



**HERITAGE-MAKING AT THE PALEMBANG CHENG HO MOSQUE:
ARCHITECTURE, RITUAL, AND TOURISM NARRATIVES OF
CHINESE-INDONESIAN MUSLIM IDENTITY**

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Abstract

The Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque is a prominent site where Chinese-Indonesian Muslim identity becomes visible through heritage discourse, religious practice, and tourism. As a hybrid landmark blending Chinese symbolism with Islamic functions, it provides a case for examining how heritage is constructed and stabilised through institutional management and everyday devotional life in contemporary Indonesia. This article analyses how the mosque operates as a heritage-making institution negotiating identity through architecture, ritual governance, and tourism narratives. Using a qualitative case-study approach, the research combines ethnographic observation, interviews, discourse analysis of signage and media, and analysis of online materials. Findings show that architectural hybridity balances ethnic visibility with Islamic legitimacy, while ritual governance regulates symbols to maintain public acceptability. Tourism narratives centred on Admiral Cheng Ho frame the mosque as a heritage attraction, and online reviews emphasise its architecture over devotional aspects, reinforcing its dual role as both a religious space and a heritage destination.

Keywords: Heritage-making, Chinese-Indonesian Muslims, mosque architecture, lived religion, tourism narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque is widely regarded as a symbol of cultural harmony because its architecture combines Chinese, Islamic, and local Palembang elements (Santoso & Aziz, 2021). Studies of Cheng Ho mosques across Indonesia show that this hybridity reflects the selective borrowing of multiple cultural and religious traditions (Angkasa & Kamil, 2025). However, most scholarship treats these mosques mainly as symbolic representations of identity rather than examining how they produce heritage and negotiate what counts as “Chinese,” “Islamic,” and “Palembang” in the public sphere (Maryamah, 2023).

This issue matters because Chinese-Indonesian Muslim identity is continuously negotiated across different domains of legitimacy and visibility (Mulyanto, 2022). Previous research shows that Cheng Ho mosques can function as markers of social status, boundary mediators, and spaces supporting Chinese Muslim communities and converts (Hasanah et al., 2022; Abidin, 2022). However, limited attention has been given to how identity negotiation occurs through the interaction of architectural symbolism, ritual practice, and public narratives (Musaffa et al., 2025; Rosi & Yousif, 2024).

At the same time, the Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque is increasingly promoted as a religious tourism destination, where media and digital platforms shape how visitors interpret the site (Sundari et al., 2023; Khairunnisa et al., 2023). Heritage scholarship shows that institutional authority, visitor interpretation, and authorised heritage discourse shape meanings at religious sites (Jin et al., 2024; Thouki, 2024), while tourism studies highlight how circulating narratives and online reviews construct heritage meanings (Soulard & Russell, 2025). Addressing this gap, this study examines how the Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque operates as a heritage-making institution through architecture, ritual governance, and tourism narratives. Accordingly, this study examines how the mosque constructs and negotiates Chinese-Indonesian Muslim identity through architecture and ritual practice, while also analysing how tourism narratives and public discourse shape its role as a heritage and religious tourism site. By integrating perspectives from heritage-making, hybridity, and lived religion, the study contributes a case from Palembang that expands discussion beyond the more commonly studied Java-centred contexts (Arabiah & Yusuf, 2025).



Figure 1. Cheng Ho Mosque at Palembang
Source: Author's Documentation

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Heritage Making

Recent heritage scholarship increasingly treats heritage not as a stable object but as a process involving selecting, narrating, practising, and re-valuing the past in the present. This process is particularly visible in “living heritage,” where everyday use and community attachment intersect with institutional conservation frameworks, meaning policy itself can shape what becomes recognised as heritage and which values are legitimised (Katapidi, 2023).

A central issue in this process concerns the relationship between authorised narratives produced by institutions and the lived meanings embedded in everyday practice. Heritage sites are often interpreted through multiple regimes—such as national heritage discourse, religious authority, regional identity, or community memory—making heritage layered and negotiated rather than singular (Tantinipankul, 2023). Although the “people-centred” turn in heritage aims to foreground community participation and social justice, its outcomes still depend on governance structures, access to resources, and professional authority (Sun et al., 2025).

In contemporary contexts, heritage-making is also shaped by tourism markets, digital platforms, and urban transformation. Online visibility, algorithmic circulation, and regeneration strategies can influence what becomes visible, preserved, or erased as heritage (Beekmans, 2025; Gu et al., 2026). At the same time, heritage is often produced through practice—such as community participation, adaptive reuse, and institutional recognition—highlighting heritage as an ongoing social process rather than a fixed legacy (Wei et al., 2024). In many contexts, these processes are also embedded in state cultural politics and administrative systems that shape classification, management, and meaning (Zhou & Huang, 2024).

Taken together, this literature suggests that heritage should be understood as a negotiated outcome produced through the interaction of institutional narratives, everyday practice, and public interpretation. In tourism environments, these processes extend beyond the physical site into mediated and

digitally circulating representations that shape how heritage is recognised and shared among wider publics (Beekmans, 2025; Katapidi, 2023; Sun et al., 2025).



Figure 2. Details and Ornaments of Cheng Ho Mosque
Source: Author's Documentation

Hybridity and Cultural Translation

Hybridity is not understood as a mix of styles but as a socially produced process occurring in “boundary spaces,” where cultural, political, and religious meanings are negotiated. Hybrid architectural forms emerge through the interaction between material elements—such as façade, ornament, and rooflines—and shifting regimes of meaning about what a building represents and who it serves (Ahamad & Yasmoon, 2024). In this sense, hybridity reflects both adaptation and contestation, as architectural choices can signal openness across communities while also encoding hierarchy or strategic representation (Al Braifkani & Günçe, 2025).

This perspective aligns with studies treating religious buildings as urban projects shaped by political visibility and public recognition. Mosques therefore function not only as places of worship but also as spatial claims of presence and legitimacy within the city (Burchardt et al., 2023). Research on cultural translation further shows that architectural forms are reinterpreted through local typologies, identity politics, and historical narratives (Li et al., 2024), while public reception shapes whether architectural symbolism is perceived as authentic or appropriate (Alzahrani, 2022).

In mosque architecture, hybridity and cultural translation often appear through symbolic elements such as domes, minarets, and ornamentation that negotiate Islamic identity while responding to contemporary expectations of integration and aesthetic acceptability (Al Khalifa & Lafi, 2025). In Indonesia, hybrid mosque designs increasingly combine Islamic and non-Islamic references, but they also generate debates over authenticity and legitimacy (Suryandari et al., 2023). Similar concerns appear in mosque modernisation, where simplified styles raise questions about whether evolving designs still represent Muslim communal identity (Ahmed & Fethi, 2024).

Finally, mosque legitimacy is negotiated not only within Muslim communities but also through public discourse, planning systems, and media representation. Studies in Europe show that mosque architecture often becomes

a symbolic site where issues of identity, citizenship, and multiculturalism are articulated (Yardimci & Martin, 2024). In this context, hybrid mosque architecture can strengthen internal belonging while presenting a publicly legible identity to broader audiences.

Religious Tourism and Heritage Consumption

Traditional religious tourism was often rooted in hereditary sacred rituals, but contemporary motivations increasingly combine worship with appreciation of Islamic architecture and cultural experience. Mosques now function not only as places of worship but also as social arenas supporting education, community activities, and local economic development. As tourism attractions, they offer visitors spiritual experience, architectural appreciation, and spaces for reflection and social interaction.

The growth of modern religious tourism is strongly influenced by the architectural appeal of contemporary mosques, including their ornamentation, monumental forms, and visual atmosphere. Architectural grandeur also encourages visitors to document and share mosque imagery, reinforcing their visibility as cultural and tourism landmarks.

Perceptions of the mosque are categorised into three main tourism types:

- Religious: Visitors view the mosque as a sacred site for prayer and traditional pilgrimages (ziarah) to ancestral graves.
- Historical: It is seen as a vital cultural heritage site protected by law
- Educational: Students and researchers perceive the mosque complex as a “living museum” for learning Islamic history and heritage.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive single-case study design, treating Masjid Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Sriwijaya Palembang as a bounded case to examine heritage-making, Chinese-Indonesian Muslim identity negotiation, and public tourism narratives. Single-case designs are suitable for explaining how meaning-making processes unfold within a specific institutional context and when the case is analytically information-rich (Mtisi, 2022). To capture how heritage meanings extend beyond the physical site, the study also analyses publicly accessible digital materials, including tourism websites, media coverage, and visitor-generated online reviews.

Case Selection and Bounding

The Cheng Ho Mosque was purposively selected because it functions simultaneously as a religious institution, a symbol of Chinese Muslim visibility, and a tourism site within Palembang’s Muslim-friendly destination framing (Ary

Anggara et al., 2024). The case is bounded by (a) the mosque complex and visitor infrastructure, (b) key ritual activities such as daily prayers and Islamic events, and (c) public narrative arenas including tours, promotional materials, media coverage, and online platforms discussing the mosque.

Data Sources and Fieldwork Strategy

To examine identity negotiation across architecture, ritual practice, and tourism narratives, this study uses a multi-source qualitative corpus with four strands:

1. Architectural–visual and spatial documentation
Photography, field sketches, and spatial notes document how built form and ornament express cultural–religious meanings (Sastra, 2023; Angkasa & Kamil, 2025).
2. Participant observation of ritual and everyday practice
Observations examine religious activities, visitor management, and negotiations between worship and tourist space (Thouki, 2022).
3. Semi-structured interviews
4. Interviews with mosque managers, worshippers, community members, guides, and visitors capture diverse interpretations of the mosque. Sampling combines purposive and snowball methods to access knowledge-rich participants (Czernek-Marszałek & McCabe, 2024).
5. Document and discourse corpus (tourism and public narratives)
Brochures, signage, tourism materials, and news articles are analysed alongside 4,709 Google Maps reviews and ~45 online articles (2018–2025). A purposive sample identifies recurring narrative frames and compares visitor discourse with institutional and media representations (Thouki, 2022).

Analytical Approach

Analysis proceeds iteratively and comparatively across the four data strands:

- Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) identifies recurring identity themes in interviews and fieldnotes, including visibility, belonging, religious legitimacy, and tourism appropriateness (Byrne, 2022).
- Socio-semiotic analysis examines how visual-spatial elements—such as colour schemes, pagoda or minaret references, calligraphy, and spatial boundaries—signal identity and hybridity (Fauziyanti, 2022; Angkasa & Kamil, 2025).
- Narrative and discourse analysis explores how tourism-facing texts frame the mosque as heritage, multicultural harmony, and a Muslim-friendly tourism site (Thouki, 2022; Thouki & Skrede, 2025).

- Keyword frequency coding of Google Maps reviews identifies recurring descriptors related to tourism, culture, architecture, Chinese identity, and religious function, while online articles are analysed for recurring narrative patterns.

Ethics and Positionality

The study follows standard qualitative ethics, including informed consent for interviews, anonymisation of non-public participants, and careful handling of sensitive topics such as ethnicity, conversion, and intra-Muslim differences. Observations in public tourism areas are conducted through non-intrusive note-taking, while observations of worship activities prioritise discretion and respect for congregational norms.

The digital corpus consists solely of publicly accessible materials (e.g., Google Maps reviews and online articles). Usernames are not reported, and excerpts are selectively anonymised. These materials are treated as publicly circulating discourse rather than private communication, in line with recent guidance on transparency and responsibility in qualitative research reporting (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025).

Analytically, the study integrates interviews, observation, and digital corpus through thematic triangulation. Interviews examine institutional narratives, management intentions, and community perspectives, while observations explore how these narratives are spatially practised through visitor circulation, worship boundaries, signage, and everyday interactions. The digital corpus traces how the mosque is represented and interpreted in wider public discourse beyond mosque management.

These three sources were coded using the same thematic framework, including heritage identity, religious legitimacy, visitor behaviour, multicultural symbolism, and tourism framing. The analysis compares points of convergence and tension across interviews, observations, and digital discourse to examine how heritage meanings are produced through institutional, spatial, and public narratives.

The online reviews and article corpus were purposively selected to examine how Cheng Ho Mosque is publicly narrated as heritage rather than to measure public opinion statistically. Google Maps reviews provide place-specific and visitor-generated perspectives on architecture, religious atmosphere, tourism value, and visitor experience. Online articles reflect broader media and tourism narratives, including multiculturalism, Chinese–Islamic acculturation, religious tourism, Palembang heritage, and Admiral Cheng Ho symbolism.

Source selection was based on relevance, public accessibility, and narrative richness. Included materials discussed the Cheng Ho Mosque in relation to architecture, cultural identity, religious function, visitor experience, or tourism

value, while duplicated, irrelevant, promotional, or non-Palembang materials were excluded.

Field Sites and Access

The Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque is located in the 15 Ulu district of Palembang, within a predominantly residential area that is calm yet strategically accessible from the Jakabaring urban corridor. Its position within everyday neighbourhood life, combined with convenient road access, supports its dual role as a local religious institution and a city-level heritage and tourism landmark.



Figure 3. Cheng Ho Mosque's Site, 15 Ulu district at Palembang City,
the Location of Cheng Ho Mosque
Source: Author's Documentation

FINDINGS

Architecture as Heritage Language

The Cheng Ho Mosque's architecture functions as a heritage language that presents the site as Chinese, Islamic, and Palembang/Sriwijayan through layered architectural cues. Chinese identity appears mainly through roof forms and red—

gold ornamentation, while Islamic identity is anchored in the spatial organisation of worship, including prayer orientation, the mihrab–minbar axis, and Quranic inscriptions. Palembang identity is conveyed through narratives linking the mosque to local history and civic identity.



Figure 4. Cheng Ho Mosque Monuments
 Source: Author's Documentation

These architectural cues generate multiple interpretations. Some visitors view the mosque as a symbol of tolerance and plural belonging, while others interpret the same features as visual branding within religious tourism.

A key finding is the gap between institutional narratives and visitor interpretations. Mosque management frames Chinese elements as cultural heritage while maintaining Islamic legitimacy through ritual practice and spatial rules. Visitors, however, often focus on visible Chinese aesthetics, sometimes overlooking ritual boundaries. This tension becomes visible through spatial negotiations, such as photography near prayer areas, where signage, routing, and guided explanations help reinforce the mosque's heritage and religious meaning.

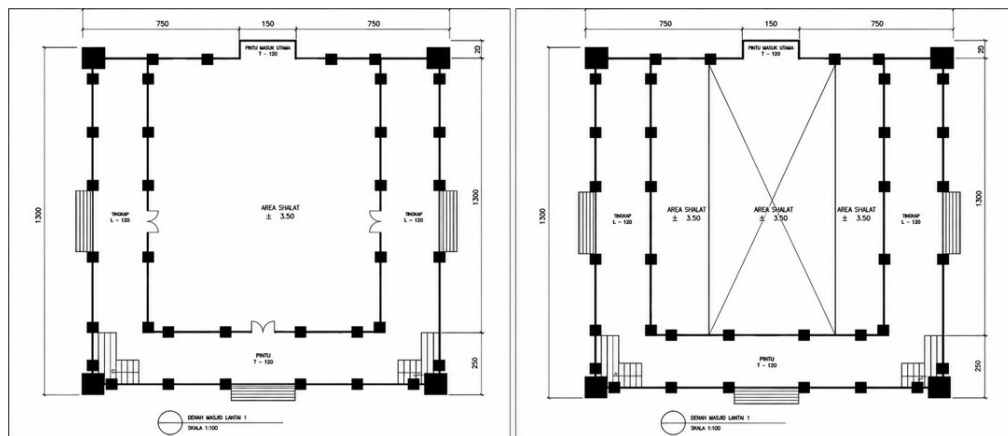


Figure 5. Layout of Cheng Ho Mosque
 Source: Author's Drawing



Figure 6. Views of Cheng Ho Mosque
Source: Author's Drawing

Ritual Practice and Governance of Belonging (lived religion)

Ritual practice at the Cheng Ho Mosque produces a sense of belonging among Chinese-Indonesian Muslims by allowing Chinese cultural identity to remain visible within an Islamic framework. This belonging is shaped through three main practices. First, the mosque creates a Sinicised Islamic environment through pagoda-inspired forms, red–green colours, and lotus motifs. Second, support programs provide religious guidance and social support for Chinese converts without requiring them to abandon their cultural identity. Third, public religious and social activities, including Nuzulul Qur'an events, health services, and blood donation programs, open the mosque to wider communities and reduce perceptions of ethnic exclusivity.

Governance further strengthens this role by positioning the mosque as a bridge between Chinese-Indonesian Muslims and the wider public. Through the Haji Muhammad Cheng Ho Indonesia Foundation and the Indonesian Chinese Islamic Association (PITI), the mosque maintains formal Chinese Muslim leadership while remaining open to all Muslims and visitors. Community services, education programs, and philanthropy extend its role beyond worship into social welfare.

The core argument is that Cheng Ho Mosque does not simply display Chinese-Islamic identity architecturally; it actively manages belonging through ritual, education, openness, and social service. In this way, the mosque protects Chinese Muslim identity, builds inter-ethnic connections, and converts cultural differences into socially accepted religious heritage.

Table 1: Layered Governance of Belonging at the Cheng Ho Mosque

Layers	Group	How to Determine a Sense of Belonging
Core	PITI Management & Foundation	Implement organizational rules and maintain the sustainability of acculturation rituals.
Active	Chinese Congregants & Converts	Feel culturally represented through rituals and feel protected by organizational rules.
Peripheral	general public	feels a sense of belonging because the mosque provides social benefits without discrimination based on ethnicity (through health and education services).

Source: Author's Summarises and Self-made

Tourism and Public Narrative

Heritage mosque tourism positions historic mosques as both religious spaces and cultural heritage landmarks, combining spiritual, historical, and architectural value. In Indonesia, many historic mosques have developed into religious tourism destinations that integrate Islamic devotion, cultural preservation, and local economic development. Their management therefore requires balancing tourism promotion with religious sanctity and cultural authenticity.

Key dimensions of heritage mosque tourism include heritage preservation, tourism development, community participation, and balanced management. These support architectural conservation, visitor attraction, community-based tourism (CBT), and the protection of religious integrity. Mosque tourism also encourages cross-cultural exchange and visitor learning through interpretation and visitor experience.

The Al-Islam Muhammad Cheng Ho Mosque in Palembang exemplifies multicultural religious tourism, combining Chinese, Malay, and Islamic influences. Its distinctive architecture—red and jade colours, pagoda-style elements, and Chinese ornamentation—symbolises the historical legacy of Admiral Cheng Ho and the region's plural cultural identity.

To examine how tourism narratives circulate publicly, a digital corpus was analysed comprising 4,709 Google Maps reviews and approximately 45 online articles (2018–2025). This dataset reveals recurring patterns in how the mosque is framed and consumed as heritage.

Table 10: Dominant Keywords in Google Maps Reviews (n = 4,709)

Thematic Category	Keyword	Frequency	Approx. %
Tourism Framing	tourism / destination	92	1.95%
Cultural Identity	culture	82	1.74%
Visitor Experience	comfortable	26	0.55%
Architectural Features	ornament	26	0.55%
Architectural Identity	Chinese architecture	17	0.36%
Religious Expression	“SubhanAllah”	17	0.36%
Architectural Comparison	temple / klenteng	12	0.25%
Architectural Feature	pagoda	12	0.25%
Religious Conversion	convert / muallaf	8	0.17%

Frequency patterns show that tourism and culture-related descriptors appear more prominently than devotional language in visitor discourse. Architectural references—especially Chinese stylistic elements and pagoda forms—reinforce the mosque’s visual distinctiveness, while explicitly religious expressions appear less frequently.

Table 3: Dominant Narrative Frames in Online Articles (2018–2025)

Narrative Category	Recurring Framing Patterns
Multicultural Harmony	multiculturalism, tolerance, coexistence, diversity
Cultural Acculturation	Islamic–Chinese blending, acculturation
Historical Legacy	history, Sriwijaya heritage, legacy
Religious Tourism	religious tourism, destination, attraction
Architectural Hybridity	pagoda-style minaret, red façade, Chinese-inspired design
Minority Muslim Identity	Chinese Muslim identity, symbol of visibility

Source: Author’s Summarises and Self-made

Across media and tourism platforms, the mosque is often framed as a symbol of multicultural harmony rather than solely a ritual space, positioning it as a religious site, heritage landmark, and tourism asset. Educational facilities (TPA) and community spaces further support its role as a “living heritage” site where worship and public engagement coexist. As an iconic landmark of Palembang, the mosque enhances tourism visibility while requiring ongoing negotiation between religious sanctity, cultural representation, and tourism framing. Taken together, the case shows that heritage status is continuously produced through institutional management, visitor interpretation, and public narratives.

Heritage Conservation Management Plan and Integration with Palembang’s Urban Tourism Strategy

A Heritage Conservation Management Plan is needed to conserve Cheng Ho Mosque not only as a tourism attraction but also as a living religious and cultural heritage site. Its significance lies in the combination of Chinese architectural expression, Islamic worship functions, and Palembang/Sriwijayan cultural narratives. This layered identity has also been identified in previous studies, where Chinese-Islamic acculturation is expressed through architectural form, ornament, colour, and symbolism (Santoso & Aziz, 2021).

The conservation plan should adopt a values-based and living-heritage approach protecting both tangible heritage—such as pagoda-inspired forms, ornaments, inscriptions, and worship layout—and intangible heritage, including worship practices and Chinese Muslim identity. Sustainable conservation should also involve community participation, collaborative governance, and integration with wider urban development (Liorančaitė-Šukienė & Jurėnienė, 2025; Ripp et al., 2025). Because the mosque remains an active place of worship, visitor

circulation, photography zones, signage, and etiquette guidance should prevent tourism activities from disrupting sacred functions (Merina & Pratama, 2025).

Interpretation and education should be strengthened through panels, guided narratives, and digital tools explaining Admiral Cheng Ho, Chinese Muslim history, Islamic spatial elements, and Palembang's multicultural identity. This can prevent the mosque from being reduced to a Chinese-style landmark while supporting wider heritage tourism initiatives in Palembang, including QR-code interpretation systems in heritage areas such as Sekanak River (Widyawan et al., 2025).

Finally, Cheng Ho Mosque should be integrated into Palembang's wider tourism strategy as part of a multicultural and religious heritage network. As a historic river city shaped by riverside settlements and collective memory (Anwar et al., 2025), Palembang provides a broader context linking the mosque to river-based and religious-cultural heritage destinations. However, tourism promotion should not reduce the mosque to a photo object. Visitor management, community participation, and local benefit-sharing are therefore needed to ensure tourism supports conservation, education, and community welfare (Oktavia et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque negotiates Chinese-Indonesian Muslim identity by transforming cultural difference into institutionally managed heritage. Chinese architectural cues make ethnic identity publicly visible, while Islamic spatial organisation maintains religious legitimacy and local narratives connect the mosque to Palembang identity. Digital discourse further amplifies architectural distinctiveness and multicultural symbolism, reinforcing the mosque's role as both a heritage landmark and tourism site.

However, these meanings also circulate beyond institutional control. Online reviews and media narratives often frame the mosque through tourism and multicultural lenses, producing competing interpretations as both a symbol of tolerance and a tourist attraction. Institutional narratives therefore present Chinese elements as cultural heritage rather than religious doctrine to maintain religious legitimacy (Thouki, 2022). This indicates that heritage governance involves not only preserving architecture, but also managing meanings, visitor behaviour, and religious boundaries.

The study's planning contribution lies in showing that Cheng Ho Mosque requires an integrated heritage management approach. Heritage governance should involve mosque management, PITI, local communities, and tourism stakeholders to protect both architectural hybridity and religious function. Visitor management through circulation routes, photography zones, signage, and worship-time controls can reduce conflict between tourism and

sacred practice while maintaining public access. Spatial interpretation should be strengthened through panels, guided narratives, and digital media explaining the mosque's Chinese-Islamic symbolism, Admiral Cheng Ho, Islamic spatial order, and Palembang's multicultural history. The mosque should also be integrated into Palembang's cultural and religious tourism strategy not merely as a photo landmark, but as a site supporting education, intercultural understanding, community benefit, and respect for worship.

In this context, the mosque functions as a heritage-making institution mediating between worshippers, visitors, and civic audiences. When framed as heritage and aligned with Islamic norms, Chinese aesthetics allow minority Muslim identities to remain visible while socially legitimate (Angkasa & Kamil, 2025), consistent with previous studies identifying Cheng Ho Mosque hybridity as a marker of Chinese Muslim identity (Fauziyanti, 2022). From a planning perspective, successful religious-heritage tourism depends on balancing conservation, interpretation, visitor management, and protection of sacred spaces.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Palembang Cheng Ho Mosque operates as a heritage-making institution where architectural hybridity—through Chinese visual elements, Islamic spatial requirements, and Palembang-local narratives—shapes how Chinese-Indonesian Muslim identity becomes publicly visible and interpreted. Rather than simply representing mixed identity, these architectural cues organise how identity is narrated across audiences. Digital visitor discourse further reinforces the mosque's role as both a religious space and cultural tourism landmark through architectural distinctiveness and multicultural symbolism (Volzone et al., 2025).

At the same time, hybridity functions as governance rather than only aesthetics. Institutional narratives frame Chinese elements as cultural heritage while maintaining Islamic legitimacy, allowing the mosque to attract visitors while preserving ritual order (Bukhari, 2025). However, tourism circulation can also produce simplified narratives of tolerance and architectural spectacle that obscure more complex lived realities (Merina & Pratama, 2025). Such narratives reflect broader public recognition frameworks that stabilise certain forms of difference while simplifying lived pluralism (Young, 2021; Thompson & Modood, 2024).

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