

Confucian Ethics as a Design Paradigm: Shaping Chinese Architecture in Malaysia for Sustainable Communal Living

Alice Sabrina Ismail^{1*}

¹ Department of Architecture, Faculty of Built Environment and Surveying, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia
81310, JOHOR

*Corresponding Author: b-alice@utm.my

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30880/ahcs.2025.06.02.019>

Article Info

Received: 03 September 2025

Accepted: 20 November 2025

Available online: 05 December 2025

Keywords

Confucian ethical values, Chinese Malaysian, Chinese Malaysian architecture

Abstract

The presence of Chinese Malaysian communities in Malaysia had evolved since the Malaccan Sultanate, with the Ming dynasty establishing commercial and diplomatic ties in the 13th century, which later led to the late 19th century under the British colonial rule that formed the new Chinese Malaysian demographic due to the new wave of Chinese immigrants arriving in Malaya for trade and employment opportunities. These communities have developed distinctive cultural practices facilitated by integrating Confucian rituals into everyday life. Their cultural identity combines traditional Chinese and modern cultural features and those of Malaysian origin through an acculturation process, thereby ingraining these values into the fabric of society. Due to their unique cultural practices and customs, where Confucian teaching serves as a framework for conceptualising various aspects of life, including habits, social practices, and the overall ethos of societies grounded in Confucian principles for generations, these Chinese Malaysian communities significantly shaped Malaya's historical and urban landscape identity, including the built environment. Henceforth, this study first aims to identify these Confucian characteristics and analyse to what extent the level of Confucian ethical values influences Chinese Malaysian architecture after acculturation with the local context. The Chinese shophouses, ancestral halls, and clan houses in Malaysia were chosen as they are the most regional architectural type, practical, and rich in Confucian connotation. These prominent Chinese buildings in Malacca and Penang were selected because they still uphold Malaysia's Confucian principles and value systems. The method used in this study is the qualitative descriptive method, which falls under the interpretive anthropology paradigm, aligning the semiotics and hermeneutics methods to understand the symbolic meaning of the house's architectural elements. The study concludes that there was an acculturation process between the authenticity of Confucian principles and their symbolic value influence on Chinese architecture in Malaysia in terms of architectural form and space-making. In this way, Malaysian Chinese architecture becomes a living embodiment of Confucian values, whether in its original built form or undergoing acculturation. This contributes to a broader understanding of how Confucian ethical values can support a more harmonious and sustainable way of life in contemporary living in multicultural Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Chinese Malaysians are of Chinese descent, constituting one of the largest ethnic groups in Malaysia, making up about 20-25% of the country's population. Chinese Malaysians are a diverse community composed of various subgroups, primarily distinguished by their dialects, cultural practices, and places of origin in China (Chee-Beng, 1997). They are predominantly descendants of immigrants from southern China who came to Malaysia during three periods of history and have since become an integral part of Malaysian society. In Malaysia, these Chinese are divided into various dialect or speech groups: Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese, Hockchiu, Kwongsai, Henghua, Hockchia and others (Zakaria.M, 2022). However, the overall distribution pattern reflected in the Chinese compositions in peninsular Malaysia comprises Hokkien, which is numerous, followed by Hakka, Cantonese, and Teochew. This differs from the pattern of the Chinese populace in Sabah and Sarawak; the majority are Foochow and Hakka. The evolution of Chinese Malaysians in Malaysia can be divided into three waves from the 15th to the 21st century that reflect their historical migration, adaptation, and integration into Malaysian society (Kin, L. G. 2003). These phases highlight the Chinese Malaysian community's socio-economic, cultural, and political developments over time. The first phase was the early settlements of Chinese in Malaysia, from the pre-15th century to the 15th century, characterized by trade-driven migration, intermarriage, and the formation of small but influential communities. These early settlers laid the groundwork for a significant Chinese presence in the region. These early Chinese settlers tended to establish themselves near coastal ports and rivers, facilitating trade and communication. The settlements were relatively small and often integrated with local communities. Intermarriage between Chinese men and local Malay women led to the assimilation of Chinese settlers into local culture. These settlers contributed to the region's economic growth and enriched its cultural tapestry by blending Chinese and Malay traditions (Lee, K. H., & Tan, C. B. 2000). These early Chinese settlers played a critical role in the region's economy, focusing on trade, agriculture, and small-scale industries like ceramics and metalworking. The early settlements of Chinese in Malaysia were modest but significant, setting the stage for the larger waves of migration that would come during the colonial period. Chinese migration during the colonial phase in the 19th to the early 20th century marked a significant increase in Chinese influx to Malaysia, driven by economic opportunities and the demand for labour during British colonial rule due to British colonial policies encouraging migration to support the growing tin mining and plantation industries. The third phase in the late 21st century witnessed the Chinese Malaysian communities' strong bond towards integration and multiculturalism while navigating their minority status, in which they have contributed significantly to Malaysia's economy, particularly in sectors like banking, real estate, and technology. Chinese Malaysians have evolved from migrant labourers to a dynamic and influential community, balancing cultural heritage with modernity while navigating Malaysia's multicultural framework. Their resilience and adaptability remain hallmarks of their journey, which shaped Malaysia's economy, society, and cultural and religious landscape (Tan, W et al., 2018).

These Chinese Malaysians inherited a complex set of beliefs and practices adopted from China's spiritual traditions, incorporating local religious principles and rituals into their religious system with elements of Taoist and Buddhist traditions and Confucian ethics. This makes the Chinese religion in Malaysia unique due to its syncretism, diversity, and integration of philosophy, rituals, and practices that emphasize harmony between humanity and the cosmos (Tong, C. K. 2006). It blends Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion elements, creating a rich and adaptable spiritual framework. Nevertheless, the teachings of Confucius, encapsulated in Confucianism, have profoundly influenced Chinese Malaysian communities to varying degrees, shaping cultural practices, social values, and interpersonal relationships (Tan, C. B. 1983). The extent of this influence depends on factors such as generational differences, levels of education, religious beliefs, and the degree of cultural assimilation into Malaysian society. Showing the importance of the Chinese Malaysian communities as the second largest ethnic group in Malaysia with strong uphold to Confucian values, this paper focuses on two main objectives. First, to identify the meaning of Confucian ethics and their embodiment in the living culture which is practised and second, to examine how, why and to what extent the aspects of the value of this Confucianism are applied in the context of the living culture of the Chinese Malaysian community towards strengthening community development through the symbolism of their built environment namely family dwellings.

This writing is very significant because most past studies on the Chinese Malaysian community have only focused on the historical economic, political and socio-development, which includes cultural Chinese activities and literature relating to the transformation, role and adaptation of the Chinese as an immigrant society. Henceforth, a gap in systematic research must be explored and highlighted because this paper will contribute to the development of the Chinese Malaysian diaspora in Malaysia regarding Confucianism ideological beliefs and value systems in their culture, explicitly the built environment. These aspects of Chinese Malaysian culture could also influence the local communal development in Malaysia's multicultural society by fostering shared values, cross-cultural understanding, and cooperative initiatives. For example, Chinese Malaysian culture emphasises

filial piety, mutual aid, and respect for elders and others, which can inspire communal support systems. These values indirectly promote cultural understanding and unity, fostering harmony and cooperation.

In summary, the extent to which Confucianism influences Chinese Malaysians varies across individuals, families, and social settings, depending on factors such as generational differences, levels of education, urbanization, and exposure to modern values. Nevertheless, Confucianism remains a cornerstone of Chinese Malaysian culture, particularly in family life, education, and community values (Goh, D. 2009). However, its influence is evolving due to modernity, globalization, and Malaysia's multicultural context. While traditional practices and values persist strongly in some areas, they are increasingly adapted or blended with contemporary ideas, leading to a dynamic but enduring legacy. The following section will discuss Confucianism's origin and influence in forming the necessities of Chinese Malaysian society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Role of Confucian Values and Ethical Principles in Shaping the Built Environment

Chinese religion in Malaysia refers to a diverse and intricate blend of beliefs and practices that Chinese Malaysians have inherited from traditional Chinese religious heritage. It combines elements of Chinese folk religion with Taoist and Buddhist traditions alongside the ethical principles of Confucianism (Goh, D. 2009). Confucianism, however, is essential because it provides a timeless framework for addressing fundamental human concerns: how to live a virtuous life, build harmonious relationships, and create a stable and just society. For the Chinese Malaysians, it is not merely a set of abstract principles but a practical philosophy that has guided their way of life for generations. It remains a source of cultural pride, moral guidance, and a blueprint for harmony in an ever-changing world (Ackerman, S. E., & Lee, R. L. 1982).

The influence of Confucianism on Chinese Malaysians is significant but varies across generations, regions, and contexts (Tan, O. 2020). Its impact can be seen in several areas, such as family life, which has shaped traditional family structures, emphasising filial piety and respect for elders. This includes a strong influence on Chinese-medium schools and private education initiatives as a means of self-cultivation and societal advancement, as well as in work ethic and business practices, where values uphold Confucian principles prioritizing responsibility and integrity, diligence, discipline, and thriftiness are integral to the entrepreneurial spirit of Chinese Malaysians (Liew, F. Y., & Yam, K. K. 2018). Since Confucius profoundly influenced the Chinese religious belief system and values, it is worthwhile to understand the background of Confucius and his role in providing a foundational ethical framework that shapes the identity and behaviour of many Chinese Malaysians.

Confucius (551–479 BCE) was a renowned Chinese philosopher, educator, and political thinker whose teachings laid the foundation for Confucianism. This philosophical and ethical system profoundly influenced Chinese culture and society (Liew, F. Y., & Yam, K. K. 2018). Revered as Kǒng Fūzǐ (孔夫子), meaning "Master Kong," he is considered one of the most pivotal figures in both Chinese and global history. Confucius' contributions have had a far-reaching impact on philosophy, education, politics, and culture, shaping China's moral fabric, intellectual traditions, and other parts of the world. Confucius' philosophy and teachings, collectively known as Confucianism, are centred on morality, proper conduct, and social harmony. His ideas emphasise the cultivation of virtue, the importance of relationships, and ethical governance. The central philosophical core and teachings of Confucius nonetheless focus on principles like Ren (仁, humaneness), Li (礼, ritual and propriety), Xiao (孝, filial piety), and Zhong (忠, loyalty) (Liew, F. Y., & Yam, K. K. 2018).

Ren (仁, humaneness) can be defined as kindness, compassion, and altruism in relationships. Confucius regarded it as the highest virtue, emphasising the need to treat others with respect and empathy. The core principle of Ren (仁), or humaneness and benevolence, influences the built environment by promoting the creation of spaces that foster harmony, respect, and care for people and nature (Goh, D. 2009). This Confucian value emphasises empathy, kindness, and consideration for others, translating into design practices and urban planning that prioritise community well-being and sustainable development. To understand the value of how Ren (仁, humaneness) shapes the built environment, it comprises eight main aspects, which help to promote the human-centered design, emphasis on community and social harmony, integration with nature; implementation of moral and ethical construction practices; showing the sense of respect for cultural and historical context; having balanced urban planning and preferment of health and well-being in considering long-term sustainability (Goh, D. 2009).

In terms of human-centred design, applying the value of Ren (仁, humaneness) in the built environment will encourage and prioritise human needs and comfort in designing buildings and spaces. This can be achieved by

incorporating ergonomic designs and providing accessibility for all, including the elderly, children, and those with disabilities, as well as offering public spaces that enhance social interaction, such as parks, squares, and community centres. As for the emphasis on community and social harmony, implementing the value of Ren (仁, humaneness) can help create environments that facilitate positive relationships and a sense of community. Understanding how Ren (仁, humaneness) integrates with nature reflects respect for natural elements. It indirectly encourages harmony between humans and the environment, promoting sustainable architecture that minimises environmental impact and uses renewable resources. This can be applied when incorporating green spaces, water features, and natural landscaping into urban and architectural designs.

The role of Ren (仁, humaneness) is also applicable to be adapted as moral and ethical values in handling construction practices, in which it emphasises care and responsibility toward others by ensuring prioritising community impact over profit in development projects. In addition to this, the presence of Ren's (仁 humaneness) value is also deemed necessary as it showcases the respect for cultural and historical context in which Ren encourages respecting the past and creating spaces that honour cultural heritage and traditions. This is achieved through awareness and practice of preserving historical sites and traditional architectural styles by designing buildings that harmonise with their cultural and historical surroundings.

Aside from that, Ren's (仁 humaneness) plays an essential role in producing balanced urban planning as it promotes fairness and equity in access to resources and services. Having appropriate and equitable distribution planning may reduce social segregation and encourage inclusivity. The principle of Ren's (仁 humaneness) also helps to promote health and well-being as it underscores the importance of compassion and care for people's physical and mental health values. This can be achieved when designing environments that enhance well-being and prioritise active mobility, like pedestrian-friendly streets and cycling paths, including clean air systems, natural lighting, and noise reduction measures. This is crucial for long-term sustainability as Ren (仁 humaneness) also encourages consideration for future generations, aligning with sustainable development principles that can be adapted to climate change and natural disasters. The principle of Ren (仁 humaneness), hence can profoundly influence the built environment by advocating for designs that prioritise human well-being, foster social harmony, and respect the natural and cultural context. This philosophy aligns with modern ideas of sustainable and inclusive development, making it a timeless guide for creating meaningful and compassionate spaces and built forms for the built environment.

The concept of Li (礼) in Confucianism refers to ritual, propriety, or etiquette, encompassing a broad range of behaviours and practices designed to maintain social harmony and order (Tan, C. B. 1983). Rooted in ancient Chinese culture, Li goes beyond formal ceremonies to include the norms, customs, and moral principles that govern interactions in everyday life. It is one of the central values in Confucian thought, emphasising the importance of structure and respect in relationships. In the built environment, the philosophy of Li (礼) is vital as it influences and manifests in how spaces are designed, organised, and used to reflect cultural values, promote order, and encourage respectful interactions. The value of Li (礼) can be applied and appreciated in five main aspects for creating a harmonious and well-ordered built environment. This can be achieved by adequately understanding hierarchy and spatial organisation layout, having spaces that respect ritual pathways and processional design, incorporating symbolic elements that reflect cultural values, encouraging community and social interaction, and advocating the integration of nature whilst appreciating human function according to different needs and purposes. For instance, applying the concept of Li (礼) when designing spaces will promote hierarchy and proper spatial organisation that thoughtfully considers cultural values, functional needs, and aesthetic principles (Tan, C. B. 1983). By prioritising symmetry, clear zoning, and symbolic elements, the built spaces embody a sense of respect and harmony and become deeply meaningful. This can be achieved by establishing each space based on its intended use and the roles of its occupants. Hence, by adopting the value of Li (礼), the zoning categorisation for public and privacy functions can also be well-defined and thus reflect different levels of access and propriety. This will ensure that built-form spaces adapt to ceremonial and everyday tasks for complete efficiency and flexibility. Adhering to orderly hierarchy and proper spatial organisation resulted in an intentional design that respects cultural values, promotes functional competency, and ensures harmonious relationships between spaces and users. By having these elements, the built environments can both be meaningful and practical.

Xiao (孝), or filial piety, is a cornerstone of Confucian philosophy, emphasising respect, care, and devotion to one's parents, ancestors, and family (Lynn-Sze, J. C., Yusof, N., & Ahmad, M. K., 2014). It is considered the foundation of personal virtue and social harmony in Confucian thought, extending beyond familial obligations to

influence societal relationships and governance. Nevertheless, the value of Xiao (孝), or filial piety, also profoundly influences the built environment by shaping how spaces are designed, arranged, and used to reflect respect, care, and devotion to family and ancestors (Abdullah, O., Shukri, A. S. M., & Othman, N., 2011). This Confucian principle manifests in residential architecture, public spaces, and cultural institutions, emphasising intergenerational harmony, ancestral reverence, and social order. Concerning Xiao (孝), the value can shape the built environment by prioritising spaces that facilitate intergenerational living, ancestral reverence, and social harmony. From traditional courtyard homes and ancestral halls to modern retirement-friendly housing, these designs reflect a deep respect for family ties and cultural heritage, ensuring that the built environment supports filial piety's moral and social framework. The application of Xiao (孝) values not only encourages inclusive spaces, supports varying levels of mobility, and encourages meaningful connections across generations, but also helps to create environments that foster interaction, respect (allowing for privacy and independence), and cooperation among different age groups (children, adults and elders) while accommodating their distinct needs. The value of Xiao (孝) shapes the built environment because it not only helps to prioritise shared experiences and individual comfort, but through the principles of understanding its values, it encourages the presence of spaces and built form that nurtures connections, promotes mutual respect, and strengthens the bonds between generations.

The concept of Zhong (忠), or loyalty, is a key virtue in Confucian philosophy. It signifies a deep sense of dedication, sincerity, and responsibility toward others, especially in relationships defined by trust and hierarchy (Abdullah, O., Shukri, A. S. M., & Othman, N. 2011). Zhong reflects a commitment to moral integrity and social harmony, aligning individual behaviour with the greater good of society. In other words, Zhong (忠) represents sincere loyalty and steadfastness in relationships, duties, and societal roles. Rooted in trust and righteousness, it demands dedication to others while maintaining moral integrity. Zhong fosters harmony within families, communities, and governance, making it a vital principle for ethical living and societal stability. The value of Zhong (忠), or loyalty, has also significantly influenced the built environment, particularly in societies influenced by Confucianism and other traditions emphasising dedication to family, community, rulers, and nation. Zhong emphasises steadfast devotion to relationships, responsibilities, and larger institutions, manifesting in the physical design and use of spaces. In other words, Zhong influences the built environment by creating spaces that reinforce collective identity, dedication to authority, and loyalty to shared values. It is expressed through architectural symbolism, spatial hierarchy, and community-oriented design, bridging personal relationships and broader societal commitments. This can be seen in many forms built by the Chinese community, like temples or memorial halls, Clan-Based and Communal Spaces, Educational Institutions and others.

The value of Zhong (忠), or loyalty, influences building space design by shaping architectural elements, spatial organisation, and symbolic features to reflect devotion to family, authority, community, or shared ideals (Jiang, W., & Zhang, H., 2020). This can be viewed in three approaches: how Zhong (忠), is implemented in the built form and spatial organisation. First is from the aspect of centrality and hierarchy in spatial organisation, where buildings with structured layouts, such as imperial palaces or government offices, often use spatial hierarchy to denote loyalty to authority, with the essential spaces reserved for leaders or symbols of governance. This placement emphasises their importance and reflects the hierarchical relationships central to Zhong. Second, in terms of accessibility and connectivity, where buildings that are designed with loyalty in mind will include grand entrances, processional paths, or courtyards leading to focal points (e.g., a throne room, altar, or monument), symbolizing the act of devotion or submission to a central figure or idea (Rong, W., & Bahauddin, A. 2023). Third, the integration of collective identity, where buildings are designed with loyalty to the community or group, often includes spaces that foster unity, such as shared halls, open plazas, or dining areas, and clan or family spaces where people gather and reinforce their bonds, including nurturing their relationships. In essence, the value of Zhong shapes building spaces to reflect loyalty through symbolism, hierarchy, communal functionality, and dedication to shared ideals (Rong, W., & Bahauddin, A. 2023). These design choices ensure the physical environment reinforces loyalty's moral and cultural significance. Aside from this, the value of Zhong (忠), or loyalty, influences building form design by shaping architectural features and aesthetics that symbolise dedication, steadfastness, and hierarchical relationships. Buildings designed with this value often emphasise formality, symmetry, strength, and cultural symbolism to embody loyalty to individuals, institutions, or ideals (Cocks, S. 2024).

In summary, incorporating Confucian values into the built environment promotes sustainability, cultural preservation, social cohesion, and ethical responsibility, resulting in spaces that respect human needs and the natural world. This approach closely aligns with modern sustainable development and human-centred design principles. For this discussion, the focus will be on the five key philosophies of Confucianism: Ren (仁,

humaneness), Li (礼, ritual and propriety), Xiao (孝, filial piety), and Zhong (忠, loyalty). These principles are renowned for emphasising harmony, symbolism, and their profound connection to the Chinese built environment. Over time, Confucian tenets, such as harmony with nature and respect for elders, have been deeply reflected in traditional Chinese buildings' design, structure, and layout. Examples include the symbolic significance of traditional houses, temples, and communal spaces, where Chinese architecture physically manifests Confucian thought, worldview, and spiritual philosophy. To explore this further, the following section examines Confucian ethical values and how they are embodied in architecture to communicate specific meanings to society through various architectural elements.

2.2 Architecture as a Medium for Representing Confucian Ethical Values

As discussed above, ethical values are closely tied to the built environment and can be expressed through architecture to communicate specific meanings to society via its architectural elements. More specifically, ethics in the built environment pertains to how humans engage with nature through virtuous practices, as built forms must effectively interact with their users. Scholars suggest that "humans explore the universe and, within the framework provided by revelation, strive to make their existence as convenient, comfortable, and meaningful as possible" (El Husseiny, A. M., & El Husseiny, A. A. 2018). Consequently, humans bear the responsibility of caring for the entrusted natural world. They further argue that individuals guided by moral values play a crucial role in shaping the universality of nature, ensuring that every human development respects and aligns with the existing context.

According to experts, humans are responsible for caring for the built environment, as Confucian belief positions humans as superior beings with a duty to uphold balance and harmony. The built environment plays a vital role in connecting human civilization, making ethical values essential to preserving the universality of nature. Therefore, the architectural work should convey meaning that reflects and reinforces the positive values of its community's ethos. The importance of ethical values in architecture has been advocated by thinkers such as Pugin since the 17th century. This need arose during eclecticism when designers focused heavily on imitating styles and aesthetics, often neglecting deeper ethical considerations in architectural design (Muktiono, A. 2023). By the 18th century, this led to growing opposition and the emergence of the concept of "fitness for purpose."

The true essence of architectural forms was often obscured, prompting a moral revolt against the falsification of forms and historical styles. Thinkers like Morris, Ruskin, Wright, and Le Corbusier expanded on this idea. For instance, Wright emphasized the moral value of architecture by creating humble designs that symbolized humanity's close relationship with God (Pevsner, N. 2005). This approach indirectly reflects Wright's Christian religious ideology, showcasing ethical values through his organic architectural style. The concept of moral values in architecture originates here. Scholars suggest that when individuals incorporate ethics into shaping the built environment, the ethical qualities aligned with their belief systems can guide and influence human actions. This establishes a direct connection between humanity and the constructed world. As a result, integrating ethical values in architecture has been a foundational element in creating architectural works from the earliest periods through the 19th century (Habermas, J. 1985).

Architecture shapes the physical foundation of the social context and significantly influences human nature and behaviour. This is because architectural aesthetics have the power to evoke emotions and feelings. The physical appearance of architecture connects the user with the built form and enhances its impact when users engage their bodily senses. Through this interactive experience, two-way communication develops between users and architectural elements, as these elements play a vital role in shaping human behaviour. Architecture is a communication medium that conveys messages to society when meaning is intentionally embedded within its design.

Architecture can serve as both a tool and a medium for translating ethical values, reflecting beliefs in "supernatural" powers and offering insights into the theology and ideology of a society's belief system. It can shape experiences, influence human behaviour (including community values), and evoke emotions (Hershberger, R. G. 1970). In this way, architecture can foster unity within a society or group, particularly in contexts such as religion and worship, where shared spaces enhance collective meaning. This process occurs because architecture influences human perception and emotions, creating impactful experiences. Architecture functions as a unique "sign" system, acting as a medium of communication and translation. Similar to language, it can be read and interpreted like text (Hershberger, R. G. 1970). The architectural elements—such as space (access, circulation, arrangement, function, and use) and appearance (location, placement, scale, size, façade, and structure)—form a code that communicates meaning to users. Through this language, architecture conveys messages and fosters understanding (Marotta, A., Spallone, R., Turco, M. L., Zich, U., Vitali, M., Marchis, E., & Pavignano, M. 2017). The elements of built form and space in the building typology of Chinese society, including their roles, structures, and characteristics, embody the ethical values of Confucian principles. These elements act

as codes that may explicitly or implicitly convey specific messages. The built form serves as a rich and versatile symbol, capable of carrying multiple layers of meaning—whether representing physical safety, personal identity, or broader societal values. In this context, Chinese architecture becomes a medium for expressing Confucian ethical values on two levels: to individuals and society. Scholars have noted that the typology of buildings within the Chinese community reflects a diverse range of architectural forms, each designed for a specific purpose and embodying the people's cultural, spiritual, and social values. This includes traditional houses, temples, and communal houses (kongsi). These building types are distinguished by their symbolic designs, harmony with nature, and alignment with Confucian principles.

For the benefit of this writing, the study focuses on the architectural styles of Chinese traditional houses, temples, and communal houses (kongsi) followed by an analysis of how the Confucian ethical values comprise the concept of Ren (仁, humaneness-accommodation), Li (礼 ritual and propriety-respect), Xiao (孝, filial piety-etiquette), and Zhong (忠, loyalty-responsible) are embedded and symbolized in its architectural design form and its spatial organization. This will be described in the discussion section. Before understanding how Confucian values are translated into architecture, it is best to understand the Chinese traditional houses, temples, and communal houses (kongsi) architectural elements in their evolution in the Malaysian context.

2.3 The Chinese architecture - residential structures and their evolution in the Malaysian context

The evolution of Chinese architecture in Malaysia—encompassing religious institutions, residential buildings (domiciles, shophouses, townhouses and mansions), ancestral halls and clan houses —highlights the fusion of traditional Chinese architectural principles with local environmental, cultural, and historical influences (Armani, S., & Arbi, E. 2014). Over time, these structures have adapted to Malaysia's tropical climate, multiethnic society, and colonial legacy, creating unique designs that balance functionality with aesthetic and symbolic elements.

The architecture of early Chinese houses in Malaysia, particularly before the 18th century, was shaped by a fusion of Chinese traditions and local influences. The early Chinese settlers, primarily from the Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew communities, brought their architectural knowledge from China, which gradually adapted to the new tropical environment. These houses were heavily influenced by traditional southern Chinese architectural styles, particularly from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, but were modified using local materials and techniques to suit Malaysia's climate while maintaining key Chinese cultural and structural elements (Chen, V. F. 1998). The design of these houses varied in form, shape, and size, reflecting the different Chinese ethnic groups and their social status. However, not all elements of traditional Chinese architecture were fully retained. The primary architectural components that remained included roof designs, gables, walls, floors, and the fundamental spatial layout, which typically comprised an ancestral hall, bedrooms, kitchen, shrine, dining room, porch, airwell (courtyard), and internal and external ornamentation. Early Chinese settlers often constructed courtyard-style houses, similar to the traditional siheyuan (四合院) found in China. These homes featured a central courtyard allowing for natural ventilation and lighting, adhering to feng shui principles emphasising balance and harmony. The materials used in construction depended on availability—most early homes were built using wood, bamboo, and thatch, while wealthier settlers incorporated brick and clay tiles, drawing inspiration from Fujian-style architecture. Timber pillars on stone bases supported the structures to prevent decay in Malaysia's humid climate. A defining characteristic of these houses was their sloping roofs with upturned eaves, designed to direct rainwater away from the interior. In more permanent structures, clay tiles were commonly used for roofing. In Malacca, some houses were further embellished with ornate carvings and ridgeline decorations, influenced by southern Chinese temple architecture. While early homes were relatively simple, wealthier Chinese settlers incorporated decorative elements such as carved wooden screens, porcelain inlays, and intricate stonework, often adorning doorways, windows, and walls. Over time, Chinese settlers also adopted Malay and indigenous building techniques to better suit the tropical environment. This included raised floors to prevent flooding and wooden lattice panels to enhance ventilation. This blend of Chinese and local architectural elements resulted in a distinctive style that laid the foundation for the later development of Chinese houses in Malaysia.

The architecture of Chinese houses in Malaysia underwent significant changes from the late 18th to the 20th century, particularly during the colonial period. Initially, Chinese homes were simple, single-storey wooden structures, but over time, they evolved into more elaborate two- or three-storey designs, incorporating influences from local Malay and European styles. This transformation was driven by the migration of Chinese settlers to urban centres as traders and merchants, leading to urban shophouses. This practical architectural typology combined living and business spaces in key colonial trade hubs such as George Town (Penang), Melaka, and Kuala Lumpur. In the early phase, from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, shophouses were modest and functional, constructed primarily with wood and attap (thatch roofing). These structures featured minimal ornamentation, plain plastered walls, and small inner courtyards to facilitate ventilation. However, shophouse

designs evolved between the mid-19th and late 19th centuries, with buildings constructed from brick and lime plaster for enhanced durability. Many shophouses became highly ornate, featuring timber windows, intricately carved wooden doors, and roof ridges decorated with traditional Chinese motifs such as dragons and phoenixes.

Additionally, Chinese calligraphy plaques were often placed above entrances to signify shop ownership, family heritage, and social status. The ground floor typically served as a commercial or storage space, while the upper floors functioned as living quarters. A central hall (*tang*) was a key feature, serving as a gathering space for family activities and ancestral worship. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as Chinese traders accumulated wealth, they invested in grander and more elaborate shophouses, showcasing their affluence through architecture. This period saw the emergence of the Straits Eclectic style, a fusion of Chinese, Malay, and European influences. These shophouses were distinguished by their highly decorative facades, colourful glazed tiles, floral stucco, and Corinthian-style columns. Imported European materials such as cast-iron balcony railings, Venetian glass windows, and Art Nouveau tiles further enriched their aesthetic appeal. A prime example of this architectural style can be seen in the Peranakan (Baba-Nyonya) shophouses of Melaka and Penang, which remain iconic representations of Malaysia's architectural heritage.

After the 18th century, Chinese townhouses and mansions emerged in Malaysia's urban areas. These structures evolved in response to colonial influences, urbanization, and the economic prosperity of the time. The architecture of these homes is characterized by grand, multi-storey designs that reflect the wealth and status of the Chinese elite. While the original designs were based on Southern Chinese architecture (particularly from Fujian and Cantonese regions), they absorbed elements from Malay, Peranakan, and European colonial styles over time, giving rise to the distinctive Straits Eclectic style. The layout of townhouses mirrored that of shophouses—two storey high but has a narrow, deep layout structures with more privacy that purely served as residential areas. This design was practical for wealthy Chinese traders and merchants, especially in port cities, only for living spaces. The townhouses has more elaborate and larger internal courtyards with ornate facades namely for those building owned by wealthy families'. Some of the townhouses also have ancestral shrines inside.

Mansions, however, were typically associated with wealthier Chinese families and featured more elaborate floor plans, often with larger, symmetrical layouts and multiple courtyards or gardens. These mansions included larger social spaces, such as formal dining rooms, reception halls, and guest rooms, while kitchens were typically placed at the rear of the house. Ancestral altars were dedicated spaces within the home, honoring family lineage. One preserved example of a Straits Chinese mansion is the Pinang Peranakan Mansion (Penang), which showcases a blend of Chinese, Malay, and European influences in its furnishings and architectural details. The architecture of these Chinese townhouses and mansions from the 18th to 20th century represents a fascinating fusion of Chinese traditions, European colonial styles, and local Malay influences. These buildings were not only homes for the wealthy Chinese merchant class, but also served as commercial hubs, reflecting the growing prominence of the Chinese community in Malaysia's social and economic landscape. Today, these structures stand as iconic symbols of Malaysia's multicultural heritage and historical development.

This paper will focus on a case study of prominent Chinese buildings -shophouses in the Malaysian context to explore how Confucian values are embedded and symbolized in Chinese architecture in Malaysia. This examination is crucial as part of the effort to document, preserve, and restore Chinese architecture in Malaysia, ensuring that the distinct Chinese identity remains an integral part of the broader Malaysian cultural landscape. The methodology used to analyze the case study will be outlined in the following section, followed by a discussion on how ethical values are reflected in the architectural design of Chinese buildings in the findings and discussion section.

3. Methodology

This study utilises case studies as the research strategy under qualitative methods and approaches. Since the study focuses on understanding how Confucian values are embedded in architectural form and spatial organisation, interpretive anthropology is the appropriate type of paradigm. Interpretive anthropology is a theoretical approach in anthropology that views culture as a system of symbols and meanings that people use to make sense of their world. Instead of focusing on laws or structures governing human behaviour, interpretive anthropology seeks to understand how individuals and groups interpret and express their experiences through rituals, symbols, and everyday practices. This approach was popularised by Clifford Geertz, who emphasised the importance of "thick description"—a detailed analysis of cultural practices within their specific contexts (White, B. 2007). Geertz believed that to understand a culture, anthropologists must go beyond surface-level observations and uncover the deeper meanings that actions and symbols hold for the people within that culture. Interpretive anthropology consists of studying the reality that an individual shapes through an implicit meaning (White, B. 2007). The study will focus on the building structure of the Chinese Malaysian community, in which an interpretative will be conducted to find why and how Confucianism values shaped the construction of these buildings. Since this study requires an understanding of the hidden meaning behind an object, semiotics is applied to unveil the meaning behind the construction of the building forms by understanding the ideological

culture of this Chinese Malaysian community. Understanding the Chinese culture here as a text means viewing their cultural practices, symbols, and behaviours as if they were a written document that can be read, interpreted, and analysed to uncover more profound meanings. On the other hand, the interpretive anthropology paradigm, as a method of processing data subjectively, is also adjusted to the chosen hermeneutic approaches. This hermeneutic approach will further enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena by answering questions related to why, how, and what occurs when examining documents on Confucian values and their significance in Chinese Malaysian society. Hermeneutics allows researchers to uncover the underlying intentions of the Chinese Malaysian community in their actions. This study explicitly explores the Confucian values of the Chinese Malaysian community, focusing on their principles and actions. The goal is to identify the Confucian values that influence Chinese Malaysian ideological thinking and assess how these values shape the Chinese architecture for communal living. This multiple case study analyses prominent buildings within the Chinese Malaysian community, tracing their origins from the 18th century onwards (showing signs of acculturation with the local context while retaining customs and traditions). Since the study aims to explore how Confucian values are embedded in the form and spatial organisation of building designs, purposive sampling is employed. The built form is a holistic representation of Confucian values, as it is often viewed as more than just a physical structure; it symbolises aspects of human life, personal identity, social relationships, and emotional well-being. Direct observation is employed to collect data on the selected case studies. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with building owners are conducted to gather insights into the building's background and the purpose behind its architectural elements. The analysis follows the framework Yin, R. K. (2009) outlined, which helps explain the phenomenon based on specific causes and effects. The study of Chinese Malaysian architecture and Confucian values is conducted in two phases. Phase One involves separate analyses based on observational studies of the built form and spatial organisation of Chinese Malaysian houses, followed by document analysis and interviews regarding Confucian values. Phase Two: This phase compares the similarities and differences across various Chinese Malaysian houses to highlight the defining characteristics and elements of their built form and spatial organisation. In the final phase, the findings from both studies are combined to assess how Confucian values have influenced the design of the built form and how this, in turn, may impact communal development (refer to Research Framework Figure 1)

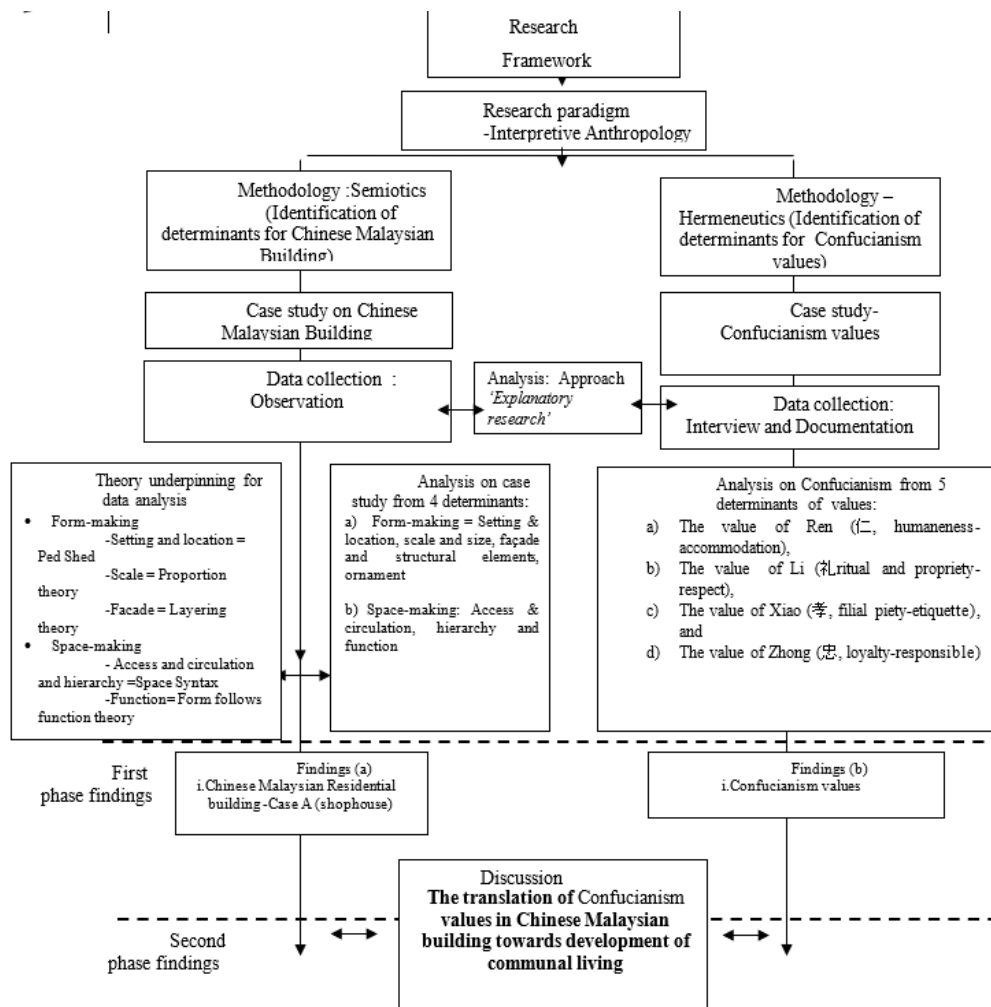


Figure 1 *Research Framework***4. Analysis and Findings****4.1 Case Study A: Chinese Shophouses (店屋, Diànwū) Fwu Chang Shophouse, Malacca****Figure 2** *Shophouse at Jalan Kasturi, Malacca**(source: <https://issuu.com/belindalau7>)*

This study examines the shophouse owned by Mr Ting Fwu Chang, located on Jalan Kasturi, Malacca, and established in 1939. The Ting family rented this shophouse after Mr. Ting Fwu Chang's grandfather migrated from China in 1936, choosing to settle and conduct business in Malacca. Initially owned by Mr. Ting Wei Chia, the shophouse was later passed down to his son, Mr. Fwu Cha, who continued the family business. Functioning as a commercial and residential space, the shophouse's ground floor was dedicated to a workshop specialising in carving and sculpting traditional gold tablets from wood and stone using hand-carved techniques. These gold tablets were primarily used for ancestral worship and signboards in temples and sacred sites. Meanwhile, the first floor served as a family living space for daily activities. Architecturally, the shophouse reflects the early 19th-century Art Deco Chinese shophouse style, blending Chinese, Peranakan (Straits Eclectic), and Art Deco influences. Five main characteristics define the early 19th-century Art Deco Chinese shophouses: the façade design, materials and construction, interior layout, roof and structural elements, and decorative motifs. Regarding the façade design, the built form retained the five-foot way (kaki lima) for pedestrian shelter. It has simpler, geometric decorations compared to the highly ornate Straits Eclectic styles. The parapet walls became more streamlined, sometimes featuring zigzags, sunbursts, or stepped designs, and precast concrete ornaments were used instead of elaborate stucco work. As for the materials and construction, brick and plaster were dominant, but reinforced concrete was introduced. The decorative Peranakan tiles continued to be used, but with simpler geometric or floral motifs.

On the other hand, windows and doors are incorporated with metal grilles with Art Deco-inspired patterns, replacing traditional wooden screens. The interior layout retained the narrow but deep layout (shophouse typology), and the central air well (courtyard) for ventilation remained a key feature. Timber beams and columns were used, but were sometimes replaced with reinforced concrete. The roof and structural elements are made of traditional clay-tiled roofs with some modifications, including flat concrete roof sections. Some early Art Deco shophouses had stepped roof parapets with linear, minimalist details. The decorative motif, however,

Open and Accommodative Public Spaces:
 The covered walkway, Five-Foot Way (Kaki Lima), is for shelter and social interaction in front of shophouses and reflects Ren's emphasis on communal living by accommodating pedestrians, traders, and social gatherings. It provides shelter from rain and sun, ensuring inclusivity for all, including the elderly and children. This semi-public space encourages spontaneous interactions and strengthens neighbourhood bonds (Diagram 1.0)

Connection & Ventilation:
 The air well enhances openness by creating a seamless connection between spaces, promoting natural light and airflow. It acts as a communal gathering space for family interactions, reinforcing family unity and respect—key aspects of Confucian values. The openness of the courtyard fosters a sense of balance between nature and human habitation, aligning with Confucian ideals of harmony with the environment (Diagram 1.0)

Flexible and Inclusive Space Planning:
 The dual-purpose design using multi-functional spaces indicating family & usiness integration accommodates both commercial (ground floor) and residential (upper floors) functions, ensuring a balance between economic and social well-being. This adaptability reflects Ren's human-centered approach, allowing generational businesses to thrive while maintaining family bonds.(Diagram 1.0)

Modular & Expandable Spaces:
 Spaces are designed to be adaptable, allowing modifications to accommodate growing families and evolving business needs. Courtyards and open-plan interiors can be reconfigured for different uses, promoting inclusivity and cooperation among family members (Diagram 1.0)

Spatial Hierarchy:
 Private and public spaces are clearly defined, showing respect for family and community roles and ensuring harmony in family interactions and respect for different generations. The ancestral altar is centrally positioned, symbolizing filial piety and reverence for ancestors, key aspects of Ren (Diagram 1.0)

Human-Centered Environmental Design:

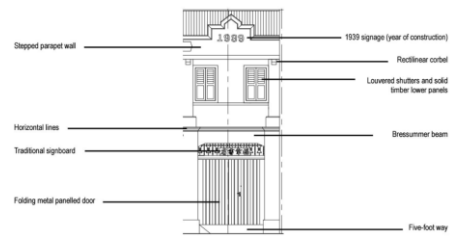


Diagram 4 : The façade form design of frontage shophouse to show the value of sustainability using durable materials (source :<https://issuu.com/belindalau7>)



Diagram 5 : Indication of the door at the ground floor plan to show the example of handcrafted gold lettering conveying good message positioning at the kitchen door as remembrance to family members (source :<https://issuu.com/belindalau7>)

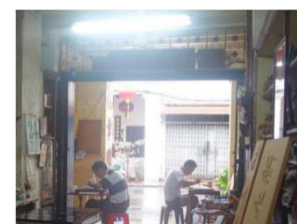
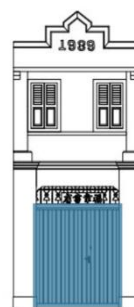
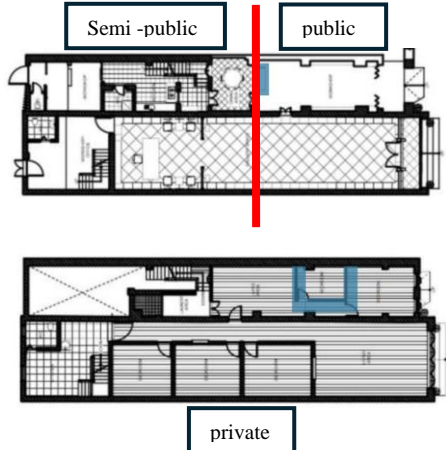
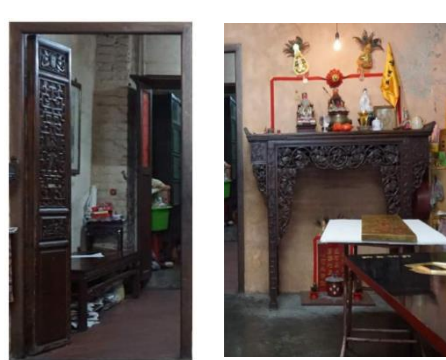


Diagram 6 : Openess at the frontal

	<p>Natural ventilation and lighting – well-being & sustainability The open-air courtyard, timber louvered windows, and cross-ventilation design create a comfortable indoor climate, reducing the need for artificial cooling. This provides natural ventilation & lighting – well-being & sustainability. This passive cooling strategy enhances health, well-being, and sustainability, demonstrating Ren’s emphasis on care for people and nature. (Diagram 1.1)</p> <p>*In essence, the value of Ren (仁, humaneness)- (accommodative and openness) is deeply connected to the spatial layout of Chinese shophouses, symbolizing and optimizing space-making for social harmony, adaptability, and environmental balance. These principles ensure that shophouses are buildings and living spaces that foster community, family bonds, and sustainability.</p> <p>Form making</p> <p><i>Use of Local & Sustainable Materials:</i> Materials like brick, timber, clay tiles, and lime plaster ensure durability and thermal comfort, making the space environmentally responsible. This reflects Confucian teachings on resource stewardship and long-term sustainability (Diagram 1.2).</p> <p><i>Symbolism and Cultural Representation:</i> Façade design and decorative motifs express humaneness & respect. The façade incorporates auspicious Chinese motifs, including calligraphy and patterns symbolizing harmony, prosperity, and respect for ancestors. For example, elements like the fu 福 (happiness or good fortune) character might be prominently displayed. These decorations are meant to enhance the aesthetic appeal, promote the well-being of those who live and work in the building, and create an environment that nurtures harmonious relations between people. Art Deco influences simplified these motifs while still reflecting Confucian ideals of order and balance. (Diagram 1.3)</p> <p><i>Openness and Welcoming Facades:</i> The front of Chinese shophouses, especially in older structures, is often designed to be open and welcoming to the community. The ground floor, which usually functions as a business or shop, has large windows or open doors, allowing passersby to see inside and engage with the business. This</p>	<p>façade using metal decorative lattice that can be opened fully for ventilation, lighting and direct interaction with the five foot pathway (source :https://issuu.com/belindalau7)</p>
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	<p>openness can be seen as reflecting the Confucian value of ren, where benevolence extends to a willingness to engage with and serve others in a community-oriented manner. Additionally, the open facade invites interaction with the outside world, symbolizing the Confucian emphasis on human relationships and mutual respect. (Diagram 1.4)</p> <p>*In summary, the Ren (humaneness) in Confucianism is symbolized in the design of Chinese shophouses through their openness, functional design, the balance between privacy and public interaction, and the connection between individuals and the larger community. The design embodies values of accommodation, mutual respect, and harmony, central to Confucian philosophy.</p>	
<p>Li (禮 ritual and propriety- (respect) In Confucianism, respect is a fundamental value that shapes interactions with others, nature, and the spiritual realm. This profound sense of respect extends beyond social customs to the design of Chinese shophouses, influencing their spatial organization, architectural form, and orientation.</p>	<p>Space making</p> <p><i>Hierarchy and Order:</i> Li promotes a structured social order and respect for hierarchy, which is reflected in the spatial organization of shophouses. Front and Back Division: The front of the shophouse, often used for commercial activities, is designed to welcome customers and conduct business with decorum. The rear, reserved for family life, ensures privacy and respects familial hierarchy. Vertical Stratification: Upper floors are typically residential or for storage, separating public (business) and private (family) spheres, reinforcing respect for personal space and family structure. Central Axis and Symmetry: Shophouses are designed along a structured axis, often with a main hall at the center for ancestral worship and social gatherings, flanked by living quarters. This reflects Confucian ideals of harmony, balance, and respect for tradition. Many shophouses have ancestral altars prominently placed, often in a central hall or a special room. This placement underscores the Confucian emphasis on filial piety and respect for one’s ancestors. The design ensures these spaces are respected and maintained, reinforcing family values. (Diagram 1.5)</p> <p><i>Adaptation for Functionality space:</i> Multi-functional Spaces: Shophouses are designed to be adaptable, with spaces that serve multiple purposes while maintaining order and propriety. Modesty and Restraint: Designs often reflect modesty, avoiding excessive display, which is in line with Confucian values of humility and</p>	 <p>Diagram 7 : The spatial organization of the ground floor and floor shophouse to show the value of respect in terms of hierarchy division according to gender and age group (source :https://issuu.com/belindalau7)</p>  <p>Diagram 8 : The Confucian value of Li (禮)—ritual, propriety, and respect—profoundly influences the built form of Chinese shophouse architecture. Rituals</p>

	<p>propriety. (Diagram 1.1)</p> <p><i>Community and Social Interaction in space:</i> Li encourages harmonious social interactions: Frontage Design: The front façade often includes open verandas or "five-foot ways," facilitating interaction with neighbours and customers, reflecting the value of community respect and engagement. Shared Courtyards: Some shophouses feature internal courtyards that serve as communal spaces, fostering neighbourly relations and shared rituals. (Diagram 1.1)</p> <p>*In essence, the Confucian value of Li (禮) is deeply embedded in the spatial design of Chinese shophouses. This respect is reflected in various architectural elements, from the hierarchical arrangement of spaces to the choice of orientation and materials, demonstrating reverence for nature, ancestors, social order, and spirituality. The layout serves practical functions and symbolizes the Chinese worldview, where architecture embodies respect for social, environmental, and spiritual dimensions of life. In this way, shophouses stand as living representations of Confucian values.</p> <p><u>Form making</u> <i>Symbolic Architectural Elements Reflecting Propriety:</i> Raised Thresholds: Doors often have elevated thresholds, symbolizing a respectful transition between public and private spaces. They also serve to prevent negative energy (煞气) from entering, reinforcing the idea of maintaining order and decorum. Ornate Doorways and Gateways: The main entrance often features auspicious carvings or inscriptions, reinforcing moral teachings and respect for cultural heritage. Paifang (牌坊 - Commemorative Archways): These gateways honour virtuous individuals, scholars, or loyal subjects, reinforcing the value of Li by celebrating exemplary conduct.</p> <p><i>Decorative Motifs and Calligraphy:</i> Moral Teachings Engraved in Architecture: Walls, beams, and entrances often feature Confucian sayings, reinforcing values like filial piety (孝), righteousness (义), and harmony (和). Mythological and Animal Symbols: Dragons (龙) symbolize power and wisdom, often seen in imperial architecture. Cranes (鹤) represent longevity and virtue, reinforcing the Confucian respect for wisdom and elders.</p>	<p>and symbolic elements are embedded in spatial organization, decorative details, and structural features, reinforcing social hierarchy, respect for tradition, and harmony within society (source :https://issuu.com/belindalau7)</p>
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5. Discussion: Chinese Malaysian buildings as symbols to convey Confucian ethical values

The findings from Case Study A (a Chinese shophouse in Malacca) above highlight how dominant Confucian values deeply influence the shophouse's design form and spatial organisation. This reflects societal life and the relationship between the built environment and its surroundings. From the case study above, it is profoundly shown that Chinese buildings in Malaysia do continue to preserve Confucian values in their design, particularly in terms of family respect, hierarchy, moral symbolism, and community responsibility. These values are still embedded in architecture, even as designs evolve to accommodate modern needs. The preservation of filial piety and loyalty and the emphasis on social order ensure that these Confucian principles are passed down through generations, making them integral to both the physical and cultural landscape of the Chinese community in Malaysia. Components such as structural, functional, and aesthetic aspects shape the experience of the space, influencing the occupants' sense of identity, comfort, security, and emotional well-being. Scholars have noted that the architectural elements of a building can subtly reflect values like openness, order, humility, respect, and responsibility, as these values relate to human principles and experiences, thereby becoming symbols of human life. Consequently, the architecture of the building should foster ongoing, indirect interactions with its users, the community, and the surrounding context through its functional role and physical symbolism. (Refer to Table 2)

Confucianism values	Representation of Confucianism values in residential-built form and spatial organization
<p><i>Ren</i> (仁, <i>humaneness</i>)- (<i>accommodative and openness</i>)</p> <p>Design a welcoming and flexible home environment that encourages social engagement and offers personal retreat while maintaining a strong connection to the outside world.</p>	<p>The values of <i>accommodation and openness</i> are reflected in the following spatial layout and built form:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The spatial layout is open and fluid, promoting a seamless flow between interior spaces and fostering easy movement and interaction between rooms. • Multi-functional interior spaces enable the home to adapt to changing family dynamics and host social gatherings. • The house's entryway embodies openness, welcoming residents and guests and encouraging interaction and inclusivity. • The interior spaces are free of physical barriers, such as walls, to enhance a sense of openness and connection. This makes the space adaptable to various needs and lifestyles, encouraging interaction and communication among family members and guests. • The external walls feature ample windows, allowing natural light to flood the interior and creating a strong connection with the outside world, bridging the gap between home and nature. • The interior space is thoughtfully connected to the surrounding environment, promoting a natural flow between indoor and outdoor spaces and fostering a sense of openness.
<p><i>Li</i> (禮 <i>ritual and propriety</i>)- (<i>respect</i>)</p> <p>Designing spaces and structures that embody respect involves a mindful approach that honours the individuals who inhabit them, recognizing their privacy, uniqueness, and connection to the environment. It also</p>	<p>The simple design of the space and façade reflects the value of respect through a balanced approach to structure and aesthetics. This results in an inclusive form that avoids conveying an exclusive identity. Essentially, it represents a built environment that honours the cultural needs of both the users and the local community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The spatial layout ensures accessibility for all occupants to communal, family, and personal areas, promoting both privacy and comfort while recognizing the importance of communal living and individual retreats.

<p>means incorporating elements that reflect an appreciation for personal needs, cultural traditions, and sustainability.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interior's hierarchical arrangement accommodates residents and guests of all ages and physical abilities, supporting inclusivity and equal access. • The design follows ergonomic principles to prioritize the occupants' physical comfort and ease of use. Proportionately scaled façades and structures, combined with functional materials and thoughtful arrangement, allow the built form to integrate with the user seamlessly.
<p><i>Xiao (孝, filial piety-etiquette) (manners)</i> Incorporating the value of manners goes beyond mere aesthetics—it's about being thoughtful and respectful in every aspect of the home's design. From crafting inviting spaces to prioritizing privacy and comfort for everyone, these elements combine to create a home that embodies kindness and consideration.</p>	<p>The value of manners plays a crucial role in housing design because it encompasses norms and rules driven by respect. This value can be expressed through both internal and external features.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In terms of spatial organization, the main areas should flow seamlessly from one to the next. Social spaces such as the living room, dining room, and kitchen should be easily accessible without passing through private areas like bedrooms, ensuring privacy for family members and comfort for guests. • The built form incorporates eco-friendly and sustainably sourced materials, such as bamboo, recycled steel, and reclaimed wood, reducing the ecological footprint and showing respect for available resources. This approach fosters a harmonious relationship with the environment, minimising its overall impact.
<p><i>Zhong (忠, loyalty-responsible)</i> Emphasizing the value of responsibility centres on sustainability, resource efficiency, and creating spaces that encourage responsible living for both the occupants and their community. This approach considers environmental, social, and practical obligations, aiming to minimise the home's ecological footprint, promote well-being, and make mindful use of materials and space.</p>	<p>The value of responsibility involves integrating sustainability, resource efficiency, and community-oriented principles into the architectural form and spatial layout. This can be achieved through a thoughtful hierarchical arrangement and appropriate circulation that accommodates the diverse needs of its users.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The spatial organisation adopts a modular design concept, allowing spaces to be easily adapted or expanded as necessary. • The built form incorporates local materials, sustainable practices, and design elements that foster harmony with nature and the community. This responsible approach minimises the home's visual impact on the landscape and encourages a connection with the natural environment. • Traditional home layouts and foundations often align with the natural landscape, avoiding significant alterations. This approach respects the land, reduces erosion, and supports the preservation of local ecosystems.

Table 2 Relationship between *Confucianism* values in typical Chinese house architecture

Based on the above description, it is evident that Chinese houses, grounded in Confucian values, effectively communicate ethical principles centred on harmony, balance, and inner peace. The case studies of Chinese houses in Malaysia are examined below for this discussion. The findings reveal that Confucian values have significantly influenced the design of Chinese house architecture despite undergoing an acculturation process (Case Studies A – Chinese shophouses). In other words, the Chinese house symbolises Confucian principles, contributing to the development of the Chinese people and their community.

6. Conclusion

Holistically, Confucianism has profoundly influenced Chinese culture for over two millennia, and its core values continue to shape the daily lives of Chinese communities worldwide, including in Malaysia. This preservation of values persists due to five main aspects of the built environment, Chinese societal development, and communal well-being. First, to ensure the continuation and preservation of homegrown cultural traditions. The Chinese community in Malaysia, particularly those of Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew descent, have maintained strong

cultural ties to China's Confucian traditions, even after generations of living in a foreign land. These cultural practices have been passed down through generations, often by family elders who emphasise the importance of Confucian values in daily life. Many of these traditions are integrated into social life, such as Chinese New Year celebrations, family reunions, and ancestor worship.

Second, to strengthen the community cohesion among the Chinese Malaysian communities from various clans and backgrounds. This is vital as Confucianism promotes harmony and respect within the family and community, which helps maintain strong ties between individuals and fosters a sense of collective responsibility. This emphasis on community and family values contributes to the tight-knit nature of the Chinese community in Malaysia, where people often prioritise family obligations over individual desires. The respect for elders and the duty to care for ageing parents are central to family dynamics, and the strong sense of filial duty fosters respect and unity within Chinese Malaysian families. In addition to this, upholding the philosophy of Confucianism as a foundation in many Chinese clan associations and temples in Malaysia will promote the importance of respect, loyalty, and education through community events, festivals, and educational programs.

Third, the flexibility of the Confucianism belief that can adapt and integrate with the local practices. Confucian values have been easily adapted to fit into Malaysia's regional context of a multi-racial background. For example, respect for elders and ancestor worship remain deeply embedded in Malaysian Chinese culture. These values also intersect with Malaysia's Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu practices, allowing for a rich blend of spiritual and ethical principles across different communities. Chinese bilingual and bicultural Malaysians often integrate Confucian values into their interactions with the broader Malaysian society, making them relevant in diverse social contexts. In other words, the tractability of Confucianism also places great emphasis on the value of education among the Chinese communities, which is key to success in business and academics. In Malaysia, Chinese Malaysians have often achieved notable success in education and commerce due to their commitment to these values, leading them to continue to adhere to Confucian principles, in which many Chinese families in Malaysia still prioritise academic excellence and career success as part of their cultural identity, following Confucian ideals of wisdom and personal responsibility. This creates a harmonious and well-balanced Chinese Malaysian society essential for societal development, as it allows communities to progress and modernise while maintaining their cultural roots, ensuring that development is forward-looking and culturally grounded.

Integrating these values of Confucianism, encompassing Ren (仁, humaneness-accommodation), Li (礼 ritual and propriety-respect), Xiao (孝, filial piety-etiquette), and Zhong (忠, loyalty-responsible) ensures that architecture creates functional buildings and fosters a healthy, sustainable, and culturally rich society. By aligning built environments with these core values, communities are better equipped to face modern challenges while maintaining their cultural identity and environmental balance, leading to more holistic and sustainable societal development.

Acknowledgement

This research is made possible by the knowledge contribution of expertise from the Centre of Conservation for Sustainable Ethnic Heritage (CASEH-PERZIM).

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of the paper.

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