Chinese in Lasem: the struggle for identity and living space

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Abstract. Chinese have lived in Lasem since ancient times to this day. Uniquely, Lasem is a region that rarely experiences horizontal conflicts, although Lasem's entity is quite diverse. This is due to the Chinese people in Lasem being able to assimilate with the natives. From marriage, business relations, and religious ties the reason for the Chinese in Lasem is to live peacefully. This study aims to uncover the lives of Chinese people in Lasem from the social and cultural aspects, the focus of this paper is the Chinese in the struggle for identity and living space in Lasem. This is a qualitative study with phenomenological design. This study involved 10 Chinese families as informants and the cultural environment of Lasem as observed objects. The findings of this study show that the Chinese people in Lasem are able to live in harmony because they have merged with indigenous communities. The Chinese at Lasem in their daily lives are able to communicate and interact well with indigenous people. Activities such as producing batik, sew, trading, religious associations are the reasons Lasem entities are able to live in harmony. The findings of this study also show that the struggle for Chinese identity and living space at Lasem takes place on the basis of ideology and social praxis, political aspects are not considered by the community to be interconnected.

Keywords: Chinese, Identity, Living Space, Lasem

1. Introduction

The rise of intolerance practices in society has become a problem for Indonesia today [1]. Some cases involving tribal sentiment, religion, race, and between groups spread after the 2017 Jakarta Governor General Election [2]. The hatred not only disturbs the harmony, but also shows that the spirit of pluralism is still not organized in the personality of Indonesian society [3]. Although the Chinese-Indigenous conflict is not new in Indonesian history, as happened in 1740, 1918, 1965, 1972, and 1998 [4–6]. Until today racial, sentiments have not been extinguished, the strongest reason for the conflict to erupt is politics, this aspect is often used by certain groups who have a great desire to rule. The latest, in a mass media report, a child of Chinese descent was ridiculed at the School, with the nickname "Ahok", the ridicule certainly had a negative connotation and impacted on the psychology of the child, the last child did not want to go back to School and chose to stay home, because scared and worried about the incident he received [7].

Some racial conflicts as described previously, occur in big cities. One of the causes of racial conflict is the lack of awareness in the community to live in harmony [2]. This is due to the condition of the people who are "blind to history" [8], reluctance to look past as a basis for acting and speaking has given birth to a generation that is aggressive and has a high sentiment towards "different / other” [9]. Recent cases have attracted researchers to open, historical pages about the harmoniousness of communities in rural Java. Lasem is a city dominated by ethnic Chinese so the city is often called “small China”[10]. However, such domination has formed a harmony of mutual benefit and mutual need between Java and China. Aside from developing as a Chinatown City, it turns out Lasem also grew as a center for the spread of Islam on the east coast of the North Coast of Java. This area became an important area of the Majapahit period to Demak [11]. There, despite living various ethnicities, the largest are China and Java, but there has not been a history of inter-ethnic horizontal conflict. This is unique considering that racial conflict in Indonesia is quite vulnerable [12].

Talking about the lives of Chinese, this article is not the first, Suryadinata discusses the journey of the Chinese in treading the importance of Indonesian nationalism. The Chinese, in Indonesian history, are positioned as immigrants, so that in the process of identity struggle being an Indonesian citizen is very complicated. This is due to the sentiment and stigma on the lives of Chinese people who are
considered "Economic Animals", or groups of people who are capitalist and are concerned with their business affairs above all else. So that in social practice, they look very individual [12]. Kustedja revealed about the Chinese community in Bandung in building a living space for their community. The study discussed a lot about displacement, expulsion, and even eviction of poor Chinese settlements in Bandung. That makes the relationship between the Chinese Community and the State tenuous. The Chinese there became reluctant to come into contact with government affairs. They are considered as individuals who are apathetic and do not have the sense of politics [13].

This study wants to reveal that the life of the Chinese community in Lasem in the context of the struggle strengthens identity and gains a living space in a historical-sociological perspective. The focus of this research is on the ideas and social practices of Chinese people in building harmony at Lasem. The research question is 1) what is the social practice of Chinese people in Lasem? and 2) what is the idea of the harmony of the Lasem community in relation to the struggle of identity and living space?

2. Methods

This research is a qualitative study with phenomenology design [14]. The phenomenon of this research is the harmony and order of life of the Chinese people in Lasem. As a phenomenology study, the focus of this research is on the psychology of Chinese people and their interactions with other ethnic communities [15,16]. This study considers the ethical, moral, and ideas aspects of the Chinese as a manifestation of their appreciation for a wider life.

This study involved 10 Chinese families as informants and the environment in which they lived as observation objects. The informant was chosen randomly, and obtained good results in his practice. The informants consisted of Chinese Muslims, Chinese Christians, Chinese Confucians, and Chinese Buddhists. They lived side by side in a settlement since the early 20th century, they were Chinese who were born alive in that place, there were also Chinese who migrated from Batavia, Semarang, and Surakarta. From the data collected, 4 transcripts were coded as: Data Number 1 (DN1), DN2, DN3, and DN4. Number 1 shows Chinese Muslim families, Number 2 shows Chinese Christian families, Number 3 shows Confucian Chinese families, and Number 4 shows Chinese Buddhist families. The entire data was analyzed using an interactive data analysis model [17], who consider aspects of ideas [18] and social practice [19] as the main object of analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Findings

Lasem is a small town administratively included in the Rembang Regency area, about 110 Km from Semarang to the east, along the North Java Coast line. Located 12 km before the east of the city of Rembang. The area is in the middle of the main north coast line between Semarang and Surabaya. As with the northern coastal cities of Java that have experienced glory in the past, Lasem also has supporting elements of the city such as: river (Sungai Bagan), a port that is easily landed by ships from small to medium size and highways connecting the city this is with other big cities on Java. Itupula Port is a channel for Chinese people from China and cities in the archipelago to come to Lasem.

DN 1 argues: “at the beginning of the 14th century, the small town of Lasem was one of the powers of the Majapahit Kingdom. This kingdom has existed in Indonesia since the 13th century until the 15th century. And it began to collapse when Islam came to Indonesia”. Tome Pirres, a Portuguese traveler, noted that from the Rembang region to the east to the Tuban region, it was famous as a woodworker. One source of news about the sub-district said that Lasem had become a kind of subordinate land of Majapahit in 1273 Saka or 1351 AD. This area was led by a woman named Dewi Indu who was the niece of Prabu Hayam Wuruk, Majapahit ruler.

Another source said that Lasem had been a duchy under the Demak Islamic kingdom through the leadership of Raden Patah who succeeded in shifting the authority of Majapahit. DN 2 argues: “in 1751 Lasem was established as a sub-district after a year before the status of the regency city was moved to Rembang by the Dutch colonial government. Of all the diversity that is present, the aroma of China is the strongest as is generally the northern coastal region of Java since the 15th century. Until now, it was quite easy to find Chinese ornaments in ancient buildings in the sub-district. This touch of integration is certainly the result of the Lasem community’s appreciation for their diversity”.
In Lasem there is a Bie Yong Gio Temple, a temple that has a long history of Chinese ethnicity in Lasem which is often cited as a symbol of plurality. This temple according to DN 3:
"presented to three main figures from ethnic Chinese who contributed to Lasem, especially in countering the colonialism of the Dutch VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) in the great war of the Yellow War. The three are Oey Ing Kyat, Tan Kie Wie, and Raden Panji Margono”.

The arrival of Chinese in the archipelago in general is traders. These traders visited ports in various northern coastal cities of Java. Some of these Chinese traders settled in Java, which were then permanently assimilated. According to DN4:
"in Lasem, it was estimated that in the 11th century there were permanent settlements of Chinese people on the east on the banks of the Lasem River. Generally they marry local women and then choose to stay forever in the new land. Their arrival to the island of Java can be seen from the journey made by Laksaman Cheng Ho to various areas on the island of Java in the early 14th century. Ships sailing from foreign countries, including China, landed in Tuban, Gresik and Majapahit”.

DN 1 argues: "Chinese immigrants who have settled for more than two or three generations and mingled with Lasem residents became accustomed to the language and customs where they were. This is reflected in various aspects of Javanese art in Lasem. The influence in Javanese art is seen in batik art, especially the patterns and decorative colors and colors used as can be found in Lasem's good writing". Some of them are Chinese who are of Chinese descent and have crossed with Javanese people, then some have developed into art experts and protectors of Javanese art, as explained in Lasem's book house community.

Political aspects are not the reason for the united Chinese and Javanese people. This is explained DN 2: "Chinese and Javanese mingle not because of political affairs. Politically we are traumatized, such as the Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body (Baperki), which was associated with communism in 1965. We avoid political affairs, but are active in the social and cultural fields”.

DN 4 argues: "in Lasem, indigenous people greatly respect the customs and culture of the Chinese community. Even most of them embraced Islam, Christianity, Confucianism and Buddhism. In the integration of the Chinese community, Lasem highly respects the customs of the indigenous people, as well as the same thing done by the indigenous people so that good relations between ethnic Chinese in Lasem and the indigenous people are established”. Although not very interested in politics, they even tended to stay away from him, the Chinese people in Lasem were loyal to the Pancasila. This is evidenced by the symbol of the Garuda Pancasila in Chinese homes. DN 4 argues: "we are united by Pancasila, therefore diversity as a fundamental value needs to be maintained".

Figure 1. Chinese and Javanese community activities in Lasem

The relationship between ethnic Chinese and indigenous Lasem is a social structure that requires each other. DN 2 argues: "This relationship occurs in elite areas and communities in villages in daily
life. The pattern of relations between constellations occurs in joint communication in negotiations, contestations and relationships that need each other”. DN 2 assumes: “Interelite negotiations appear on the occasion of peace that occurred in Lasem to secure the city on the issue of violence that occurred at the end of the New Order government. This negotiation becomes the starting point to see the threat to the harmony in Lasem that happened before, namely in the colonial VOC period with the yellow war reaction. The war between the santri, peasants, fishermen, Lasem and the Chinese in fighting the Dutch invaders”.

In the economic sector at the middle to upper levels, Lasem’s economy is controlled by Chinese citizens. This can be seen in the many shops along the main Lasem road that are owned and run by Chinese citizens. Especially for mid-level businesses, since some Chinese descendants have expanded their business to big cities such as Jakarta, Semarang and Surabaya, Lasem santri indigenous people have begun to develop their businesses in various sectors, especially the clothing business and ladder needs.

At the community level, according to DN 3: "in everyday life harmony is maintained because of several factors, namely cross marriage, siblings’ feelings, and the opening of social spaces. Cross-breeding between ethnic crossroads consisting of Chinese, native Javanese and santri, occurred since the arrival of the Chinese in Lasem, around the 13th century, then continued with the arrival of Cheng Ho's entourage in the binangun area around the 15th century. Since then, mixed marriages are common until now”.

Social relations between Chinese and santri in Lasem are well-established. Brotherhood is combined with the social reality of cross-breeding between ethnic Chinese and Javanese. Kyai Mustafa, who is married to a Chinese woman, and Koh Lian Ong, who married a native Javanese woman, is a story about the marital relationship between residents in Lasem. DN 3 argues: “social relations between Chinese and Javanese in Lasem have implications for maintaining the value of harmony among Lasem residents. Besides that, it also reflected the values of tolerance found in the Lasem community between indigenous people and ethnic Chinese”.

The Chinese in Lasem not only live in Chinatown, living quarters and living spaces that are typical of Chinese in other regions. DN 2 argues: "Chinese people in Lasem live mingling with Javanese and Arabs. All of them live guarding each other, this is evidenced by their integration in the activities of security posts, religious activities, and the economy such as batik together”.

Today's Chinese in Lasem do not experience living space problems, historically they have never received coercion, emphasis or rejection in society. DN 1 argues: "the problem of living space for us is not a problem, since my great-grandfather, this house has been established, despite riots in several regions, such as the tragedies of 1740, 1965, and 1998 we still exist, even indigenous people actually take care of us (ethnic Chinese) " From that experience DN 2 argued: "We are very respectful of Javanese and Arabs in Lasem, we feel they are also our brothers. My father was saved by a Javanese when he almost drowned in the river, when it was difficult to get rice in a crisis, our Javanese neighbors volunteered to give us free rice”.

3.2. Discussion
Based on the findings above, this study supports Carey's opinion [20], Cheung et al. [21], Freedman and Skinner [22,23]. Chinese people form their communities in the countryside through open relations and the nature of those who want to adapt to the social environment of the indigenous people. They blend in fully because of acceptance by the indigenous people and a high sense of grace. In line with Coppel that from social activities that do not take into account racial and differences issues, the Chinese people obtain their identity [24]. Suryadinata emphasized that Chinese people have a high survival, history records in obtaining Indonesian identity or to get recognition for the existence of their groups, they participated in struggling to win independence with financial support or administrative contributions [25–27]. The Lasem Chinese are involved in the social and cultural world, but in political affairs they are still antipathy. This is due to the tragic political experience of the Chinese people in the post-independence era, one of which was the Indonesian Citizenship Consultative Body (Baperki) in 1965 [28].
This research also supports Unger’s argument [29], Tan and Dahana [30] that the struggle for identity carried out by Chinese society is carried out socially and culturally. They assimilated through marriage, work, and religious life. Chinese consider diversity as the core of national life. Criticism of Kustedja’s study [13], Chinese people in Lasem are different from Bandung, China in Lasem is more harmonious in relation to living space. They are able to blend and not exclusive. Whereas China in Bandung tends to be exclusive and is unable to escape the influence of Dutch colonial policies that separate residential settlements based on ethnic considerations. The problem of living space in Lasem is not a problem, with life blending and being close to other ethnicities, further strengthening the survival and tolerance of the community.

Despite antipathy to politics, the Chinese at Lasem regard Pancasila as the single ideology that unites Indonesia. They see, Pancasila as the main source of ideas of tolerance. In Pancasila, all groups of society are the same and are not differentiated based on ethnicity or religiosity. This opinion also strengthens Purdey’s opinion [28] that the anti-Chinese spirit was the least Pancasila phenomenon, the anti-Chinese nature was discourse as a form of the abandonment of the Pancasila ideology. People who plan these things usually have other ideas in the state outside of the agreed upon basic ideas. Pancasila became a basic idea agreed upon by the Indonesian people to live side by side and get along well [31] [32]. Hoon asserted that post-Soeharto, the spirit of pluralism re-emerged in Indonesia. Along with the collapse of the New Order, the anti-Chinese spirit began to fade and was replaced by a high spirit of tolerance in the community [33]. In the context of Lasem, the anti-Chinese spirit never grew because of awareness and spatial reasons. Awareness involves ideas of tolerance, and spatial involves intermingling and assimilation between ethnic groups. That is the strongest reason, racial problems cannot grow in Lasem society, and until now they have remained alive in the frame of harmony.

4. Conclusions
Chinese in Lasem are able to fight for their identity and living space on the basis of ideas of tolerance and social practice. They do not take into account the political aspects as part of daily activities, for reasons of trauma over the history that has been traversed. In Lasem, Chinese people live in harmony with Javaneses in marriage, work, and religious affairs. They have a high spirit of unity because of the Pancasila ideology that they believe is a basic idea for tolerance. The idea was then practiced socially, so that the Chinese in Lasem did not have sentiments, racialism, and suspicion towards other ethnic communities. This is what proves that endemic, Chinese people in Lasem participate in efforts to care for diversity and nationality in the local sphere.

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