two discusses the different classifications of secondary sources; a study of literature and scientific hypotheses on different horizons. It thoroughly discusses the topics closely related to: 1) Chinese beliefs and religions from ancient China and Malaysia, 2) Contributions and settlements of Chinese diaspora, 3) Symbolic architecture and ornaments of the Taoist temples, 4) Taoist Temples in China mainland and in Malaysia, and 5) The Philosophy of understanding, Ornaments and Symbolic meanings

Chapter 3: This chapter briefly introduces the research methodology by utilising the qualitative method in employing a single case study. This research study adopted the semi-structured interview and site observational study approaches. In the first stage, primary data were collected on-site through a site observational study. The survey was conducted using a digital measurement tape to capture the dimension of the buildings. Photographs were captured and hand sketches were drawn for all relevant ornaments for documentation purposes. In the second stage, the semi-structured interview session using the open-ended questionnaire approach was used to gather evidence of the Temple Committee's interpretation of the Taoist Chinese.

Chapter 4: This chapter discusses the findings of the ten Taoist temples built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Klang Valley. First-hand data collected on-site are consolidated for analysis to achieve Objective 1 (RO1) i.e. to identify the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments of the Taoist Temples built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Data collected from the interview are tabulated in a table for content analysis to achieve Objective 2

(RO2) which is to investigate the understanding of the Temple Committee on the symbolic meaning of the architecture and ornaments in the Taoist Temples in the Klang Valley Malaysia. The process involves the interviews texts and the interpretation of the interviews to obtain for secondary coding for primary coding. A theme is created as the final results in the last stage. This process is reviewed to ensure the reliability of the results.

Chapter 5: This chapter summarises the important findings of the facts, provides suggestions, and discusses the Objective 3 (RO3) i.e. to recommend a framework of the symbolic meaning of Taoist architecture and ornaments for knowledge dissemination. Lastly, the avenue for potential criticism, limitation, and future research are discussed.



**Figure 1.2: Research Flow.**



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