

PRESERVATION OF CHINESE CULTURE IN MEDAN CITY: BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

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Abstract

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This study explores the preservation of Chinese cultural heritage in Medan, a city with a long history of Chinese settlement and cultural influence. As modernization accelerates, various traditional practices, architectural forms, and cultural values within the Chinese community have experienced noticeable shifts. Using a literature-based research approach, this study reviews books, academic journals, historical records, and previous research to understand how Chinese cultural traditions are maintained and transformed in contemporary Medan. The results show that core cultural practices such as Lunar New Year celebrations, Cap Go Meh rituals, and ancestral worship remain actively observed and continue to play an important role in strengthening family bonds and community cohesion. Heritage sites like the Tjong A Fie Mansion, old Chinese shophouses in Kesawan, and long-standing temples also illustrate the enduring presence of Chinese culture in the city. However, modernization has influenced several aspects of cultural expression. Many traditional homes have been converted into commercial venues, some rituals are practiced only symbolically by younger generations, and cultural familiarity has shifted due to media exposure and changing social preferences. This study highlights that meaningful cultural preservation requires cooperation between local authorities, community organizations, heritage managers, and the general public. Preservation efforts should not only focus on maintaining physical heritage but also support cultural activities that keep traditions relevant.

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is a heritage that reflects the identity, values, and worldview of a society. Within the context of Indonesia's multiculturalism, ethnic and cultural diversity



represents an invaluable richness. One of the ethnic groups that has made a significant contribution to Indonesia's social, economic, and cultural development is the Chinese community. Among Indonesia's major cities, Medan stands out as one of the areas with a substantial Chinese population and strong cultural influence. The presence of the Chinese community in Medan has shaped the character of the city's life through architecture, culinary traditions, religious practices, and performing arts.

According to Clifford Geertz (1973), culture is defined as "webs of significance," referring to networks of meaning woven by society to understand the world. This perspective explains that Chinese culture in Medan is not only manifested in physical forms such as buildings and decorations, but also lives on through rituals, family values, religious practices, and historical narratives that are continuously transmitted across generations. Koentjaraningrat (1985) reinforces this view by categorizing culture into three forms: ideas, social activities, and artifacts. These three forms are clearly evident within the Chinese community in Medan, for example, values of harmony and ancestral respect (ideas), the celebration of festivals (activities), and distinctive Chinese shophouse architecture as well as the Tjong A Fie Mansion (artifacts). Thus, Chinese culture functions not merely as a historical ornament, but as a marker of collective identity for the people of Medan to this day.

Chinese culture in Medan has not only influenced architectural styles and culinary preferences, but has also become an integral part of the city's collective social life. To this day, major Chinese celebrations such as the Lunar New Year (Imlek) are widely celebrated by the broader population of Medan. This phenomenon is closely related to the continuously growing Chinese population in the city. Despite their significant demographic presence, the Chinese community in Medan has been able to coexist harmoniously with other ethnic groups, including the indigenous ethnic communities of North Sumatra who also reside in the city.

Imlek is one of the most highly anticipated celebrations among the people of Medan. Unlike many other cities, Medan displays a unique characteristic in which members of all ethnic groups actively participate and cooperate to enliven the Lunar New Year celebrations. This spirit of mutual cooperation reflects strong interethnic harmony and social cohesion. The festive atmosphere is further evident in temples that become crowded with people from various ethnic backgrounds who gather to witness and enjoy the celebrations, including fireworks displays, lion and dragon dance performances, and barongsai shows.

The acculturation of Chinese culture in Medan can also be observed through the presence of numerous Chinese temples and shrines that serve as centers for cultural and religious activities for the local Chinese community. Notable examples include Vihara Gunung Timur, Maha Vihara Maitreya, and Vihara Borobudur. These temples function not only as places of worship, but also as important venues for cultural events such as religious festivals and traditional celebrations. Through these shared spaces and activities, Chinese cultural traditions have become embedded within the broader social fabric of Medan, reinforcing interethnic harmony and cultural coexistence in the city.

However, along with the passage of time and the rapid pace of modernization, Chinese culture in Medan faces increasingly complex challenges. Urbanization processes, shifts in societal lifestyles, and the influence of global culture have significantly affected the existence of local cultural traditions and values. One prominent tradition is the celebration of the Lunar New Year (Imlek) in Chinese culture.

In Medan, Imlek is celebrated in a vibrant and festive atmosphere. Families typically gather, exchange *angpao*, clean their homes, and pray at temples. Areas such as Kesawan and Pajak Ikan are often adorned with lanterns, red decorations, and lion dance performances, reflecting the continued visibility of Chinese cultural expressions in the urban space.

Cap Go Meh marks the closing of the Lunar New Year celebrations and takes place on the fifteenth day after the New Year. In Medan, Cap Go Meh is celebrated through cultural festivals, lion dance processions, *tatung* performances, and religious activities at temples.

In addition, ancestral worship remains an important tradition among Chinese families in Medan. This ritual is performed to honor and remember deceased family members, reflecting the continuity of intergenerational values and spiritual beliefs within the community.

Even traditional Chinese architectural forms have begun to undergo transformation, as seen in the Kesawan area of Medan, where many old Chinese–Colonial shophouses and residences that once functioned as both family homes and business spaces have been converted into modern cafés and offices.

These changes also influence the meanings and cultural practices among younger generations. Anthony Giddens (1990) explains that modernity is characterized by *disembedding*, a process that detaches social practices from their traditional contexts, allowing cultural rituals to change or even lose their original meanings. Meanwhile, Stuart Hall (1996) emphasizes that cultural identity in the global era is fluid and continuously negotiated rather than fixed. Therefore, changes in how younger generations of Chinese Indonesians interpret their ancestral culture should not be seen as a loss of tradition, but rather as a form of identity adaptation within the modern world.

On the other hand, preservation efforts continue to be carried out through various forms, such as the establishment of the Tjong A Fie Mansion Museum, the organization of cultural festivals, and the active role of the Chinese community in safeguarding their ancestral heritage. According to Laurajane Smith (2006), through the concept of *Authorized Heritage Discourse*, cultural preservation is not merely about conserving historical objects, but about how social groups assign meaning to those objects. The Tjong A Fie Mansion, for instance, does not simply display artifacts; it constructs historical narratives about the role of the Chinese community in the development of Medan. In the context of cultural tourism, Timothy and Boyd (2003) emphasize that local community participation is the primary foundation of successful heritage preservation, as communities hold social authority over their traditions. Furthermore, Ashworth (2011) warns that heritage promoted without community involvement risks becoming an empty commodity visible but not truly understood.

The preservation of Chinese culture in the city of Medan does not merely function to maintain the identity of a particular ethnic group, but also enriches national cultural diversity and strengthens values of religious and interethnic tolerance. This perspective aligns with Eric Hobsbawm's (1983) theory of *invented traditions*, which explains how revived traditions can serve as instruments for building social solidarity. In the Indonesian context, Tilaar (2004) asserts that cultural preservation is a crucial element in fostering a democratic multicultural society, as each ethnic identity contributes to social stability. Therefore, the preservation of Chinese culture in Medan

plays a dual role: safeguarding historical memory and reinforcing interethnic harmony within the realities of a plural urban society.

Within the context of modernity, cultural preservation must be conducted in an adaptive manner without losing the essence of traditional values. Soini and Birkeland (2014), through the concept of *cultural sustainability*, argue that cultures capable of enduring are not those that remain frozen, but those that are able to transform contextually while maintaining their core values. Overly rigid preservation may instead cause traditions to lose their social relevance. Consequently, the study of Chinese cultural preservation in the city of Medan becomes essential to understanding how the Chinese community balances inherited traditions with the demands of modernity in an increasingly dynamic society. Within this framework, cultural preservation is not solely about safeguarding the past, but also about facilitating the sustainability of ethnic identity for the future.

Definisi, permasalahan, dan tujuan, serta kegunaan penelitian ditulis secara naratif dalam paragraf-paragraf, tidak perlu diberi subjudul khusus. Artikel ditulis dalam font Times New Roman, 12pt, spasi tunggal, pada kertas A4, Margins Top 3 cm; Bottom 3 cm; Left 3 cm; Right 3 cm, Awal paragraph : dengan first line 1,3 cm dari tepi kiri tiap paragraph, isi artikel minimal 8 halaman, hindari terlalu banyak gambar atau hanya opini tanpa rujukan ilmiah.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Culture, Identity, and Meaning in Multicultural Societies

Culture plays a fundamental role in shaping collective identity and social meaning within multicultural societies. Clifford Geertz (1973) conceptualizes culture as “webs of significance,” emphasizing that cultural practices are systems of meaning through which individuals interpret their social world. This interpretive approach highlights that culture is not merely material or symbolic expression, but a dynamic framework that guides social behavior, values, and identity formation. In multicultural contexts such as Indonesia, cultural diversity becomes a vital resource that enriches national identity while simultaneously posing challenges related to coexistence and integration.

Koentjaraningrat (1985) further elaborates the concept of culture by categorizing it into three interconnected forms: ideas (values, norms, and beliefs), social activities (patterns of interaction and rituals), and artifacts (material expressions). These dimensions illustrate how cultural identity is sustained through both tangible and intangible elements. In the case of ethnic communities, culture functions as a medium through which historical memory and collective identity are preserved across generations.

Scholars such as Hall (1996) argue that cultural identity is not fixed or static, but fluid and continuously reconstructed through social interaction and historical experience. This perspective is particularly relevant in urban multicultural societies, where global influences intersect with local traditions. Cultural identity thus becomes a process of negotiation rather than preservation of a rigid essence.

Within the Indonesian context, ethnic cultures including Chinese culture play a crucial role in maintaining social plurality. Cultural recognition and preservation not only affirm minority identities but also contribute to social cohesion. Therefore, understanding culture as a system of meaning and identity provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing how ethnic traditions survive, adapt, or transform in the face of

modernization and globalization.

2. Modernity, Globalization, and Cultural Transformation

Modernity and globalization have significantly reshaped cultural practices and social relations worldwide. Anthony Giddens (1990) explains modernity through the concept of *disembedding*, a process in which social practices are lifted from local contexts and restructured across time and space. This phenomenon often results in the transformation of traditional rituals, institutions, and cultural meanings, particularly in urban environments. As societies modernize, cultural traditions are no longer confined to their original social settings, leading to reinterpretation or simplification of their meanings.

Globalization accelerates this process by facilitating the flow of information, values, and lifestyles across national and cultural boundaries. According to Appadurai (1996), global cultural flows create complex interactions between the global and the local, producing hybrid cultural forms. Traditional practices may be reshaped to align with modern aesthetics, commercial interests, or contemporary lifestyles, especially among younger generations.

Stuart Hall (1996) emphasizes that cultural identities in the global era are constantly negotiated rather than inherited intact. This fluidity allows communities to adapt their traditions without entirely abandoning their cultural roots. In this sense, cultural change should not be interpreted solely as cultural loss, but as an adaptive strategy for survival within changing social conditions.

In urban centers like Medan, modernization manifests through architectural transformation, lifestyle changes, and shifting patterns of cultural participation. Traditional Chinese practices, festivals, and spaces increasingly coexist with modern consumer culture. Understanding the relationship between modernity and cultural transformation is therefore essential for analyzing how ethnic cultures navigate continuity and change within rapidly developing cities.

3. Chinese Cultural Heritage in Indonesia and Urban Contexts

The Chinese community has long played a significant role in Indonesia's economic, social, and cultural development. Historically, Chinese Indonesians contributed to trade, entrepreneurship, and urban growth, particularly in port cities such as Medan. Their cultural heritage is expressed through religious practices, festivals, architecture, culinary traditions, and family-based social structures.

Urban Chinese cultural heritage is often visible in spatial forms such as temples, shophouses, and historic residences. These spaces function not only as physical structures but also as cultural symbols that embody collective memory and identity. According to North (1990), institutions including cultural institutions shape social behavior by providing continuity and stability. In this sense, cultural heritage sites act as informal institutions that preserve values and social norms.

However, urban development pressures frequently threaten the sustainability of cultural heritage. Commercialization, gentrification, and functional changes in historic areas may reduce the cultural significance of heritage spaces. Ashworth (2011) notes that urban heritage is often redefined to meet tourism or economic objectives, sometimes at the expense of cultural authenticity.

In Medan, Chinese cultural heritage remains an integral part of the city's identity, yet it faces challenges related to urban transformation. The coexistence of traditional practices and modern urban life highlights the need to understand heritage not merely as

static remnants of the past, but as living cultural systems embedded in contemporary social realities.

4. Cultural Preservation, Heritage, and Community Participation

Cultural preservation extends beyond the conservation of physical objects to include the preservation of meanings, values, and social practices. Laurajane Smith (2006) introduces the concept of *Authorized Heritage Discourse* (AHD), which emphasizes that heritage is socially constructed through power relations and dominant narratives. According to this perspective, preservation is shaped by who has the authority to define what is considered valuable heritage.

Community participation is widely recognized as a key factor in effective cultural preservation. Timothy and Boyd (2003) argue that local communities are not merely stakeholders, but cultural custodians who possess knowledge, emotional attachment, and social legitimacy. Without community involvement, preservation initiatives risk becoming superficial or disconnected from lived cultural experiences.

In the context of ethnic heritage, preservation efforts often serve multiple purposes, including identity affirmation, education, and tourism development. However, Ashworth (2011) warns that heritage commodification may reduce culture to spectacle, stripping it of its social meaning. Therefore, preservation strategies must balance economic interests with cultural integrity.

Museums, festivals, and community organizations play important roles in transmitting cultural knowledge to younger generations. These institutions function as mediators between tradition and modernity, ensuring cultural continuity while allowing adaptation. Consequently, cultural preservation should be understood as an ongoing social process rather than a one-time conservation effort.

5. Cultural Sustainability and the Future of Ethnic Traditions

The concept of cultural sustainability emphasizes the ability of culture to endure through adaptation rather than resistance to change. Soini and Birkeland (2014) argue that sustainable culture is dynamic, flexible, and capable of responding to social transformation while maintaining its core values. Cultural sustainability thus aligns preservation with innovation, allowing traditions to remain relevant in contemporary contexts.

Hobsbawm's (1983) concept of *invented traditions* further explains how traditions may be reconstructed or revitalized to serve contemporary social needs. These reconstructed traditions are not necessarily artificial, but function as mechanisms for reinforcing identity, continuity, and social cohesion.

In multicultural societies, cultural sustainability also contributes to social harmony by promoting mutual understanding and respect among different ethnic groups. Tilaar (2004) emphasizes that cultural preservation is essential for building democratic multicultural societies, as recognition of diversity strengthens social stability.

For Chinese culture in Medan, sustainability depends on the community's ability to reinterpret traditions in ways that resonate with younger generations. Digital media, cultural tourism, and educational initiatives offer opportunities for revitalization. Thus, cultural preservation should be viewed not only as safeguarding the past, but as shaping the future of ethnic identity within an evolving urban society.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach based on a literature review (library research). This approach is selected because the focus of the study is to understand how the preservation of Chinese culture in the city of Medan takes place amid the dynamics of tradition and modernity. A literature-based approach allows the researcher to explore various theories, cultural concepts, and findings from previous studies related to ethnic identity, social change, and heritage preservation.

1. Type of Research

The type of research used in this study is descriptive qualitative research. This research does not aim to measure data numerically, but rather to provide an in-depth explanation of Chinese cultural phenomena through the examination of academic references. The analysis seeks to understand the interconnections between tradition, modernization, cultural identity, and preservation efforts occurring in Medan.

2. Data Sources

The data sources used in this study include:

1. Academic literature such as books, scholarly journals, conference proceedings, and research articles related to Chinese culture, modernity, cultural identity, and heritage preservation.
2. Historical and ethnographic documents, including writings on the Chinese community in Medan, the history of Chinese architectural heritage, and records of cultural practices such as Lunar New Year (Imlek), Cap Go Meh, and ancestral worship rituals.

The primary theoretical foundations are drawn from the works of Geertz (1973), Koentjaraningrat (1985), Giddens (1990), Hall (1996), Smith (2006), Timothy and Boyd (2003), Ashworth (2011), Hobsbawm (1983), Tilaar (2004), and Soini and Birkeland (2014).

3. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was conducted through:

1. A systematic literature search using academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, Garuda, and university repositories.
2. Thematic note-taking of key concepts, including cultural meaning, Chinese traditions, modernity, ethnic identity, heritage, and preservation.
3. Analysis of visual and descriptive sources related to Chinese architectural heritage in Medan (such as Kesawan shophouses and the Tjong A Fie Mansion) to understand changes in function and historical value.

The data were collected systematically by selecting sources that are relevant, up-to-date, and academically credible.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis. The analytical process involved:

1. Reading and comprehensively understanding all sources related to Chinese culture in Medan.
2. Identifying major themes, such as Lunar New Year (Imlek), Cap Go Meh, ancestral worship, transformations in Chinese architecture, and the influence of modernity.
3. Linking relevant theories such as fluid identity theory (Hall, 1996), the concept of disembedding in modernity (Giddens, 1990), and cultural sustainability (Soini & Birkeland, 2014) to the observed phenomena.

4. Drawing analytical conclusions regarding how traditions are maintained, transformed, or adapted within the lives of the Chinese community in Medan.

The analysis was conducted continuously to ensure coherence with the research objectives.

5. Data Validity

The validity of the research was ensured through:

1. Cross-checking information from multiple sources authored in different periods.
2. Ensuring theoretical consistency between cultural theories and the empirical phenomena described in the literature.
3. The use of primary theoretical references on culture and identity, ensuring that the analysis is grounded in strong academic foundations rather than personal opinion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Presence of Chinese Culture in the Social Life of Medan

The literature review indicates that Chinese culture has become an integral part of Medan City's identity. The Chinese community, which has been established since the colonial period, has significantly shaped the city's character through economic activities, arts, architecture, culinary traditions, and religious practices. This cultural heritage remains strongly visible in areas such as Kesawan, Asia Mega Mas, and the old city districts.

Geertz's (1973) notion of culture as "webs of significance" is clearly reflected in the context of Medan. The Chinese community does not merely preserve visible symbols such as lanterns or red ornaments, but also sustains core values including ancestral respect, family solidarity, and intergenerational rituals. These practices demonstrate that Chinese culture in Medan is a living identity rather than a static relic of the past.

Koentjaraningrat's (1985) framework of culture as comprising ideas, social activities, and artifacts is also evident. These dimensions are reflected in ancestral values that continue to be upheld, religious activities and cultural festivals, and physical artifacts such as old shophouses, temples, and Chinese-Colonial architectural buildings that still stand today.

2. Enduring Traditions amid Modernity

The literature review reveals that several Chinese traditions in Medan remain actively practiced and continue to play a role in the social life of the community. The Lunar New Year (Imlek) is celebrated as an important moment for family gatherings, prayer, the exchange of angpao, and visits to temples. In areas such as Kesawan and Pajak Ikan, the festive atmosphere is marked by lanterns, lion dance performances, and increased economic activity.

Cap Go Meh serves as the closing event of the Lunar New Year celebrations and is typically marked by cultural parades, lion dances, tatung performances, and religious rituals. In addition, ancestral worship remains an important tradition among many Chinese families in Medan. This ritual honors deceased family members and reinforces values of filial piety and intergenerational continuity.

Although younger generations live in a highly modernized environment, many continue to participate in cultural celebrations and family rituals. However, their interpretations of tradition have evolved. Giddens (1990) describes this shift as a

process of disembedding, where traditions are detached from their original contexts. Hall (1996) further explains that modern cultural identity is fluid, meaning that younger generations may not practice traditions in the same way as previous generations, yet still preserve their essential values.

3. Shifts in Chinese Architecture within the Old City Area

One significant finding of this study is the transformation of Chinese architectural functions, particularly in the Kesawan area. Many old shophouses that once served as both family residences and business spaces have been converted into cafés, modern shops, or offices.

These changes are driven by economic demands, business development, and lifestyle shifts among younger generations. Such transformations illustrate cultural adaptation to modernity. While renovations have altered certain aspects of the buildings, some architectural features such as wooden ornaments, large windows, and Chinese–Colonial styles are still preserved.

This functional shift reinforces Giddens’s argument regarding modernity’s impact on how space is perceived and utilized. At the same time, it presents new opportunities for preservation, as adaptive reuse allows historic buildings to remain physically intact while serving contemporary needs.

4. Preservation Efforts by Communities and Institutions

The literature indicates that various efforts have been made to preserve Chinese culture in Medan. One prominent example is the Tjong A Fie Mansion Museum. This museum functions not only as a repository of artifacts but also as a center for historical education and a symbol of the Chinese community’s contribution to Medan’s development.

Smith (2006) emphasizes that heritage preservation is not solely about conserving physical structures, but about how communities assign meaning to heritage. The Tjong A Fie Mansion exemplifies successful preservation by integrating artifacts, historical narratives, and social interpretation.

Beyond museums, cultural festivals, heritage communities, and religious institutions such as temples play crucial roles in sustaining traditions. Timothy and Boyd (2003) highlight that community participation is fundamental to successful preservation, a principle that is clearly reflected in Medan.

Preservation efforts are also evident in the celebration of Imlek and Cap Go Meh, which have evolved into cultural tourism events. However, Ashworth (2011) cautions that cultural promotion should not reduce traditions to mere spectacles. Therefore, preservation initiatives must continue to involve the community and uphold the original cultural values.

5. Preservation as a Means of Strengthening Identity and Diversity

The literature review demonstrates that the preservation of Chinese culture benefits not only the Chinese community but also the broader cultural diversity of Medan City. Sustained traditions enrich the city’s cultural identity and strengthen interethnic tolerance.

Hobsbawm (1983) argues that revived traditions can reinforce social solidarity. In Medan, Chinese cultural traditions that remain publicly celebrated foster interaction among different social groups and promote mutual understanding. Tilaar (2004) similarly emphasizes that cultural preservation is essential in multicultural societies to maintain social harmony.

To remain relevant in the modern era, preservation must adopt adaptive strategies as proposed by Soini and Birkeland (2014). Culture can endure if it transforms in response to societal change while maintaining its core values. The findings indicate that the Chinese community in Medan has successfully practiced such adaptation through festivals, museums, and the adaptive reuse of heritage buildings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Chinese culture holds a significant position in shaping the social identity and urban character of Medan City. The presence of the Chinese community since the colonial era has left a strong imprint on architecture, religious traditions, family life patterns, and economic activities. In line with the perspectives of Geertz and Koentjaraningrat, Chinese culture in Medan is reflected not only through tangible artifacts, but also through values and practices that continue to be embedded in everyday life.

Amid rapid urban development and global influences, Chinese culture in Medan faces various challenges. Modernization has led to shifts in the meaning of traditions, particularly among younger generations. Celebrations such as the Lunar New Year (Imlek), Cap Go Meh, and ancestral worship continue to be practiced, yet their interpretations have evolved in response to contemporary dynamics. Similar transformations are evident in the changing functions of heritage buildings in the Kesawan area, where many historic shophouses have been repurposed into cafés or modern business spaces. These findings align with the arguments of Giddens and Hall, who emphasize that cultural identity is fluid and continuously negotiated within modern society.

Despite these changes, preservation efforts remain active and play a crucial role in sustaining Chinese culture. The Tjong A Fie Mansion Museum exemplifies preservation that goes beyond maintaining a historic structure by presenting narratives that connect the public with the historical role of the Chinese community in Medan. In addition, cultural festivals, religious activities in temples, and strong community involvement indicate that preservation is carried out as a collective process rather than merely a formal or institutional initiative. The perspectives of Smith, as well as Timothy and Boyd, reinforce the view that community participation is a key factor in successful cultural preservation.

From a broader perspective, the preservation of Chinese culture benefits not only the Chinese community but also enriches the cultural diversity of Medan City as a whole. Sustained traditions contribute to interethnic harmony and form an integral part of the city's inclusive cultural character. In accordance with the views of Hobsbawm and Tilaar, traditions can function as instruments for strengthening social solidarity and supporting multicultural coexistence.

To ensure that Chinese culture remains relevant and can be transmitted to future generations, preservation efforts must be conducted in an adaptive manner. Culture should not be preserved rigidly; instead, it must evolve in response to social change while maintaining its core values. This approach is consistent with the concept of cultural sustainability proposed by Soini and Birkeland.

Overall, the preservation of Chinese culture in Medan is an ongoing process that balances respect for ancestral heritage with the ability to adapt to modern realities. Through inclusive strategies and strong community involvement, Chinese culture can

continue to thrive, evolve, and remain a vital element in enriching Medan's multicultural identity.

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