



Fish, Faith, and Culture Intersections: A Case Reflection of Indonesian Chinese Christians Community

Linus Baito

Theology Department of Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Aletheia, (Aletheia Theological Seminary), Lawang, Malang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study explores the complex relationships between the Christian faith and Indonesian Chinese cultural traditions, focusing on the fish motif as a significant symbol. The research employs historical and literary analyses through an intercultural theology lens to investigate how the fish symbol serves theological and socio-cultural functions within Christianity, tracing its transformation from ancient times to its current role in Indonesian contexts. A comparative analysis highlights the similarities between the fish's theological significance in Christianity and its integration into Indonesian Chinese cultural practices, especially during Chinese New Year's Eve celebrations. This festive occasion exemplifies the conceptual ties to biblical narratives involving fish, emphasizing sustenance, salvation, and community themes. Furthermore, the research illustrates the adaptive nature of religious symbols in multicultural settings, demonstrating how these symbols evolve while retaining their core meanings. Through this examination, the study aims to enhance understanding of the multifaceted interpretations of the fish symbol across diverse cultural landscapes, thereby contributing valuable insights into the intersections of faith, culture, and ritual practices within biblical and Indonesian Chinese backgrounds.

Keywords: *Fish; Faith; Indonesian Chinese Christian; Identity; Intercultural Theology*

Introduction

The Indonesian Chinese community had a lengthy history spanning centuries, marked by substantial migrant waves throughout the colonial period. Initially embraced for their economic contributions, they subsequently encountered discrimination and violence, especially during times of political turmoil (Ubaedillah 2023). The most significant event emerged during the anti-Chinese riots in 1998, culminating in extensive violence against Chinese Indonesians, causing fatalities and property destruction. This historical context is essential for comprehending the challenges encountered by Indonesian Chinese Christians today.

The quest for cultural identity is a significant theme in the experiences of Indonesian Chinese Christians (Jingyi and Jiangli, 2024). They frequently have a dilemma between their Chinese origin and their Indonesian nationality. This dualism may result in a sense of estrangement from both societies. The

research article examines the integration of traditional Chinese behaviours, including festivals and culinary activities, with the Christian faith, resulting in a distinctive cultural tapestry.

The symbolism of fish holds considerable importance in biblical literature and Chinese culture. In Christianity, fish symbolizes abundance and faith (Steffler 2002, 10), originating from the miracles of Jesus involving fish. For Indonesian Chinese Christians, fish symbolize prosperity during traditional holidays like the Lunar New Year (Fong 2000). The research examines the utilization of these symbols to negotiate identity and articulate faith within the community.

The research also examines religious identity as a significant factor. A significant number of Indonesian Chinese are Christians who have difficulties pertaining to their faith in a mostly Muslim society. The quest for religious expression frequently crosses with ethnic identity; Indonesian Chinese Christians may experience pressure to adhere to prevailing societal norms while striving to preserve their unique religious traditions.

The study highlights how ecclesiastical communities are essential support networks for Indonesian Chinese Christians. These communities offer a venue for worship that respects their Christian convictions and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, difficulties may emerge when traditional behaviours contradict Christian doctrines, resulting in internal disputes regarding the dual identity of Indonesian and Chinese.

The socio-political environment in Indonesia presents more obstacles for the Indonesian Chinese people. Discrimination and marginalization have traditionally constrained their possibilities across all areas, including politics and business. The research examines the influence of socio-political disputes on the community's capacity to engage in national discourse comprehensively.

Although Indonesian Chinese constitute a considerable economic influence in Indonesia, they frequently lack representation in political arenas. This under-representation may result in policies failing to address their needs or concerns. The study emphasizes the endeavours of community leaders to promote enhanced inclusion in national politics while managing the intricacies of their dual identities.

The writing employs a qualitative methodology and a literature review concerning fish symbolism. The study design entails the examination of literature, cultural behaviours, and religious rites to gain a complete understanding of the Indonesian Chinese Christian population. Data were gathered from historical texts, scholarly literature, and pertinent narratives within Indonesia's Chinese Christian community. The data analysis is also supported by an intercultural theological framework, which effectively offers a dynamic interpretation of tradition, culture, and religion within Christianity.

Symbols in society are crucial for communication and meaning-making, enabling individuals to comprehend and engage with one another and influencing behaviour and identity through a shared understanding. One component of the intercultural theology methodology is engaging in discussion to establish a novel constructive significance (Wijsen 2014) (Baito 2023). The outcomes of the methodological framework seek to provide an understanding of the experiences and viewpoints on fish symbols within the Indonesian Chinese Christian community. This approach to intercultural theology will enhance understanding of the interplay between culture, religion, and identity in Indonesian society.

The study article's primary focus is the interplay between faith and culture. It highlights the interpretation of biblical narratives through the perspective of Indonesian Chinese experiences. The community affirms its identity and addresses modern concerns by connecting with scriptural texts and local traditions. Further study indicates that encouraging discourse across diverse cultures can facilitate bridging differences and enhance mutual understanding. Through dialogues that respect biblical doctrines and local customs, Indonesian Chinese Christians may adeptly manoeuvre their distinct role within Indonesia's multifaceted society.

Biblical Perspective on Fish

Fish is one of the God's creatures. It first appeared in the book of Genesis 1:20-23, 26, 29. The Bible verses revealed that aquatic ecosystems are inhabited by fish, various other organisms, and humans, all of whom share these environments in a mutually dependent manner. Thomas Nelson notes that besides Bible, Near East culture and Egyptian rulers in ancient times cultivated gardens for a better living included plants, birds, and fish. This reality implies that gardens were not merely aesthetic spaces but integral parts of ecological systems where various species, including fish, coexisted. This interconnectedness emphasizes how human cultivation practices impact natural habitats, suggesting that gardens serve as microcosms of larger environmental dynamics (Nelson 2008, 3–5).

Fish have been categorized as clean or unclean in some religious contexts. Unclean fish typically refer to those lacking proper anatomical features, such as fins, which aligns with biblical references like Leviticus 11:10. Additionally, animals that move improperly or abnormally, akin to bats flying though they are mammals, may also fall under the category of unclean (Nelson 2008, 126–27). For example, in Judaism, the Torah specifies that fish without scales or fins are deemed unclean (Leviticus 11:9–13). Similarly, in Islamic tradition, halal food laws dictate that fish must have fins and scales to be considered permissible for consumption (Brondz 2018) (Ridho, Anggraini, and Oktaviani 2021). These distinctions highlight the importance of proper identification and preparation when it comes to consuming seafood within these religious frameworks.

In the Old Testament, fish symbolized a fundamental reminder of plentiful feasts for the Israelites. Specifically, the profuse availability of Nile fish, vividly recalled in Numbers 11:5, underscored its prominence within the Egyptian diet (Wildberger and (Trans) 1991, 247). However, the Israeli recollection of fish diverges significantly from their experiences during the desert exodus. While fish was not inherently linked to their slave status in Egypt, it holds a sacrosanct connotation related to divinity. Consequently, royal and cultic figures strictly avoided consuming fish due to its revered nature (Radcliffe 1921, 321). This phenomenon aligns with broader trends across ancient civilizations, wherein particular foods were designated for sacrificial purposes rather than individual consumption. For instance, in ancient Egypt, priests refrained from eating fish, perceiving it as an abomination. This dichotomy reinforced their roles as mediators between the divine and mortal worlds (Wilson 2022).

In the New Testament, fish are frequently linked to the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, who were engaged in fishing. Jesus' exhortation to His disciples to become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19) serves as a metaphor for the Church's global evangelization and outreach efforts. The miraculous feeding of 5,000 individuals with two fish and five loaves (Matthew 14:13-21) is a significant occurrence linked to the symbol of the fish. The event underscored Jesus' function as a benefactor and advocate for His adherents.

Thomas R. Schreiner stated that fish or *ichthus* possesses a symbolic significance pertaining to the connection between Christ, the mission of salvation, and the disciples of Jesus. The divine scheme of salvation is frequently manifested through imperceptible and unforeseen methods. This episode occurred when Peter and the other apostles were miraculously fishing in the sea of Galilee. In this scenario, fish denote a tangible objective for Peter and his fellow fishermen while symbolizing their broader aim (Schreiner 2008, 689). The assembly highlighted the sacred essence of vocation for Christians. This section discusses the methodological relevance of *ichthus* about God's transforming mission, which profoundly affects His church.

Carmen M. Cusack's research reveals that fish possesses a complex significance in Christian exegesis. This highlights its significant impact on Christian culture and theology. Biblical depictions of fish encompass diverse themes, such as the demonstrations of divine power, humanity's inherent sinful condition, and fertility symbols (Cusack 2017, ix). Firstly, the symbolic significance of the fish in the Bible pertains to the omnipotence of God. The extraordinary fish catch, as depicted in Luke 5:6,

exemplifies divine involvement in human endeavour. This occurrence highlights Jesus' divine authority and illustrates the transformational power of His disciples' faith. Likewise, the miracle of feeding five thousand individuals with five loaves and two fish (Matthew 14:17) underscores Jesus' omnipotence in supplying essential sustenance, symbolizing both physical and spiritual gifts (Cusack 2017, x).

Secondly, as biblical parables demonstrate, fish are a fundamental component of the evolution of symbolism and metaphor within Christian society. The story of the net (Matthew 13:47-50) functions as a compelling metaphor for the division of the righteous from the wicked. This fable, akin to others, utilizes the natural world to elucidate intricate theological principles, making them more accessible and relatable to the audience. The fish image in this tale emphasizes that salvation involves sorting and discrimination, wherein the righteous are saved, and the wicked are discarded (Cusack 2017, xi).

Thirdly, the fish symbol embodies a profound historical, ethical, and spiritual tale. The narrative of Jonah with a colossal fish (Jonah 1:17) serves as a quintessential illustration. This account, which mirrors the resurrection of Jesus (Matthew 12:38-45), epitomizes the transformational potency of faith and the notion of spiritual rebirth. The account of Noah's Ark (Genesis 6-9), which includes fish, further emphasizes the notion of salvation and the connection between people and animals. These narratives impart moral precepts and constitute the spiritual accounts that have influenced Christian theology and practice (Cusack 2017, xii–xiii).

Cusack noted that the connotation of fish in Christian exegesis is varied and profoundly embedded in the biblical narrative. Fish have profoundly influenced Christian culture and theology through their connection to divine power and human sin and their contribution to symbolic language and moral precepts. The historical and spiritual narratives associated with fish, notably those from the accounts of Jonah and Noah, persist in resonating with Christians today, providing profound insights into the essence of faith, salvation, and the human condition.

Fish Interpretations in the Historical Context

The fish symbol connotes Jesus and Christianity. Catholic tradition posits that the symbol was recognized for several centuries prior to the introduction of the cross (MacErlean 1917, 82). Tuomas Rasimus contends that the depiction of Christ via the fish symbol first emerged in Christian literature in the mid-second century. *Ichthus* is an acronym formed from the initial letters of the Greek words Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς Θεοῦ Υἱὸς Σωτὴρ [*Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter*]. The sentence is rendered in Indonesian as *Yesus Kristus, Anak Allah, Juruselamat* (Rasimus 2012, 327).

Augustine (354–430 A.D.), noted by Robert W. Dayson, provided a commendable evaluation of the term *ichthus*, asserting that all Christians see it as a hallowed symbol of Christ. The sacred significance of *ichthus* relates to the existence of Jesus Christ, who, despite assuming the form of a sinful man, remained sinless amidst the abyss of mortality and did not succumb to the depths of sin (Dyson 1998, 851). In early Christian society, the fish symbol served as a form of artistic expression. The art embodies the significant identity of Christians (Francis 2003). M. Marcovich and J.C.M. van Winden, citing Clement of Alexandria, stated that the term *ichthys* and its diverse visual representations confirm the identity of Christians, particularly regarding their identification as adherents of Christ (J.C.M. Marcovich 2002, 229).

During the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians, the *ichthys* emblem emerged as a secret identity for early Christians. The symbol was selected because of its indirect association with Christianity, serving as a prudent method for adherents to recognize one another without inciting suspicion from Roman authorities and informants. The fish sign is frequently employed in clandestine assemblies as indicators on Christian graveyards and jewellery. In certain spots, the fish symbol is frequently observed on the walls of the catacombs where early Christians conducted their worship (Hansen 2004)

(McManners 2001, 35). Nonetheless, its application is not limited to Christianity, as several pagan cults have likewise embraced it to mitigate suspicion regarding its importance (Parke, 2022).

Elesha Coffman discusses the fascinating archives of ancient beliefs concerning symbols and wisdom. He stated that the utilization of fish symbols among Christians historically served as a prudent method for recognizing one another while encountering outsiders. Their activity involves drawing a bow with the fish symbol on the ground to signify their connection. If the stranger responds with another bow, it confirms the shared belief. This technique is frequently regarded as a manifestation of the romanticization of historical accounts that accentuates elements of sanctity and communal unity during the era of persecution. Coffman posits that such ordinances and behaviours possess paradoxical implications.

Coffman underscored the significance of a nuanced equilibrium between preserving Christian identity and evading the scrutiny of oppressors. Conversely, they also highlighted the hardness and intellectual dimensions of the early Christian society. This tradition enables clandestine gatherings and reinforces a sense of solidarity and shared objective among its followers (Coffman 2008).

Fish is intricately linked regarding faith, revealing a profound imbalance in the relationship between believers and their rulers. Tyler R. Yoder posits that Christians are symbolically represented by the fish, which encapsulates vulnerability and resilience. The metaphor of powerless Christians as fish pursued by fishermen is particularly striking; it underscores a shared narrative of oppression. This traditional imagery resonates deeply across cultures, as illustrated by ancient royal decrees that depicted Assyrian kings as fishermen seizing enemy territories under divine sanction. Similarly, biblical prophets portrayed Israel and Judah as defenceless fish destined to be ensnared by foreign powers. This parallelism not only highlights the shared vulnerability of these groups but also critiques the dynamics of power and faith throughout history (Yoder 2016, 170).

Christianity in ancient China emerged as a significant motif, symbolically represented through various artistic expressions that reflected the faith's core beliefs. Susangeline Yalili Patrick argues that Nestorian Christians utilized a range of symbols—including peace signs, fish motifs, bird imagery, and sunflower designs—on bronze crosses to articulate their Christian identity. This diverse iconography not only illustrates the adaptability of Nestorianism within the Chinese cultural context but also underscores the intricate interplay between indigenous beliefs and foreign religious symbols during this period (Patrick 2024, 28). The Christian religion involves a vibrant and active relationship between God and His people. Jesus exemplified these profound relationships with the disciples. Jesus of Nazareth is intricately linked with marginalized communities, particularly the fishers of the lake of Galilee, whose dependency on landlords is poignantly illustrated in the parable of the vineyard labourers. Douglas E. Oakman asserts this relationship underscores a broader socio-economic dynamic, as evidenced by Josephus's self-identification as a benefactor and saviour to the Galileans, a designation he mentions twice in his writings. Such terminology reflects a patron-client framework, revealing that Josephus was strategically positioned in their favour, thereby highlighting the complexities of social hierarchies and mutual obligations in ancient Galilean society (Oakman 2022, 56).

Intercultural and Fish Interpretations

The fish symbol holds significant value in Christianity and Chinese culture. This definition encompasses a variety of circumstances pertaining to history, tradition, and culture. The phrase "fish" in Christianity originates from the Greek word "*ichthus*." The term can possess a literal meaning, specifically fish, as well as a symbolic interpretation. For ages, *ichthus* was regarded as a clandestine symbol to recognize the adherents of Christ throughout the Roman persecution (Suprianto, Alfian, and Kristanto 2022). The symbolic significance of fish is well grounded in theological principles. The term *ichthus* is frequently linked to the miracle of five loaves and two fish (Matthew 14:13-21) and the new identity of Jesus' apostles as "fishers of men" (Mark 1:16-18). Presently, the significance of *ichthus*

appears to have transformed into a symbol utilized in several Christian contexts. The emblem is present on automobile bumper stickers, business cards, and many media as a tangible manifestation of faith.

In Chinese culture, fish are esteemed as symbols of wealth, abundance, and prosperity. The Chinese word for fish is *yú*, signifying abundance, richness, and prosperity. All of these phrases serve as metaphors for material prosperity and fecundity (Su 2019). Fish are frequently illustrated alongside flowers, particularly lotus flowers, to symbolize a yearning for a flourishing and wealthy existence. The amalgamation of fish and lotus blossoms, termed *Nian Nian You Yú*, symbolizes the aspiration for enduring prosperity annually. This cultural tradition is firmly rooted in Chinese mythology and is frequently employed in rituals and ceremonies to secure good fortune and wellness.

Historically, Indonesian Chinese Christians have preserved a distinctive cultural identity influenced by their Chinese ancestry and Christian beliefs. There appears to be a resurgence of interest in the practice of Chinese traditions and culture among Indonesian Chinese Christians. This heightened attention is manifested in cultural events and rituals that integrate Chinese and Christian traditions. An instance is the celebration of the Chinese New Year. These celebrations frequently encompass traditional rites and ceremonies that are profoundly embedded in Chinese cultural narratives, exemplified by the use of fish as a symbol of abundance and success.

Chinese Christians in Indonesia must integrate aspects of both cultures into their religious observances. These endeavours can yield a beneficial influence, fostering many manifestations and interpretations of international theology. This integration is anticipated to be a profound synthesis rather than a mere fusion of traditions, reflecting Christianity and Chineseness's intricate historical, traditional, and cultural backgrounds.

The integrative efforts outlined in the aforementioned description yield consequences. The fish symbol in Indonesian Chinese Christianity represents complex symbolism, reflecting the profound significance of both Christian and Chinese traditions and culture. These complex dimensions generate conflicts across traditions, civilizations, and religions, thereby promoting intercultural comprehension and religious coexistence.

Chinese New Year Celebrations and Fish Symbols Interpretation

In Indonesia, the Lunar New Year is frequently observed as a commemoration of the *Imlek* New Year. The phrase Chinese New Year originates from the *Hokkien* dialect, wherein "*im*" signifies the month and "*lek*" denotes the calendar month (Budaya Imlek: Menelusuri Jejak Tradisi dan Kearifan Lokal 2024). The notion of Chinese New Year originates from the agricultural customs of Chinese farmers to herald the arrival of spring. A tale states that a monster named *Nian* emerged in late winter to hunt humans and livestock. A grandfather clad in red once confronted *Nian*, who thereafter hunted other animals. Subsequent to the event, tranquillity and elation permeated the town. A reflective-normative activity subsequently transpired. The grandfather instructed all villagers that prior to traveling, they should affix red paper decorations and ignite firecrackers to repel *Nian*. Consequently, Chinese New Year, also known as *Sin Tjia* or *Sin Nian*, is celebrated by erecting red lanterns and igniting firecrackers on New Year's Eve (Eunuch 2024).

The Chinese New Year festivities in Indonesia represent a captivating historical account. Throughout the New Order period, Chinese New Year festivities remained restricted until the advent of the reform era. In 2000, the government granted the Chinese population in Indonesia the liberty to celebrate the Chinese New Year. President Abdurrahman Wahid promulgated Presidential Decree No. 19/2001, designating Chinese New Year as a discretionary holiday. In 2003, President Megawati Soekarnoputri designated Chinese New Year as a national holiday (Eunuch 2024).

The Indonesian Chinese community perceives Chinese New Year for several motives. For instance, Confucianist communities in Indonesia celebrate the Chinese New Year to instruct and enlighten the younger generation about the traditions associated with the holiday. These activities aim to ensure the sustainability of Chinese culture and customs in Indonesia (Tamarita and Goeyardi, 2023). Alongside Confucian groups, Christian congregations also commemorate the Chinese New Year. During the festival, various symbols are recognized by the Chinese, notably red, which signifies happiness and success. Consequently, people don crimson adornments and garments during the Chinese New Year festivities. A red envelope carrying money, referred to as an *angpao*, serves as another emblem. The festival features a buffet of unique dishes, including basket cakes, oranges, dumplings, longevity noodles, and fish (Budaya Imlek: Menelusuri Jejak Tradisi dan Kearifan Lokal 2024).

The fish dish is customarily presented at a family dinner on the eve of the Chinese New Year. It has become standard practice to offer fish dishes whole. The integrity of the fish, comprising the head and tail, symbolizes the beginning and the end, representing completion. In certain Chinese families, fish is typically the final dish presented at the dinner party preceding Chinese New Year. The meaning reflects the host's aspiration for their guests' abundant and sustainable existence (Tan and Gao 2018). The meal is meticulously prepared to preserve the fish's form, ensuring an aesthetically pleasing appearance that enhances the overall dining experience for the family members present (Soesilo, 2023).

In addition to its presence on family meal menus prior to Chinese New Year, fish holds additional significant implications. In China, fish universally symbolize success, prosperity, peace, and feelings. The fish emblem represents unity, illustrated by the behaviour of fish congregating for mutual defence when faced with danger. Ellen Johnston Laing stated that using fish as a symbol of good fortune originates from ancient Chinese literature. It is also intriguing that numerous fish are thought to forecast a bountiful harvest while swarming fish indicates societal turmoil (Laing 2017).

Another interpretation of the fish symbol pertains to fertility. It corresponds to a fish's characteristics that simultaneously generate hundreds of eggs, symbolizing fertility, success, cognitive ability, intelligence, and creativity. Fish metaphor differs among civilizations, as to other symbols, with certain species possessing distinct interpretations (Stroumsa 1992).

The traditional Chinese character for fish is 魚, whereas the simplified version is 鱼. Regardless of the writing style, the term for fish is pronounced "yú." The Chinese pronunciation of "yú" is a homophone for the term's "prosperity" or "abundance" (Asif and Ali 2019). Various species of fish, such as carp and goldfish, are deeply ingrained in Chinese culture. The Chinese correlate its significance with fortune, prosperity, fecundity, and wellbeing. The phrase "年年有魚" (*Nian Nian You Yú*) was mentioned during the Chinese New Year celebration. It signifies "an abundance of fish" or "may best wishes prevail throughout the year" (Laing 2017).

The fish symbol also conveys the creative dimension. In his work "Between Science and Art... Illustrations of Fish in China," Ching-ling Wang examines the significance of fish imagery in Chinese art, highlighting its historical, cultural, and symbolic aspects. Fish has emerged as a prevalent motif in Chinese art, sometimes reinterpreted to symbolize prosperity, fertility, and good fortune. The symbolism is fundamentally anchored in traditional beliefs and traditions, wherein fish are linked to water, a vital factor for life and wealth. (Money 2023) Beyond its artistic significance, the fish symbol embodies cultural and psychological dimensions in China, which are crucial to personal and cultural personality development and psychological development (Congxin and Yongxia 2019).

According to the aforementioned comprehension, the fish emblem within Chinese society holds a multifaceted significance firmly entrenched in Chinese culture and history. Nini Shao's research indicates that Chinese fish's history and cultural significance originated in the Neolithic era (Shao et al., 2024). Shao and his companions underscored that the fish symbol serves as an ornamental feature and has

significant meaning. The emblem signifies the principles of perpetual existence and sustainable renewal. The metaphorical significance is likewise linked to fortune, affluence, and longevity (Shao et al., 2024). These interpretations constitute a symbolic assemblage associated with fish, which epitomizes the most esteemed and honourable aspirations for realization in each individual's life in the forthcoming years.

Intercultural and Theological Reflections

Elia Maggang's scholarly contributions offer a robust theological critique highlighting the imperative of integrating marine life into discussions around food security. His arguments underscore the need for inclusive dialogue, emphasizing that such integration is vital for fostering sustainable practices within Christian communities and tackling pressing ecological crises. Specifically, Maggang critiques the World Council of Churches' (WCC) Ten Commandments of Food (TCF) campaign, which primarily focuses on agricultural concerns while largely disregarding marine resources. This oversight is particularly detrimental given the severe marine ecological crisis characterized by pollution, overfishing, and habitat degradation. Drawing upon Jesus' ministry among fishermen, Maggang highlights the profound theological importance of marine life in Christianity. He argues that incorporating marine issues into the TCF would not merely enhance its pertinence but significantly bolster its efficacy in addressing both food insecurity and ecological sustainability. Ultimately, Maggang's work underscores the urgency of reorienting our approach to food security to encompass the integral role of marine ecosystems and the communities dependent on them. (Maggang 2021)

Elia Maggang's insights emphasize the critical need to integrate marine life into food security discussions, particularly within Christian contexts. By invoking Jesus' ministry among fishermen, Maggang highlights the theological significance of marine life in Christianity. His work also implies multicultural reflections for the Indonesian Chinese Christian context, especially regarding the fish symbol.

Living Together

The coexistence of religious and cultural diversity in Indonesia fosters the development of significant societal meaning (Ashath 2021). This significance may also entail steps to preempt conflicts that frequently threaten the nation's integrity amidst the intricate diversity inside this country. Ira Chuarsa's perceptions indicate a contradiction between Chinese tradition, culture, and Christianity. Chuarsa posits that Chinese traditions should be comprehended or enacted via the lens of Christianity, a discourse that has persisted in numerous regions globally, including Indonesia. The primary issue is the widespread conviction among ethnic Chinese Christians that certain practices within Chinese tradition contradict Christian doctrines. This hereditary belief is typically embraced uncritically and is considered irreconcilable with Christian doctrine (Chuarsa 2019).

Christian religious leaders propose that Chinese-Indonesian Christians may selectively engage in Chinese cultural traditions while dismissing those associated with irrationality, myths, and the beliefs of other religions. Nonetheless, the approach appears to lack a theological reflection of the multicultural dimension.

The phenomenon of cultural and religious cohabitation concerning fish symbols is exemplified in the following cases. First, the impact of Chinese temples. In many Indonesian Chinese communities, the fish sign is utilized in conjunction with other cultural symbols. The architecture of a Chinese temple in Semarang Chinatown has two fish on the roof, representing prosperity.

The reality of cultural and religious coexistence related to fish symbols can be seen in the following examples. First, the influence of Chinese temples. In some Indonesian Chinese communities, the fish symbol is used alongside other cultural symbols. For example, the architecture of a Chinese temple in Semarang Chinatown features two fish on the roof, symbolizing prosperity (Kepirianto,

Mariam, and Febe Purnomo 2021). This merging of Chinese and Javanese cultural aspects epitomizes the hybrid nature of Indonesian Chinese culture, wherein several religions and traditions coexist and exert mutual influence.

Second, Indonesian Chinese churches frequently exhibit fish symbolism prominently in their architectural design. The incorporation of the fish emblem in ecclesiastical architecture demonstrates the cultural interchange between Christianity and indigenous traditions. In this environment, visual depictions of faith act as reminders of common values and beliefs that surpass cultural boundaries (Kepirianto, Mariam, and Febe Purnomo 2021).

The fish symbol, with its extensive history and cultural adaptability, provides significant insights into the processes of cross-cultural comprehension and religious cohabitation. Within Indonesia's Chinese Christian minority, the fish symbol has been incorporated into several cultural customs, demonstrating the persistence and ingenuity of religious traditions.

Making the Meaning

Chenyang Li, in "Cultural Configurations...", presents compelling concepts for an extensive exploration of varied cultural and disciplinary contexts. The concept seeks to implement several practical and scholarly endeavours that contribute to societal harmony (Li 2008). Li seeks to comprehend and enhance the significance of fish symbols within Christianity and Chinese culture in Indonesia. This methodology aligns with the tenets of intercultural theology.

A defining characteristic of an intercultural theological approach is conversation. The exploration of meaning, contrast, and the creation of a gap is a distinctive aspect of theology. Indonesian Chinese Christians have historically encountered considerable obstacles in preserving their cultural and religious traditions (Hoang 2023:21). They want to embrace beliefs and activities that are culturally and religiously significant, exemplified by the symbol of the fish. Moreover, throughout the nascent period of Christianity, the symbols and name *ichthus* served as a clandestine emblem to recognize a congregation of believers and as a defensive mechanism of faith amidst persecution (Parke 2022) (Suprianto, Alfian, and Kristanto 2022).

Fish holds significant importance in Christianity and Chinese culture, particularly during Chinese New Year festivities. Fish serve as the primary emblem of this festival and are frequently utilized as both culinary offerings and ornamental elements. In Chinese culture, fish (*yú*) symbolizes abundance and prosperity, serving as a central subject in New Year's celebrations. Furthermore, the expression signifies optimism for a prosperous crop and economic success in the forthcoming year. One of the eight symbols of Buddhism is the golden fish, which is represented in pairs to symbolize fertility and salvation (Laing 2017).

The fish symbol during the Chinese New Year bears a resemblance in connotation to *ichthus* in Christianity. Both symbols embody the ideals of rejuvenation, optimism, and camaraderie. In early Christian societies, fish represented salvation and everlasting hope. Similarly, fish represent a favourable and wealthy future in Chinese culture.

Interconnectivity

This section addresses the connectedness of attitudes concerning the integration of the symbolic significance of fish within theological and cultural contexts. These two dimensions create community dynamics, influence social conduct, and undergo evolution. Theological interactions that encompass cultural dimensions might be described as a connective-integrative process. The endeavour entails integrating various components to establish a unified society in which differing viewpoints can coexist (Kim and Kim 2024).

The integration of fish symbols into community cultural practices illustrates the evolving essence of Indonesian Chinese Christian identity. The perspective illustrates how traditions, religions, and civilizations may adapt and adjust while preserving their fundamental importance. This integration underscores the significance of cross-cultural comprehension and religious tolerance, enabling diverse cultural and religious groupings to discover shared values and significance. Intercultural theological perspectives that are connective-integrative concerning the significance of fish manifest in various symbolic interpretations, including:

The fish emblem possesses various cultural significances. There are both analogous and opposing elements. In Christianity, the fish emblem frequently occurs in two, divided by anchors, representing separation and the hope for reunification. Conversely, in Chinese culture, the fish emblem signifies solitude, autonomy, and individuality, frequently represented in jade carvings and jewellery. This duality highlights the intricate and context-sensitive character of cultural symbolism (Laufer 1912, 673–80). Despite the cultural disparities between Christians and Chinese on the significance of the fish symbol, they also exhibit similarities. The fish symbol illustrates the temporal dynamics of a community's existence.

Peter A. Moyle's research examines multiple facets of fish as artistic representations, encompassing literature, visual art, and cultural artefacts. It emphasizes the distinctive representations of fish symbolism throughout various cultures, including Chinese jade carvings and Christian catacombs. The artistic expression highlights the multifunctional notion and adaptability of the Christian and Chinese populations through the fish symbol (Probyn 2017). The Indonesian Chinese Christian community's existence appears to be adaptive to the diverse situations encountered in the country over time. Similarly, their lives yield various advantages in the economic, social, educational, religious, health, and other domains.

In Richard Raatzsch's article "On the Notion of Sustainability," the fish symbol exemplifies the complexity and diversity of the term "sustainability." Raatzsch contends that the concept of "sustainability" cannot be confined to a singular definition or a specific set of criteria in a restrictive manner. He employs the example of a fish to illustrate that "sustainability" might possess multiple interpretations, contingent upon the circumstances (Raatzsch 2012). The concept of sustainability can be seen through the lens of Chinese culture, where the term *yú* is associated with the notion of "eternity." In Christianity, *ichthus* possesses a historical theological significance associated with the early Christian community's resilience against persecution.

Conclusion

This study investigates the interplay between the Christian faith and Indonesian Chinese cultural traditions, centring on the fish motif as a pivotal symbol. Utilizing historical and literary analyses, the research traces the evolution of the fish symbol from ancient times to its contemporary significance in Indonesia, particularly during Chinese New Year celebrations. The fish motif embodies themes of sustenance, salvation, and community, illustrating its dual theological and socio-cultural roles. The Indonesian Chinese Christians navigate a complex identity shaped by their Chinese heritage and Indonesian nationality, often facing challenges of discrimination and marginalization, especially post-1998 anti-Chinese riots.

The research highlights how traditional Chinese practices intertwine with Christian beliefs, creating a unique cultural tapestry that facilitates identity negotiation within the community. It underscores the vital role of ecclesiastical communities in providing support for Indonesian Chinese Christians as they reconcile their faith with cultural heritage. Furthermore, the study employs an intercultural theological framework to analyse how symbols like fish communicate meaning and influence identity formation. By fostering dialogue between biblical narratives and local customs, Indonesian

Chinese Christians can affirm their identity while addressing contemporary societal issues. This research enhances understanding of the multifaceted interpretations of religious symbols within diverse cultural contexts, contributing to broader discussions on faith, culture, and identity in Indonesia.

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