

Architectural and Artistic Value of Kien An Cung Pagoda, Sa Dec ward, Dong Thap province

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the architecture and artistic value of Kien An Cung Pagoda in Sa Dec City, a recognized national historical and cultural monument. Built by the Fujianese Chinese community, the pagoda exemplifies traditional Chinese architectural styles, especially in wood and stone carving, ceramic inlay, and mural painting. Beyond being a sacred site, it serves as a center for moral education and cultural activity. The study explores the spatial layout, structural design, decorative systems, and the aesthetic-spiritual significance that the temple contributes to Vietnam's traditional architectural heritage.

Keywords: Kien An Cung Pagoda; Fujianese Chinese; traditional architecture; carving art; ceramic inlay.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the political situation in China was unstable and marked by numerous wars. This prompted a strong wave of migration to neighbouring countries, including Vietnam, in search of a more stable and safer life. Fujianese Chinese merchants stood out for their business acumen. They pioneered and developed many commercial sectors, opening shops and markets in major cities like Saigon, Cho Lon, Sa Dec, Vinh Long, and Can Tho. They also engaged in fine handicraft trades such as pottery, dyeing, food processing, and household products, with some participating in agricultural development. The Chinese community brought their cultural and religious values, including religious beliefs, Buddhism, ancestor worship, and assembly halls, to Vietnam.

They built many culturally and artistically valuable structures, including Kien An Cung Pagoda (also known as Ong Quach Pagoda), located at the corner of Phan Boi Chau and Tran Hung Dao Streets, Sa Dec City, Dong Thap Province. This is one of the typical architectural works of the Fujianese Chinese in the Southern region. Built from 1924 to 1927, the pagoda features a strong traditional Chinese

architectural style, particularly the Fujianese style, with sophisticated design, high-quality materials, and distinctive decorative art. Consequently, on April 27, 1990, the Ministry of Culture and Information recognized Kien An Cung Pagoda as a national historical and cultural monument. In this article, the author analyses the architectural and artistic value bearing the imprint of the Fujianese Chinese community. The name “Kien An Cung” (建安宫 in Chinese characters) carries a sacred meaning of peace and security, helping them stabilize their spiritual lives in a foreign, distant land and new life.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

The article applies a qualitative research method, combining field surveys, analysis of photographic materials, witness interviews, and comparison with similar works to identify the distinctive architectural, artistic, and cultural values of Kien An Cung Pagoda.

Specifically, the research team conducted:

- Field surveys: Recording the current state of the work through direct observation, photography, proportional measurement, and detailed descriptions of spatial, structural, and architectural decorative elements.

- Interviews with local experts:

Information was verified through interviews with Mr. Trù – a representative of the pagoda’s Management Board, who has deep knowledge of the pagoda’s history and religious activities.

- Comparative analysis: To affirm the unique and distinct features of Kien An Cung Pagoda, the article compares it with similar architectural works of the Fujianese Chinese in Southern Vietnam, including: Phuoc Minh Cung Pagoda (Tra Vinh ward, Vinh Long province), Vinh An Cung Pagoda (Thanh Duc ward, Vinh Long province), and Hiep Thien Cung Pagoda (CaiRang ward, Can Tho City).

Combining on-site field investigation, image analysis, and interviews with key witnesses Mr. Trù, a realistic assessment can be drawn.

The comparison focuses on the spatial layout, the characteristics of the roof tile decoration, carving art, color schemes, forms of worship, and symbolic values to highlight the unique features of Kien An Cung Pagoda.



Figure 2. Vinh An Cung Pagoda [7]



Figure 3. Hiep Thien Cung (Internet)



Figure 1. Phuoc Minh Cung Pagoda (Ngoc Nhung)



Figure 4. Kien An Cung (Author)

Table 1: Comparison of some typical works of the Fujianese Chinese in Southern Vietnam

Criteria	Kien An Cung (Sa Dec)	Phuoc Minh Cung (Tra Vinh)	Vinh An Cung (Vinh Long)	Hiep Thien Cung (Can Tho)
Construction Time	1924–1927	Late 19th century	Late 19th century	Early 20th century
Layout	“Khẩu” (Mouth) shape with “Thiên tĩnh” (courtyard)	“Khẩu” (Mouth) shape with “Thiên tĩnh” (courtyard)	Near “Công” (Craft) shape	“Tam” (Three) shape
Glazed tile roof	3 layers of curved roofs, raised relief	Multi-layered roof, elaborate decoration	Simple, subdued color	Curved Taoist-style roof
Ceramic inlay	Widespread on roof ridges, roof waves, walls, doors	Dense, vibrant	Less, mainly on roof ends	Present, but small scale



Figure 8. Full view in front of the Front Hall
(Author)

Fence: Built of brick and cement, crafted to look like slender, simple green bamboo stakes, providing ventilation and protecting the pagoda.

- Front Hall Block (B).

The Front Hall block is designed in the traditional three-bay architectural style. The central bay has the front porch area (B1) and the area for reception and rituals (B2). The left bay is the drum stand area (B3), and the right bay is the gong stand area (B4).

The area in front of the pagoda features images of guardian spirits, incense altars, and harmoniously arranged horizontal boards and couplets with unique wood and stone carvings.

The main entrance is a three-gate structure welcoming visitors. It is guarded by two large green stone Qilins from the “Four Holy Beasts,” placed on stone platforms. These Qilins symbolize power, authority, protection, and the warding off of “evil spirits and misfortune” (Figure 9).



(a) The Lân (female) (b) The Kỳ (male)

Figure 9. Stone Qilins guarding the pagoda
(Author)

The Qilin carvings show the influence of the Nguyen dynasty style, featuring heads with scrolling cloud patterns and wide-open mouths, blending mythical creatures and lions. Specifically: The male Qi (left/tả), with its paw on a ball and chain and a pearl in its mouth, represents power, control, and protection. The female Lin (right/hữu), with its paw resting on a cub, represents protection and fertility.

The wooden transoms, rafter heads, and lintels above the doors are carved with auspicious winding patterns of dragons, qilins, turtles, and phoenixes. There are 6 gilded wooden qilins, four at the main door and two at the side doors (Figure 10). In the center is a horizontal lacquered board “Kien An Cung” (建安宮) surrounded by gilt and lacquered carvings, with prominent black characters on the background.

Two embossed, gilt and lacquered couplets:

安成鳳水四方出入鎮神門 “An thành phượng thủy tứ phương xuất nhập trấn thần môn”.

建造風山三路往來靈聖征 “Kiến tạo Phong Sơn Tam Lộ Vãng Lai Linh Thánh Chinh”.

Meaning: Under the sacred water of the Phoenix, this place brings peace and prosperity. Visitors from all directions who enter and exit are protected under the guarding divine gate.

On each side of the door panels are painted scenes of the lives of kings and mandarins of the past. The main door features paintings in the ink wash (thủy mặc) style.



Figure 10. Carving details on the side of the Front Hall (Author)



Figure 11. Carvings and drawings in the bell stand compartment (Author)

Inside the Front Hall (B2), the reception and ritual area: This is the first area visitors enter to offer incense and pray before proceeding to the main worship areas inside. It serves as a transitional space between the Triple Gate and the Main Hall, creating a solemn feeling that guides the pilgrim's mindset.

On the walls of the Front Hall, the gong rack bay (Figure 11), and the drum rack bay (Figure 12) and Main Hall are richly decorated with exquisite paintings and reliefs, showcasing the high craftsmanship of Fujianese Chinese artisans and strong Chinese cultural imprints. The decorations feature: Characters from The Three Kingdoms, Journey to the West. Immortals, Buddhas, and deities from folk beliefs. Landscape paintings: rivers, mountains, plum, orchid, chrysanthemum, bamboo (the "Four Seasons" - tứ quý). Images of phoenixes, dragons, and qilins – symbols of sacredness and nobility.



Figure 12. Carvings and drawings in the drum stand compartment (Author)

- Main Hall Block (C)

The Main Hall (Chánh Điện) block is designed in the traditional three-bay architectural style and is dedicated to the deities of Fujian Province (Figure 13).

The central chamber (C1) is dedicated to Ông Quách (Guangze Zunwang – King Guangze), a native of Anxi County, Fujian Province, China. He was born during the Later Jin's Tianfu era, the 5th year (941). In 960, during the reign of Emperor Taizu of the Song Dynasty, the feudal court bestowed upon him the title 'King Guangli' (Quảng Lợi Vương). During the Great Ming Dynasty, he was further granted the title 'Yingling Weihou' (Ứng linh Uy hầu), and later, Emperor Daoguang of the Qing Dynasty once again granted him the title 'Guangze Zunwang' (Quảng Trạch Tôn Vương). He is a deity who protects the villagers, similar to the Thành Hoàng Bản Cảnh (Village Patron God) in Vietnam.

The left chamber (C2) is dedicated to Patriarch Qingshui (Thanh Thủy Tổ Sư), a Buddhist monk and Taoist priest from the Song Dynasty, who is revered by the people of Fujian as a protective deity of the nation and the people, and a god of flood control and plague eradication.

The right chamber (C3) is dedicated to Baosheng Dadi (Bảo Sanh Đại Đế), a popular god of medicine in Chinese Taoism, specializing in 'granting blessings, protecting lives, and healing the sick to save people' (Figure 14).



Figure 13. Interior of the Main Hall (Author)



(a) Master Qingshui (b) Lord Guang Ze Zun Wang (c) Lord Baosheng Dadi

Figure 14. Altars for the three Fujianese deities (Author)

Each chamber features altars with meticulously crafted shrine canopies (khánh thờ), comprising three layers of carved wooden lintels (bao lam) using openwork carving techniques. The pillars supporting them are sculpted with prominent, carved dragons finished in vermilion lacquer and gold leaf. The uppermost layer of the bao lam is adorned with elaborate, curving floral motifs executed in delicate openwork.

- East Wing (D)

D1. Khách đường (Guest Hall): For receiving guests, preparing ancestor rituals.

D2: Quan Âm Điện (Avalokitesvara Hall): Worshipping Bodhisattva Quan The Am (Avalokitesvara) (Figure 15.a).

D3: Linh Đường (Spirit Hall): A place to worship spirits, souls, and ashes entrusted by the people for the pagoda to care for with incense (Figure 15.b).

D4: Quan Thánh Điện (Guan Sheng Hall): Worshipping Guan Sheng Di Jun (Guan Gong).

D5. Nhà kho (Storage Room).



(a) Avalokitesvara Hall (b) Spirit Hall

Figure 15. Detail of worship rooms in the East Wing (Author)



Figure 16. Ancestral Hall with a “moon gate” exit (Author)

- West Wing (E)

E1: Tĩnh thất (Meditation/Rest Room): Resting room for the Pagoda Management Board (BQL).

E2: Tổ Đường (Ancestor Hall): Worshipping the founder of the pagoda, Mr. Huynh Cam Thuan (Figure 16).

E3: Thực Đường (Dining Hall): Dining room for the Management Board and pilgrims.

E4: Trù phòng (Kitchen): Area for cooking, preparing offerings, and meals for the Management Board and visitors.

E5: Tiệm phòng (Convenience Room): Restroom.

- Sky Well Courtyard (Sân Thiên tinh) (F).

The Thien Tinh courtyards are open, roofless spaces that serve to provide light, ventilation, airflow, and a venue for outdoor rituals. They help balance yin and yang and circulate sinh khí (vital energy) within the



Figure 17. Sky-well (T1) (Author)

pagoda space. They not only have functional value but are also a distinctive architectural feature, creating a graceful harmony between art and Oriental philosophy.

T1 – Central Sky Well: Located between the Front Hall and the Main Hall, used for organizing large communal ceremonies. A large incense burner and a Heaven’s Altar (bàn thờ thiên) are placed in the center, serving as a spiritual and physical focal point for the harmony between man, heaven, and earth. This opening provides light and ventilation, allowing natural light to penetrate the interior, reducing dampness, creating a cool and fresh atmosphere for the shrine, and allowing incense smoke to escape during rituals, preventing accumulation inside (Figure 17).

T2, T3 – Side Sky Wells: Create air circulation between auxiliary functional areas, featuring miniature landscapes and flowers that form a microclimate within the guest reception and rest areas.

T4 – Auxiliary Sky Well: Used for lighting incense, providing ventilation for the Avalokitesvara Hall, Guan Sheng Hall, and Spirit Hall, and as a place for burning votive paper.

T5 – Sky Well: Ventilates the kitchen and dining room, and simultaneously serves as a wet area for preparing to cook, washing up, and initial preparation of incense and offerings before they are brought into the shrine.

- Moon Gate (Nguyệt Môn): The exits to the side Sky Wells (T4, T5) are in the form of a round gate (“nguyệt môn” - 月 门), with blue and yellow borders, expressing the philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature, and between spiritual life and the real world. The circular shape symbolizes fullness, completeness, and the balance of yin and yang, creating a sense of spaciousness and bringing good energy. Stepping through the Moon Gate is believed to cleanse one of misfortune and allow entry into a pure spiritual space (Figure 16).

c. Elevations and Sections of the Pagoda:

The elevation is organized with clear functional zoning of the structure. The Front Hall block is majestic and splendid, designed with three bays. The central bay’s roof is higher than the two side bays, and the combination with the East and West Wing blocks enhances the grandeur of the Front Hall. The doorways of the blocks are symmetrically arranged, and the door frames are made of blue stone slabs. The windows are circular (moon gate style), and the wooden latticework adjoining the wall and the roof is perforated for good ventilation and light.

The curved roof architecture is characteristic of ancient Chinese design. The roof features stepped levels that undulate from low to high, following the ‘Five Elements’ (Wuxing) philosophy. The roof structure consists of three layers: the top layer is glazed tiles (lư ly) laid in alternating convex and concave (âm dương) patterns, featuring dragon ridges. The middle layer is made of brick, and the bottom layer is fish-scale shaped tiles. The roof truss system uses a ‘chồng rường cột chống’ (stacked beam and strut column) style, which facilitates the necessary changes in purlin height to easily create the curved roof structure (Figure 18,19).

The tiles are laid in dragon ripples, forming a foundation for the soaring curved ridges. The four eaves of the Front Hall’s roof ridges are four miniature palaces, connecting the mortal world and the sacred realm, featuring statues of deities, Buddhas, saints, and gods. This is a roof decoration in the “Embossed Ceramic” style



Figure 18. “Stacked beams and supporting columns” roof truss (Author)

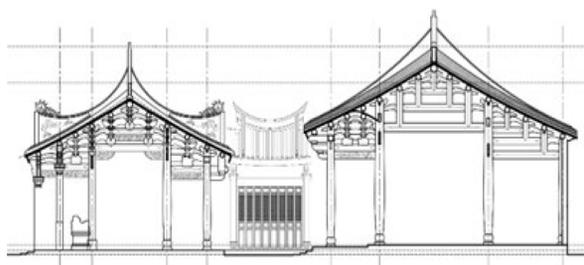


Figure 19. Longitudinal section (Author)

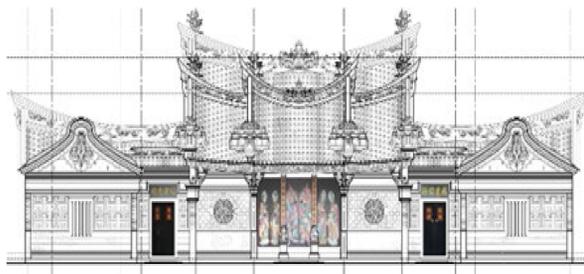


Figure 20. Main elevation (Author)

(Đắp nổi bằng sành sứ), a common technique in Chinese architectural works. At the very top is a circular shape with two upward-pointing horns, symbolizing the sun and prosperity, a significant feng shui element (Figure 20,21,22).

The roof ridge (sóng nóc) forms a curved shape along the roofline, with the ‘Two Dragons Worshipping the Moon’ motif situated at its center. The dragons coil gracefully along the roof’s edge, embossed from pieced-together fragments of colored ceramic, creating a sophisticated work of art. The dragon’s ‘open mouth’ symbolizes the absorption of the heaven and earth’s spiritual energy, bringing good fortune and wisdom. The dragon’s tail curves upwards towards the sky, conveying a powerful and steady posture. Surrounding these features are borders of blue, red, and yellow colored ceramics, along with many other Feng Shui-related decorative motifs.

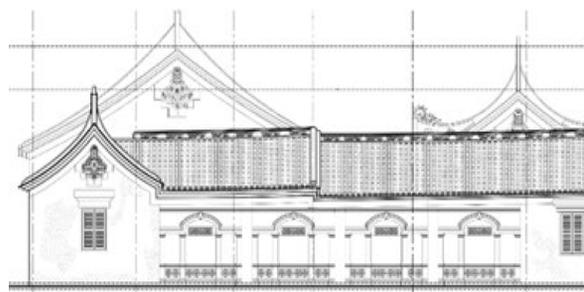


Figure 21. Side elevation (Author)



Figure 22. Overall view of the curved roofs (Author)

d. Artistic Value of Wood Carving, Stone Carving, Ceramic Inlay, and Painting:

Kien An Cung Pagoda proves that Fujianese craftsmen are the soul of the Chinese temple architecture. They are not only skilled in technique but also embody artistic talent, aesthetics, and spirituality, leaving unique artworks in the pagoda. The art here is a cultural identity, expressing reverence for the deities and ancestors. The carving is sharp in every line, beautiful, and expressive (e.g., majestic dragon, graceful phoenix). It is intricate, from the dragon’s scales, phoenix’s eyes, to the lotus petals, and carries the philosophical values of the Far East such as the Five Blessings, yin and yang, the Four Sacred Beasts, and karma (Figure 23).

Wood Carving Technique: The entire structure and wooden decoration of the Horizontal Boards, Couplets, Shrine Canopies, Archways, stacked purlins-posts, column tops, and inner partitions are all intricately carved by hand. The lines are supple and sharp, depicting scenes of dragon and phoenix, dragon, bat, lotus flower, carp, clouds, waves, vines, and Chinese classical stories. Altars and shrines: Each decorative detail features carvings of the Eight Treasures, wealth-prosperity-longevity (phúc lộc thọ), and the Four Gentlemen (pine, chrysanthemum, bamboo, and plum) (Figure 24).



Figure 23. Detail of roof eave (Author)



Figure 24. Detail of carved wooden panel and stone carving (Author)

Exquisite Ceramic Inlay Technique: This technique involves using fragments of porcelain, ceramics, and pottery—carefully trimmed, polished, and precisely adjusted in angle and size—to form detailed, raised decorative patterns that are applied to architectural surfaces. From roof tiles to the curved ridge ends, thousands of blue-and-white or celadon-glazed porcelain pieces are meticulously assembled. Wall sections are often embossed or inlaid with multicolored ceramics depicting scenes of daily life, mythology, or auspicious symbols. Roofs feature motifs such as dragons in reverence, dancing phoenixes, carps transforming into dragons, lotuses, and clouds—all crafted from intricately mosaicked porcelain shards (Figure 25).

Ridge-end Ornaments – “Giao Long” (Mythical Water Dragons): Mythical animal figures are adorned with vividly colored ceramic pieces, creating strong visual effects.

Chinese Character Reliefs and Narrative Panels: Stories from classical tales such as Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Journey to the West are sometimes portrayed through the ceramic mosaic technique. The unique color coordination, combined with the unfading hues

of the ceramics over time, produces a sparkling, lively effect on the ancient architectural background—serving as a cultural hallmark that reflects the Sino-Vietnamese artistic fusion between Chinese decorative art and indigenous construction techniques.



Figure 25: Roof and roof ridge decorations (Author)

3.2 Discussion.

In the layout: The pagoda courtyard is arranged with four tall Japanese-style stone lanterns (A4 - These stone lanterns were installed in 2022). The stone lanterns are for illumination and enhancing feng shui energy. However, they do not match the characteristic architectural style of the structure. It is proposed to replace the stone lanterns with ones in the Fujian style.

Many documents state the overall layout of the structure is in the “Công” (I) shape; however, according to the analysis above, all the main blocks of the structure are arranged in the “Khâu” (□) shape. The sky-wells are places of harmony between humans, heaven, and earth. However, to ensure security, the Pagoda’s Rituals Committee (Ban tế tự) has installed iron grilles above them, causing them to lose their inherent sacredness.

4. CONCLUSION

The arrival and settlement of the Chinese community in Southern Vietnam, especially in Sa Dec City, contributed significantly to the formation and development of unique cultural, architectural, and religious values. Kien An Cung Pagoda is a prime example, demonstrating the harmonious combination

of traditional construction techniques and the exquisite decorative arts of the Fujianese Chinese.

This complex not only makes its mark with its exquisite architectural value—featuring a rational layout, well-ventilated space, and adherence to feng shui principles—but is also regarded as a living art museum. It preserves a vast treasure trove of highly symbolic wood carving, stone carving, porcelain inlay, and painting. As such, Kien An Cung Pagoda is not merely a National Historical and Cultural Monument but also a vivid testament to the Sino-Vietnamese cultural exchange, holding an extremely important role in preservation and research amidst the current flow of urban development.

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