Waiting for extinct, neglected precious heritage sites; case study of little Tiongkok lasem

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Abstract: As one of heritage sites in Central Java Province, Lasem had been known of its existence since Majapahit era, followed by Dutch colonization and later on Indonesian independence. Chinese migrated from mainland China to Java Island (one of them was Lasem) and other destinations in Southeast Asia from 14th until 20th century and peaked during transition turmoil from Ming to Qing dynasty. As consequences, it brought uniqueness to local community tradition as culture acculturation process happened in a new place that latter on called as “Little Tiongkok”. Oriental style settlements in Lasem had been influenced by China’s Southern Province of Fujian and Guangdong, which brought precious value not only for Lasem but also Indonesian heritage in general. Aims in the research were to explore Chinese heritage existence and threat that happened in Lasem and to understand some obstacles sustainable tourism there. Descriptive method has been used in the research, meanwhile data have been acquired through combination from literature study and survey. Research findings conclude that several oriental houses as Chinese Heritage in Dasun, Karangturi and Babagan villages are abandoned by latest generation due to migration based on economic reasons to bigger cities such as Jakarta, Semarang and Surabaya. Meanwhile Tridharma (tree believes/ faiths) temples lost their members due to political regulation impact which happened across Indonesia. In the other hand, batik remains well-preserved in Lasem as having association with economic value both for the local and business owner.

1. Introduction

Unique and special, two words which suite to describe Lasem as a sub-district under Rembang regency in Central Java Province. Lasem played important role for many decades, previously it was functioned as major quay during Majapahit Kingdom exist (1293-1500), aside from Ujung Galuh (Gresik) and Tuban. Later-on during colonialization era, Lasem faced several transformations until after independence of Indonesia. Lasem itself was known as the oldest city in Java which had Chinese settlement, even though that was not the biggest. Chinese settlement in Lasem was built from 14th to 15th century. At that time those settlements had been built close to the water due to its importance for transportation and trade. In Lasem that was Lasem river which flows to the north (Java Sea) and passes Bagan village where the oldest Chinese settlements in Lasem are located. Aside from old houses also that was the oldest Chinese temple in Java called Cu An Kiong, which was built in 14-15th century to commemorate the goddess of Mazu or Tian Shang Sheng Mu, as her merit to guide and protect sailors from Mainland China to overseas [1].

Chinese settlement in Lasem concentrated in 3 different villages, which are Babagan, Karangturi and Dasun. Each settlement has their own history and brings acculturation to local people as they lived in the outer core of old city. Yet, Lasem has its own uniqueness and cannot be found in any places in Java, in Lasem there is no terminology to call China Town or better known in local as (Pecinan).

Acculturation process that happened for a long time made interaction between local (Javanese community) and Chinese cannot be separated. Mix cultural marriage in Lasem also happened there, and in the society often called them as Peranakan [13]. Masjid Jamek Lasem also has Chinese influence inside the building and on the rood style [9].
Lasem itself has unique atmosphere and labelled as *Tiongkok Kecil* (Little Tiongkok; Tiongkok was terminology used in Indonesia to call People’s Republic of China) due to many buildings resembles Southern part of China (Fujian and Guangdong Province) can easily be found in Lasem. *Kesengsem Lasem* (falling in love to Lasem) as motto to attract visitor both local and international also plays important role. During Dutch colonization in *Oost Indische* (Indonesia) several turbulences happened between local (Javanese and Chinese) against VOC [7]. VOC had seen collaboration and cooperation between native Javanese and Chinese as threat, and deter their strategy to conquer that area. VOC in many places across Indonesia had strategy aimed to divide community correspond to their tribes, as many Chinese in Indonesia working as trader, mostly they occupied strategic location in the city center, and warned them to live in rural areas [10].

Chinese community had been seen as buffer group amid white (European descent) and the lowest society which had been occupied by native Indonesian. Nonetheless, Lasem depicted as a safest place for them due to absence of conflict generated by ethnic differences. For long decade, economic disparity based on ethnic group in Indonesia has been viewed as cause of several violence and demonstration in several big cities. Ethnic clashing never happened in Lasem, local and Chinese community lived side by side even they came from different social background, economy, religion and racial. Lasem often depicted as ideal place where diversity should nurture and grow as Indonesia consist from various different tribes and origin.

![Figure 1. Lasem, a district town under Rembang Regency, Central Java from aerial satellite photograph and its settlements.](image)

In Present day, what we have seen in Lasem was little bit different from the past, even though several sites still well preserved and brought precious value to Indonesian culture and history many suffer from massive damage. Situation in old city of Lasem had no different compared to old city in Semarang, due to complexity of ownership status, many houses are abandoned empty, leaved without any maintenance. Aims in the research were (1) to analyze Chinese heritage in Lasem in accordance to vision as “Little Tiongkok” both physic and non-physic aspects, (2) to analyze physical aspect (heritage sites) in Lasem correspond to sustainable tourism.

2. Methods

Descriptive method had been used in the research through literature study and field survey. Literature study divided into 3 phases related to the Lasem history from pre-colonial, during colonial era (Dutch occupation both *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* VOC and Kingdom of the Netherlands) and after Independence of Indonesia, mostly old era (*orde lama*), new era (*orde baru*), and reformation. Several resources include reference books, journals and mass media. In the other hand, survey has been done by interviewing some key principles in Lasem, both native locals and *peranakan* (terms to call offspring of Chinese Indonesian) to acquire detail information and add some perspective from both sides. Heritage sites in Lasem divided into two categories including physical aspect (Chinese temples and Chinese houses) and non-physical aspect (tradition, language, batik, arts and religion).

Physical aspects in culture analyzed through literature study and survey, most of them are covered house style, Chinese temple style, symbol and carving. Meanwhile for non-physical aspects including language, tradition and religion conducted through interviewing key principle and survey.
3. Results and Discussion

Heritage sites in Lasem are precious, yet it facing serious threats due to complex factors. After political turmoil in present day Indonesia, it brings impact on culture degradation and transformation especially which close to several culture elements from Chinese origin. In the discussion section we have divided Chinese culture; which referred to southern Chinese people who migrated to Southeast Asia, and no exception Java Island and Indonesia in general, into physical/ visible and non-physical cultural aspects. According to C. Kluckhohn (1953) in Koentjananingrat (2010), there are 7 culture elements including: language, knowledge, social organization, utilization system and technology, occupation, religion and art [4][5].

To accommodate all aspects above, we classified culture elements into two aspects, physical and non-physical culture. Non-physical including language, religion and art, meanwhile physical aspect including utilization system and technology which has been manifested through building both in temples and houses.

3.a Religions and languages

Religions and languages are two elements in culture and each culture has been associated into certain religions and sometimes certain culture has their own language [5]. No exception when we discuss Chinese migration prior colonization era to Southeast Asia, there are several destinations for them to migrate. In Indonesia, regions that have substantial Chinese communities are Semarang, Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, Bangka-Belitung, Batam, Palembang, Singkawang and Pontianak [3]. While in Southeast Asia region, they also sailed to Bangkok, Singapore, Penang, Malacca, Phuket, Songkhla, Manila and Ho Chi Minh. They also came from various different tribes and origins, mostly who came to Java was Han tribes and they spoke either Cantonese or Hokkien (a southern dialect in Mainland China, mostly from Fujian Province and Guangdong Province). From early 14 century they migrated to Southeast Asia due to political instability in the mainland, prior to 14 century several representatives had arrived in Majapahit Kingdom under Sam Po Kong, a commander and also well known for his merit to spread Islam in Java [15].

In the other hand many migrants from mainland later on brought many traditional believes, as Moslem was not main religion there. Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism are three main believes that brought impact in the early wave of migration to the new land. They came to several destinations by boat and hope for safer place to work, but after in a new land for several generations they call it as a new home, although many tragedies related to ethnicity happened from time to time, even though in Lasem itself was not [8].

![Figure 2. Jamek Mosque in Lasem, its roof represents Javanese and Chinese acculturation.](image-url)
During Soeharto presidency that was president instruction Number 14 (1967) stated that all Chinese activities including language usage both spoken and written, traditional name usage, traditional faith and ceremony had been prohibited [6][14]. In consequences, most of Chinese descent have merged into the new religion, mainly Christianity, either Protestant or Roman Catholic, with very little still maintain their Buddhism. In 1998 under Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) presidency through president instruction Number 26 (1998) formally erased discrimination against Chinese community in Indonesia, in consequences Confucianism had been added into the sixth recognized religion in the country, yet Confucianism and Buddhist in present day had become minority among Chinese Indonesian. As consequences many Chinese temples not only in Lasem but across Indonesia had lost their members, today a lot of Peranakan only saw temple as a place to commemorate their ancestor and not join to congregation any longer.

Language from mainland China from 15 century had spoken by many Chinese community in Java, family and Chinese school were the most took effect in Lingua Franca. To communicate with the local, they used Malay (Bahasa Melayu) the root of nowadays called Bahasa Indonesia. Bahasa Melayu, Dutch and Chinese were used widely side by side, from media, daily conversation up to formal document correspond to each ethnicity and tribe. After independence the usage of Chinese literature was prohibited, many Chinese schools were closed, as consequences many Chinese offspring lost their culture element which was Language.

Old Chinese houses in Lasem mostly have main gate/ entrance in front of their houses, made by teak wood and carved 2 Chinese Character in both side of doors. Most of them have positive meaning related to prosperity and hope written in Chinese character (Hanzi) from top to bottom. In the past many Chinese in Lasem and many other cities in Indonesia are using several Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka and Hokkien. Even though Cantonese dialects are close related to Mandarin Chinese, they can be distinguished. In present day, most of them are no longer either speak or write Chinese, this is because from colonial era and after independence they have been forced to absorb and blend to local culture, due to Chinese community fell under suspicion still maintain their loyalty to communist ruler [12].

3.b Traditions
Batik was one of Indonesian traditional clothing with unique pattern and dyeing which was listed on UNESCO world heritage. That was technique of wax-resist dyeing applied to whole white fabric and later on used as clothes, household accessories and many other. Lasem also has traditional batik called batik Lasem and Batik Tiga Negeri (batik tree counties), which represent acculturation process from tree different culture mixture into one, which consist of Javanese, Chinese and Dutch (Netherlands). Acculturation process on batik media represents through color and pattern that different from any other batik, strong color usage represents coastal character (pesisiran) such as green, yellow, red (derived from Chinese Culture), purple and blue (derived from Dutch influence). Dutch influence aside from blue color usage was tulips pattern, meanwhile Chinese influence in batik pattern can be seen through dragons and phoenix. There are more than 15 batik makers association in Lasem in 2018, meanwhile batik making process had available since long time ago both manual and stamp [11].

Figure 3. Phoenix and Dragon are two characters from Chinese mythology.
In city center batik shops and galleries can easily been found, they sell several local brands both sewed as clothes for men and women, and sell as batik fabric. Batik Lasem has difference from Batik Solo and Yogyakarta, which each pattern represents certain caste in the society. Patterns in Batik Lasem are more general and can be used to different social background and had lighter and brighter color than any typical batik in Java.

3.c Temples and Houses

There are three temples in Lasem, each has 3 different direction, the west (Cu An Kiong), the north (Gie Yong Bio) and the south (Po An Bio). It was believed by Chinese community that temple establishment related to protection to Chinese settlement that had been built in certain area, and each temple had certain worshiped god. Even though one temple or local called as “Klenteng” accommodated 3 different believes, it was not mixed yet maintain their own faith. Aside from temples, there were several old Chinese houses in Lasem that hold historic value, and marked this city as “Little Tiongkok” as its appearance resembled cities in southern mainland China. Below were in detail description both temples and historic Chinese Houses in Lasem.

3.c.1 Cu An Kiong

Cu An Kiong to be believed as the oldest temple in Lasem and even in Java which had been built in 15th century,[15], it still well preserved until today, yet it lost its members/ prayers. It located in Dasun Village facing west direction which also believed as the first Chinese settlement to be built in Lasem parallel to Babagan River to the west. Temples can accommodate 3 different believes, which are Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, or widely called tridharma (tree faith or believes) From the outside, Cu An Kiong temple style had closeness association to many roof building found in Southern China (Fujian Province and Guangdong),[9], curved roof with 2 dragons in both tips and pearl in the middle. It was made by high quality of teak which at that time was easy to be found in Lasem, especially 4 pillars inside the main building. The temple also had wall painting (mural) dating back to 14th century. Ornament inside the temple dominated by oriental mythology consist of flower, dragon, phoenix and human carving, overall like many other Chinese temples, red and yellow are the most color which dominated exterior and interior. At that time terracotta had been used as floor inside the temple, after underwent renovation it had been replaced by motived tile from Lie Thiam Kwie a local tegelfabriek (tile company) which still operated until today.

![Cu An Kiong Temple in Dasun, considered to be the oldest Chinese temple in Java.](image)

In the south wing of the temple there were Kio (palanquin), all of them had red and gold in colors. It had been used to bring Mak Co Thian Siang Sing Bo whenever ceremonial process took place during Chinese big days (Imlek and Cap Go Meh). In front of the temple also displayed monument to commemorate Lasem War between local people who consist of Javanese and Chinese against VOC in 1742 [7].
3.c.2 Po An Bio
Po An Bio temple located in Karangturi Village close to the Little Tiongkok Heritage and merged into local settlement. It has smaller in size compared to Cu An Kiong which located in the north and has south direction. For Chinese community in Lasem, they believed, North, West and South are considered as good directions, this was reason why in Lasem had no temple with east direction. In front of the temple, that was a yard commonly used as ceremonial purpose during Chinese New Year or better known as Imlek in Indonesia such as Barongsai (Chinese dragon dance) and another performance. Like in Cu An Kiong, Po An Bio also has mural inside the building which represent myth/story in Mainland China related to god and goddess.

3.c.3 Gie Yong Bio
Gie Yong Bio was the smallest temple compared to the first and the second temple in Lasem, located in the west of Chinese settlement facing to the north and previously was only a monument. Located in Babagan Village which also well known for batik producer. Previously, Gie Yong Bio was built to commemorate 3 kongco whose consist of 2 Chinese (Tan Kee Wie and Oei Ing Kiat) and one Javanese (Raden Margono) during fighting against VOC in 1974.

3.c.4. Rumah Oei (Oei House)
Rumah Oei Located in Jalan Jatirogo, literary close to the city center. It was old house owned by Oei family and now was transformed into museum (emphasized Oei family story from generation to generation and Style of Old Chinese house in Java), souvenir vendor, restaurant, and guest house. Since the name of Lasem was booming on traveler list in recent decade as “Little Tiongkok”, the need of guest houses had increased, this is because previously there were no hotel in Lasem. In consequences, there were many old houses in Lasem transforming into guest houses. Old Chinese houses in Lasem used terracotta to their floor, according to the key principal, it was common to distinguish Chinese houses whether have been built in 14-15th centuries or more recent when tile commonly used as floor houses. There is no charge for tourists, yet they can put money in certain box which available there.

![Rumah Oei in Jalan Jatirogo, which transformed into museum, guest house, restaurant and souvenir store.](image)

3.c.5. Rumah Oppa (Oppa House)
Rumah Oppa located in Karangturi village and has been considered as the oldest generation who still alive in Lasem. Oppa reffered to grandfather as many locals and tourists called him. Previously Oppa’s house had been used for Batik producer, a small home industry business, but now had ended due to no generation in the family who can handle family business. In the house only Oppa and his maid (Mbak Minuk), she already there since 1970s to work and help Oppa’s family. Rumah Oppa had become one list in Lasem tourist destination, not only because its closeness to the Red House/Little Tiongkok Heritage but also old Chinese house style which still available in present day. Condition in Rumah Oppa was so deteriorated and messy, not only because financial difficulties in the family, but there was no assistance from the government.
3.c.6. *Rumah Merah (Little Tiongkok Heritage)*

Chinese local and the owner of *Laut Bonang Group*, Mr. Rudi Hartono purchased old Chinese house in Karangturi Village. It was 4 block houses which have been merged and connected and now have been used for several business activities related to cultural preservation. Like in many cases, empty Chinese houses are easy to be found in Lasem, as the young generations already moved to bigger cities such as Semarang, Surabaya and even Jakarta. The impact was many houses in Lasem which have historical value were abandoned. *Rumah merah* or literary means Red House, served several activities, including batik vendor, guest house which equal to 4 stars hotel standard, restaurant/ café “*Waroeng Khong Khauw Tjiak*” and museum. In addition, Red House also held cultural festival to nurture Chinese tradition in Lasem.

![Figure 6. Rudi Hartono, the owner of Rumah Merah/ Tiongkok Kecil Heritage taught his employees about Batik Tiga Negeri philosophy in his store](image)

Acculturation between local and Chinese descent not only represented through batik Lasem but it represents through business atmosphere there. Mr. Ruddy Hartono as the owner, employed local to work in his shop, he also trained all employee not only selling batik to the visitors, but also have to understand batik more, knowing its philosophy, history and value behind it. Batik vendor in *Rumah merah* only as shop, not as batik maker, even though old house in *Rumah merah* previously has been used as batik producer. The most common product in *Rumah Merah* to the tourist was Batik Lasem, which had rich philosophy and history in it. Batik Lasem has distinct pattern and color, those patterns represent acculturation between Chinese, Dutch and Javanese since 15 century that’s why Batik Lasem also called as Batik Tiga Negeri (*Batik Three Nations*). As Javanese batik mostly have brown in color, Batik Lasem mostly use bright colors such as red, yellow, green, purple and blue. Dragon, Phoenix and red color represented Chinese mythology, meanwhile blue color and tulips came from Dutch tradition and culture, while Javanese culture appeared in additional pattern on batik.

3.c.7. *Lawang Ombo (Wide door)*

Lawang ombo located in Dasun village, and was in the next to the oldest temple in Lasem of Cu An Kiong which had been built in 15th century. Dasun was considered as the oldest Chinese settlement in Lasem and associated to Lasem river which flowed to Java Sea to the north. Lawang ombo formerly has been used as ordinary house of Han Chinese descent and now was empty, tourist who want to visit Lawang ombo need to make appointment to the key principal (Pak Gandor) because it was not opened daily [15]. Previously, Lawang ombo was owned by one of the richest merchants who sold opium from China or better known locally as “*Candu*” commodity [9]. Inside the house tourists could see a hole to transport opium which has been connected to the Lasem River. In the back, also had been found family graveyard which common to rich family tradition to Fujian Province.
3.c.8. Nyah Lasem Museum

Nyah Lasem Museum emphasized Batik making story which took place in a family house close to Rumah Oei and Rumah Idjo. Tourist only can visit Nyah Lasem museum if they had appointment to the owner Mr. Santoso who lived in Babagan. It occupied typical old Chinese house which made by teak, each room displayed not only several equipment for batik making, but also several copied documents to show the visitor history behind it. The museum was private owned, while next to the museum was Indische (Tropical houses influenced by Dutch Style) house opened for tourist as homestay.

3.d. Threat

Several old Chinese houses suffer from serious damage, not only due to their age, but many of them are abandoned as latest generation no longer live in the city. If those building absent from protection, no wonder if someday Lasem as "Little Tiongkok" in Java will lose their identity, like it was mentioned in Pratiwo (2010) that many Chinese gates and tamarind trees along Semarang- Surabaya street have been removed due to road widening project in the past decade [9].

![Old Chinese House which sold to the outsider and ruined to collect its wood (teak).](image)

Solution can be varied and depend on each situation, even Lasem has been known for “Little Tiongkok”, only little aid for the government to protect several heritage sites there. Most of them are came from private sectors which help to protect some heritage in their own style. Rumah Oei, Rumah Oppa, Rumah Merah (Little Tiongkok Heritage), Museum Nyah Lasem, Lawang Ombo and Rumah Idjo are the example of well-known destination among many others hidden charm which the potension still possible to be explored.

4. Conclusions

Increasing awareness in Lasem as heritage site need more attention in preserving not only for physical aspect which include temples and old Chinese houses, but also non-physical aspect including art and traditions. Many old Chinese houses suffered from massive damage which worried to be disappear one day, and it could make Lasem to lose its identity. For non-physical aspect including language both written and spoken and traditional religions are no longer exist there, yet its remnant still can be found in Lasem, for good in certain Chinese New Year celebration several Chinese traditions still be performed in “Klenteng”. In addition, the local community seems to be cooperative and very welcome to the visitors, and it can be seen as a good asset to boost tourism in years to come.

“Tingkok Kecil” vision under motto “Kesengsem Lasem” need more commitment which can be seen through real action to protect several heritage sites in Lasem. Several houses which had historical value need to be protected, as private sector only doing limited action and quite impossible to walk alone without any guidance from the government even though in Lasem itself private sectors had dominated culture preservation. Two main reasons related to homework for sustainable tourism include government verdict for heritage site lists and followed by management strategy to optimize tourism activities at there.
Acknowledgements
This research was conducted by research grant from PNBP (Penenerimaan Negara Bukan Pajak/State non-tax revenue) 2019 Universitas Negeri Malang, Malang, East Java Province, Indonesia. In collaboration between the University and Department of Tourism Rembang Regency, Central Java Province, Indonesia.

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