

## CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE PERANAKAN BATIK KIDANG MAS HOUSE OF LASEM, CENTRAL JAVA, INDONESIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Peranakan* houses are becoming more marginalised due to the changing times in Lasem and various identities crisis regarding the houses that appear among the local community. Even though the houses are the legacy of tangible artefacts and intangible attributes of society that are inherited from the past generations; they have to be maintained in the present and preserved for the benefit of future generations for in-depth cultural understanding. This qualitative research used phenomenology and narrative approaches to seek the cultural heritage elements within the *Peranakan* Houses in the area of Chinatown, Lasem. The findings of the study indicate that the embodiment of cultural heritage elements within the houses has become an essential role in constructing and identifying building identity, which is a part of cultural preservation.

**Disciplinary:** Architecture, Interior Design (Phenomenology), Southeast Asia History, Religious and Believes Studies.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the value of cultural heritage within one *Peranakan* house in China Town in Lasem, called Babagan village. Cultural heritage sites are legacies that must be preserved (Febro, 2020). This study tries to explore the legacy of tangible and intangible cultural heritage from the house, which has been inhabited for seven generations. This house is known as Rumah Batik Kidang Mas. Cultural heritage is a strategy for preserving our sense of place, which means, in this case, protecting the sense of historical Lasem. Some academic and non-academic researchers have made Lasem as a research idea, both concerning history and culture. Lasem keeps a lot of exciting stories that are not enough to be seen only, but need to be explored from various perspectives so

that they can be better understood. Why is it important to discuss this? Firstly, nowadays, where “the modern world” is full of technology and mass communication to create an “international-global” culture, it is of primary importance to identify “national-local” cultural heritage to avoid any loss of identity. Secondly, the existences of *Peranakan* houses have been abandoned and destroyed or usually become “invisible” because the owner chose to become an introvert.

Another reason is that the house (Kidang Mas) has been changed in zoning systems that occur inside the home based on the alteration of residents’ perspectives that could become a new angle in seeing cultural heritage. In this housing complex, the zoning system is divided into four areas, there are public, semi-public and semi-private, private. Public area means everybody is welcome to enter, while semi-public area can be accessed if you are invited, and anyone in the house is possible to come to the semi-private area, whereas the only owner may enter the private area, such as the bedroom. This article aims to show the embodiment of the cultural heritage elements of the *Peranakan* House - Kidang Mas that it is possible to strengthen architectural language as an Indonesian identity.

## 2. LASEM AND CHINA TOWN

Nowadays, Lassem or Lasem is a small region within the administrative district (*Kabupaten*) of Rembang, in the north side of Central Java (Figure 1). Furthermore, Lasem is famous for its most influential Chinese culture, especially within their *Batik Tulis* (hand-drawn *batik*).



**Figure 1:** The Location of Lasem from Map in 1695 (6.6986° S, 111.4445° E)  
(Source: Modified from KITLV Leiden’ Archive, 2018)

Based on the interview with Njo Tjoen Hian or Sigit Wicaksono in 2017, a Lasem public

Figure and a *batik* entrepreneur stated that *Batik* Lasem is even sent to foreign countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. The batik industry in Lasem is one of the oldest *batik* production centres in Java. Its establishment is associated with the Majapahit Kingdom era starting from 1293 until 1478. Another significant characteristic of Lasem is the embodiment of the *Peranakan* style architecture.

Despite Lasem being a small area but in the 16th century, Lasem was one of the essential and well-known cities and dynamic ports under the Majapahit Kingdom. According to history, Admiral Cheng Ho from the Ming Dynasty in China regularly visited ports in the North of Java, and he found many Chinese communities at *Lao Sam* or Lasem. It was then known as the place of the most prominent Chinese immigrants in Java which occurred in the 14 to 15 centuries. That caused the strong influence of Chinese culture into the local Javanese culture (Darmayanti, 2017). In the Dutch Colonialism era, the trade through Lasem harbour was crowded due to the presence of Chinese traders who eventually stayed in Lasem. At that time, the Chinese people in Lasem were led by a Captain and two Chinese Lieutenants to show their existence in the area. The proof of the arrival of the Chinese people in Lasem could be seen in the historical sites called Punjulharjo, Rembang, where a lifeboat with two skeletons was found.

Based on radiocarbon found on the boat, derived from seven to eight centuries and the findings of the only boat in Southeast Asia the was most complete and intact (Yogyakarta Archaeological Centre). Another noteworthy background of Lasem around the year of 1860, Lasem was once a necessary area for opium trade in Indonesia and even Asia. Those who stayed in Lasem in this 19<sup>th</sup> century grew very rich as opium traders. They owned large houses and boats that allowed them to undertake their trading activities (Suroyo et al., 1994; Pratiwo, 2002).

Today, Lasem is part of the main traffic areas from the west to the east of Java. The main traffic road is known as Jalan Raya Pos or *De Grootte Postweg*, which was constructed in the Dutch colonial era under the command of Governor-General Herman Willem Daendels from 1808 to 1811. After *De Grootte Postweg* was built, it changed the cosmological notion of the place. For example, Indonesian Chinese did not develop their new temples at riverside anymore. The “new” temple of Lasem that was built in the 20<sup>th</sup> century wasn’t oriented towards the Lasem River as was the case with the old temple but facing the *Grootte Postweg* (Nas & Pratiwo, 2002). The location of Lasem can be reached by road, approximately thirty minutes from Rembang and three hours from Semarang, the capital of Central Java. For those who are visiting Lasem for the first time, they will probably have difficulty finding the area, because there is no written sign which shows it has entered the Lasem area. However, Lasem is possible to be recognised with the embodiment of Masjid *Jami* or the Great Mosque of Lasem with a green dome on the right side of *De Grootte Postweg* - main road (from Semarang). Across the mosque, there is a market area which often referred to as the square called *Alun-Alun* of Lasem, and the opposite the square is the main entrance to one of Chinatown area known as Soditan-Dasun (Figure 2).

The establishment of Chinatown or known as *Pecinan* was generally based on two factors, namely social and political. Social factors were formed because of the needs of the Chinese people in carrying out their various daily activities and any traditional-cultural activities.





**Figure 2:** The Location of Lasem, Central Java.

Besides, this area also functioned as an economic centre through its trade activities. On the other hand, political factors originated in the Dutch colonial era of *Wijkenstelsel* imposed regulations around the 18th century to all major cities in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Generally, the Chinatown area consists of residential, market or *pasar*, and temple or *kelenteng* areas. Furthermore, Chinatown in Lasem is divided into three regions based on the history of its formation, namely Soditan, Karangturi, and Babagan Village. Based on the interviews with Danang Swastika, a historian of Lasem, and Gandor Sugiharto, a local public Figure in 2017 in Lasem, saying that the Soditan was the first Chinatown in Lasem. This village is the closest to the port and was formed around 1470. The statement supported based on the fact contained in the map produced in 1477, depicts the oldest temple in Lasem, Cu An Kiong. Then, Karangturi Village was established approximately in the 1740s. The people came through the massive migration of Chinese from Jakarta who escaped from the genocide of Chinese people in Jakarta. The Chinatown area then was extended to the west, namely to Babagan that was established approximately in 1800 (Darmayanti & Bahauddin, 2019).

Previously, the majority of people in Lasem embrace Hindu - *Shiwa* as their religion, the statement based on the artefacts - *lingga* which found in Kajar Village. In general, if *lingga* is found, *yoni* is also around it. But in this village, the only *lingga* was found. *Yoni* and *lingga* are known as the symbols of female and male sexuality in the Hindu traditions, which is related to the cosmic power that produces virtues, not merely a carnal representation of the human body

(Magioglou, 2014). Today, the majority of people in Lasem embrace Islam as their religion; the rests embrace Hindu, Buddha, Christian, and Catholic. Since Lasem becomes the central dissemination of Islam and was included in one of the ancient cities in Java, many *Pesantren* or Islamic Boarding School spread within Lasem. Even though the people have faith over particular religion, some of the communities believe in supernatural powers (Animism) and are marked by some traditional ceremonies intended for the safety and wealth of the believers (Suroyo, et.al, 1994). This diversity also influences the cultural wealth owned by Lasem.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative research in nature which involves the individual experience of the researcher during fieldwork within the *Peranakan* house of Kidang Mas. Interviews and conversation are designed to be less structured and more open to encourage the participant to share details regarding their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The activity started in September- November 2017 and continued in September 2018. The researcher could stay and talk with the house's owner, and the owner of Kidang Mas invited researchers to experience the various activities that had taken place. Based on this experience, more detailed and authentic information are obtained. Through phenomenology and narrative approaches, this study documents the experiences, in the form of re-telling the lived experience through comprehensive and descriptive writing.

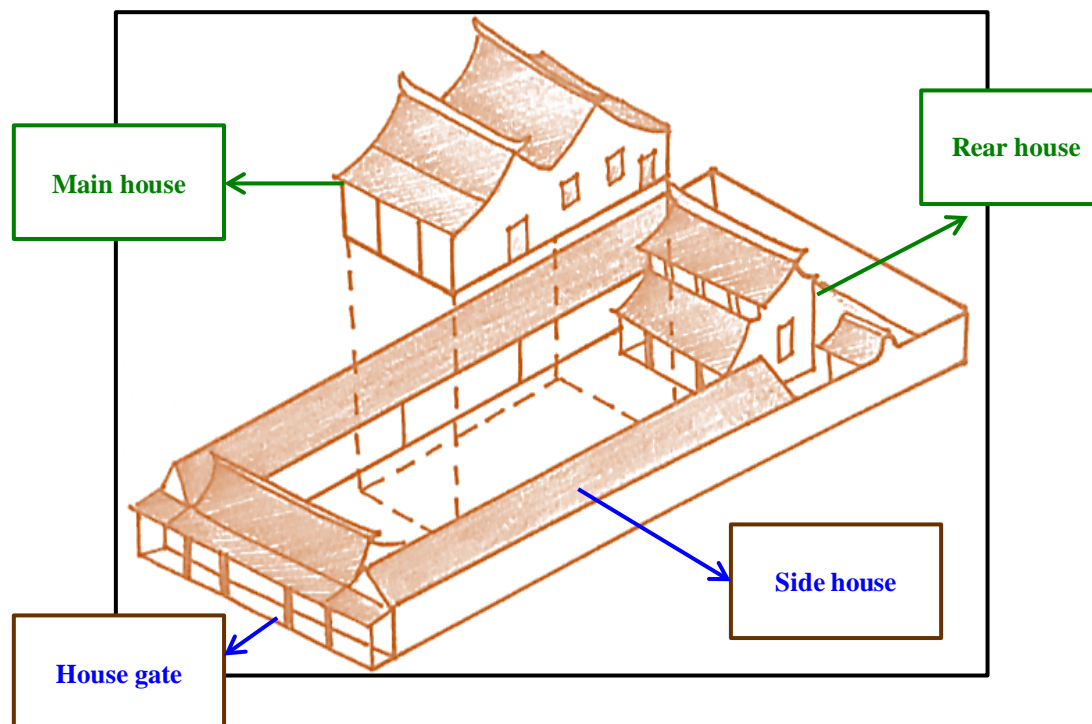
The term of cultural heritage is a broad concept. There is no exact definition of the idea of cultural heritage. The terminology adopted reflects the specific characteristics of particular cultures, according to UNESCO's Declaration Concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage in 2003 states that cultural heritage is an essential component of the cultural identity of communities, groups and individuals, and or social cohesion. Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that is inherited from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions, and values (Icomos, 2002). There are two expressions of cultural heritage known as tangible cultural heritage (TCH) that relate to objects. In contrast, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is very close to performances, representations, expressions, skills, and knowledge.

### 4. PERANAKAN HOUSE

The Chinese people in Indonesia are divided into two; *Totok* (full-blooded) Chinese and *Peranakan* (half-breed) Chinese (in Malaysia they are called *Baba Nyonya*). According to Onghokham (1990) in the 17th and 18th centuries, the term *Peranakan* was regularly used by Javanese to mention the Chinese people who were born on Java island and had settled in for generations. The existence of Chinese communities has led to the acculturation of cultures in Lasem; one of the existing artefacts to the present day is a residential house called *Rumah Peranakan*. The *Peranakan* house is included in the Straits Chinese architecture, which is generally divided into two types, namely shophouses or *ruko* and bungalows.

The Chinese never built a wall separating their settlement from other communities for the reason of security. Still, in the case of Lasem, most of the *Peranakan* houses with the bungalow

type are surrounded by high walls and massive gateways as the main entrance. According to the way it was constructed, Peter Nas (2002) stated that there were two methods of construction implemented in this *Rumah Peranakan* in Lasem. First is through establishing the surrounding wall of the complex, and then constructing the building inside the complex and eventually constructing the gate. The second way is by firstly establishing the surrounding wall of the compound, the gate, and finally forming the buildings inside the complex. The main house was built in the centre of the complex and surrounded by the side and rear buildings. The space between these buildings forms the front and the middle yards (courtyard) and if there any backyard is usually a waste space no matter how large it is and considered to be a garden with a lot of plants and trees (Figure 3).

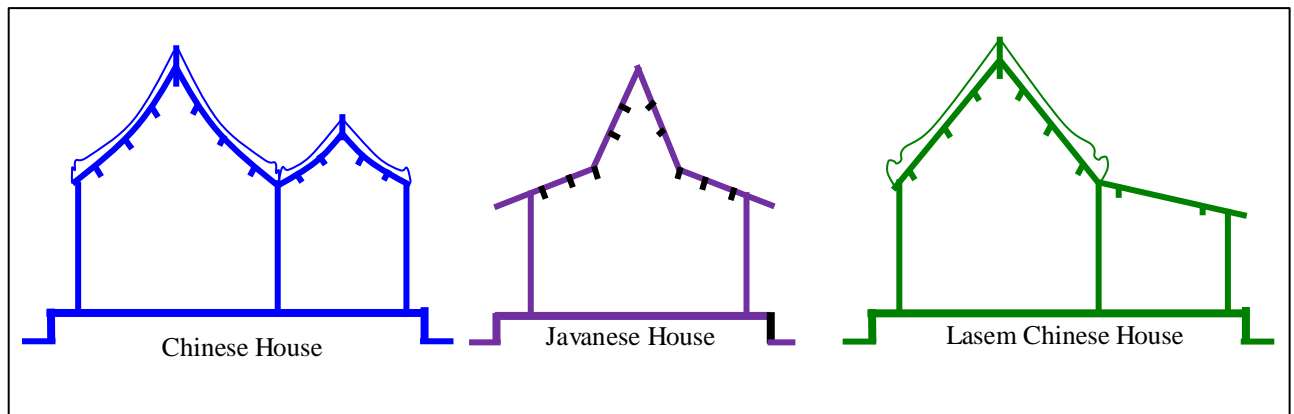


**Figure 3:** The Components of *Peranakan* Houses in Lasem (Modified from Pratiwo (1990)).

The *Peranakan* houses in Lasem generally occupied by extended families consisting of parents and their children. Each family had its room, but the kitchen, bathroom and family room were communal. When the parents died, the house was divided among the children, and when the town went into decline, families preferred to move out and leave behind the house. Besides the explanation above, according to Pratiwo's research in 1990, *Peranakan* houses in Lasem can also be characterised by the type of roof expansion which is a combination of Chinese and Javanese culture (Figure 4).

The *Peranakan* house Kidang Mas is not the first *batik* home industry in Lasem area, especially in Babagan Village. The name is not as famous as Sekar Kencana owned by Njo Tjoen Hian or known as Sigit Wicaksono. They lived there in the same generation, but Sigit has opened the house to the public earlier. This matter was realised and acknowledged by the owner of Kidang Mas. However, the *Peranakan* house of Kidang Mas remains unique because it inhabited for several generations. The *batik* business also has been carried out for generations.





**Figure 4:** The Roof Type of *Peranakan* Houses in Lasem (Modified from Pratiwo (1990)).

## 5. PERANAKAN HOUSE - KIDANG MAS, BABAGAN VILLAGE

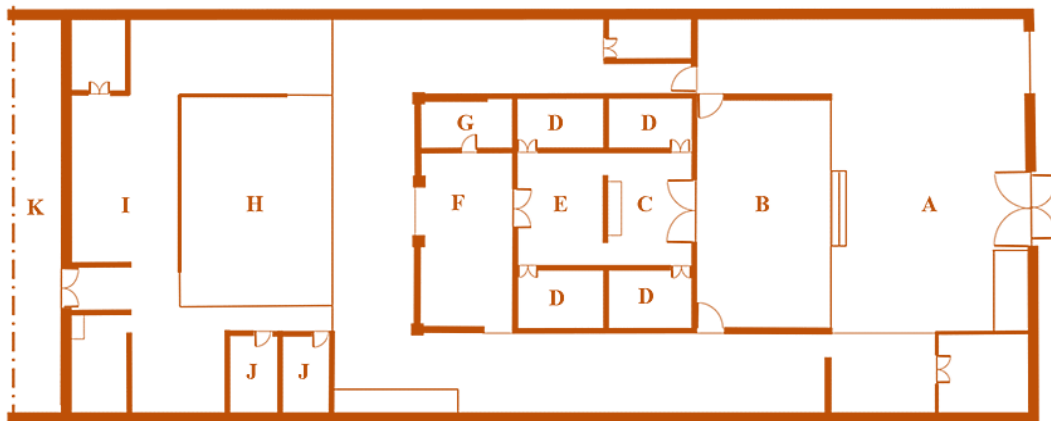


**Figure 5:** The *Peranakan* House - Kidang Mas, Lasem (Source: Taken by Author, 2017 - 2019).

This house located in Babagan street, *gang* (alley) 5, number 1, Babagan village, Lasem were selected as a case study for several reasons (Figure 5). Firstly, most of the family generations have been living in the house. The first generation was called *Mak Klepon* (*Mak* means grandma), and *Engkong Tay Tjian* directly came from South China. Tay Tjian returned to mainland China and did not return, while his wife and his daughter called *Mak Lian* settled in Lasem. *Mak Lian* as the second generation moved out from the house to follow her husband - Lie Je Siu who had a colonial *Peranakan* house on the main road of Lasem. They had eight children, and one of them who inherited the *Peranakan* house was Lie Hie Nio. Tjan Liong Khoen, the fourth generation, was born as the son of the mother Lie Hie Nio who married Tjan Liang Thay. The name of Tjan Liong Khoen became a legacy of the family and a trademark stamp on every piece of Kidang Mas batik. He married his cousin Lie Ing Nio or called *Mak Ing*. She passed away at the age of 74 years old in 1976 when her youngest daughter - Tjan Djoen Nio was pregnant the first child. Rudi, the youngest son of Tjan Djoen Nio as the sixth generation who lived in the house, a modern generation, had moved out from Lasem to Jakarta and came back to Lasem with his wife named Vina and his daughter in 2014 and until now.

Secondly, the owner was friendly and willing to share information related to culture, tradition and even *batik* business. Lastly, the house represented not only the daily activities of the family member but also public activities in the house (Darmayanti et al., 2019). The *Peranakan* house - Kidang Mas also included in the bungalow type, consist of the main gateway, garden (A) in front of

veranda (B), main house as a private area - prayer hall (C), bedrooms (D), family room (E) and terrace (F) behind the house facing the courtyard (H). Outdoor-bathroom (J), kitchen and dining area (I) are placed behind the courtyard. Another bathroom within the main building (G) is new, requested from Rudi's wife before a move back from Jakarta to Lasem (Figure 6). The material used to build this house employed a combination of bricks and teak wood for walls, floors, and pillars. But over time, some elements have been replaced with newer materials such as wooden floors inside the house and classic tile in veranda replaced with broken-white ceramic tile (Figure 7).



**Figure 6:** The Layout Sketch of *Peranakan* House - Kidang Mas.



**Figure 7:** The Flooring Material Changes in the house. Left: Inside House; Right: Veranda.

Through observation, the researcher found that the house has its charm, which is possible to “read” through activities and traditions around it. The charm is like mysteries that made researchers think for solutions. The statement reminds of the quotes of a famous architect from the modern era - Zaha Hadid is as follows:

*“I don’t think that architecture is only about shelter, is only about a very simple enclosure. It should be able to excite you, to calm you, to make you think.”*

This house is like embracing various experiences with exciting stories from across generations. But, it is rather difficult to trace the activities of the first generation in this house because of the lack of stories from previous generations. The story has begun when Rudi as the sixth generation and his wife narrates about the second generation - *Mak Lian*. In this generation, *batik* making has already



started, but only for personal use, and it continues until the third generation. Making *batik* for commercial purposes began in the fourth generation - *Mak Ing* because many people admired the beauty the motifs she made and continues until today.

The *batik* business gives a considerable influence for zoning (private and public) changes within the house. In the beginning, the housing complex only up to the kitchen area (Figure 6). Afterward, expanded by bought another house located behind the complex and using it as a *batik* workshop (K, Figure 6) until now (Figure 8). The researcher was fortunate to get the experience many times in seeing the process of making *batik* at the workshop. Starting from covering batik motifs with a special wax, boiling the cloth to dissolving wax, washing fabric after boiling and colouring cloth that was painted. From the several *Peranakan* houses visits by the researcher, it was found that something unique about this house came from the smell of the batik process. From a direct experience and full consciousness, the researcher can detect not only smell but also any typical sound or noise and even colours which were produced by this house. Based on the experience, the researcher expresses it through the following quote - “*The sound of stamping the worker’s feet on the batik cloth that being washed. The sound of splashing water when dipping the batik cloth into the giant brick-pot.. the sound of workers who are mutually talking and joking (guyon) about life and the sound of flapping the batik cloths when it will be dried*” and all of these descriptions are within one line with the words of Merleau - Ponty (1964), “We see the depth, speed, softness and hardness of objects. We see even their odor”.

Through the use of multi-sensory which involves the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton, and muscle, which possible to screening whole senses to find something that other places don’t have (Steven Holl et al., 1994). Eye to see the typical daily activities; ear to hear from various activities such as *membatik* process, cooking, playing, talking; nose to smell the *batik* cloth, the *malam* (wax) and the colouring material from the workshop, and also the *dupa* (incense) from prayer hall; skin to feel the *batik* surface, feel the walls, floors, even trace the space temperature; tongue to taste the traditional food cooked by the owner, and skeleton-muscle to feel the energy surround the house. It is called house identity.



**Figure 8:** The Workshop Area - Kidang Mas.

Darmayanti and Bahauddin (2020) stated that initially, the Kidang Mas owner - Tjian Djoen Nio or known as *Bu Kian*, the fifth generation, did not allow guests to enter the housing complex and only in 1980, the *obeng* or *batik* workers were allowed to work inside the house. For her, that rule is to keep family tradition from generation to generation and to keep family intact. Moreover, in the time of *Mak Lian* and *Mak Ing*, the *obeng* did not work inside the house. The making of *batik* motifs was done at the *obeng*'s homes and delivered back for the colouring process. The colouring process is done by themselves because it dealt with secret formulas. But the next generation, her youngest son of *Bu Kian* - Rudi Siswanto approached his parents to allow guests to enter the area of the house, especially for those who are interested in *batik*. Nonetheless, that does not mean this generation is not respecting the previous tradition, but from the influence of the environment and knowledge when he was living in the big city (Jakarta) has opened up his mind to see something from a different angle. And another reason is about political conditions related to the discrimination against the Chinese community has been better compared to his parents' era. Therefore, there is no reason for the house to be closed to outsiders the see the *batik* making.

This house was private, only for families and close relatives. The garden of the house and front veranda are semi-private, where outsiders can look in through the gate or the grid of the gate layer called *Hek* (Figure 9). The terrace is used for a family gathering as well as the reception area, while the bedrooms inside the main building and the other areas behind the house are private. Based on that explanation, some changes occurred and can be seen visually, such as activities and zoning of space. In contrast, the intangible values are possible to see from the changes of thinking that affect tradition (table 1 & Figure 11). Although there are some changes, the basic principles relating to spiritual values do not change, such as respecting the ancestors and God on the altar in the prayer hall or the kitchen (*pawon* altar) always being carried out. Since the family, converted into Christianity from Kong Hu Cu (Confucianism) except *Mak Lian*, some rituals are only conducted by her. The rituals, such as *sembahyang coki* to commemorate the day of her parents' death - *engkong* Liong Khoen and *Mak Ing*, *sembahyang ronde*, *sembahyang rebutan*, *ceng beng* and *imlek* which is also known as the Chinese New Year celebration. *Mak Lian* still holds the belief because she has to maintain the tradition and need to "keep in touch" with her parents.



**Figure 9:** Curious eyeing through the gateway grid.

The zone changes slowly took place after 1980, where the owner started *batik* production for the public. Garden becomes a public area, while veranda is for those who are genuinely interested in *batik* and also *batik* workers who make motifs on the fabric. The house owner, Rudi, and family often use front veranda as leisure space, such as eating *bakso* (meatball) with his family or guest (Darmayanti & Bahauddin, 2020: 8) and this area also be interpreted as a play or relaxation area for Rudi's children. Usually used to play bicycles or just enjoy online videos, while for the second daughter, it is used as an arena for learning to walk (Figure 10) (Darmayanti et al., 2020: 270). The prayer area has changed slightly because other than the families can enter. Significant changes occur at the back of the house since many guests want to see the process of making *batik* in the workshop and the courtyard. In this case, the value of cultural heritage from the tangible and intangible views involves a slight shift, but this shows in what characterises the construction of the identity of a *Peranakan* house in Lasem.



**Figure 10:** The activities within the Front Veranda - Kidang Mas.

**Table 1:** The Changes of Zoning Area within *Peranakan* House of Kidang Mas.

The House Area	Before 1980	After 1980 - Present
1. Garden	Semi-Private	Public
2. Front Veranda	Semi-Private	Semi-Public
3. Prayer Hall	Private	Semi-Private
4. Bedrooms	Private	Private
5. Family room	Private	Private
6. Back Porch	Private	Semi-Private
7. Bathroom	-	Private
8. Bathroom (outside)	Private	Public
9. Courtyard	Private	Public
10. Kitchen & Dining room	Private	Semi-Private
11. Batik Workshop	Private	Public





**Figure 11:** The Zoning Change of the *Peranakan* House - Kidang Mas

## 6. CONCLUSION

The existence of *Peranakan* houses in Lasem as a part of cultural heritage provides a sense of identity and continuity of culture and possible to convey the richness of history for the future. This *Peranakan* house is just a tool to better understand the cultural heritage values that Indonesia has in general and Lasem in particular through different perspectives. The *Peranakan* house in Lasem is not only a shelter, a visual or a tangible object, but also explore and experience the senses mediate not only information, but also a means of articulating sensory thought. This study aims to show that *Peranakan* houses in Lasem are a legacy of Lasem which genuinely needs to be preserved in both material and non-material values. The values that were found adapted elsewhere made the cultural heritage stronger.

In general, the *Peranakan* residences are private. It can be seen physically through the high walls surrounding the housing complex, also the use of the “two layers” door at the main gateway. Both included the identity of the *Peranakan* community house related to their origins. But, in the findings, a zone changes from the private to the public which is related to the economic aspects. In this case, is the *batik* business. The strength of family tradition and the monetary situation make the building partly commercialised. However, besides that there are also the historical and cultural



powers of Lasem which create a lot of curiosity among researchers or even tourists who become heritage or cultural enthusiasts that cause this house to be opened as a place to conduct interviews, data collection observe the *batik* process.

According to the UNESCO, the architecture of the *Peranakan* houses in Lasem should belong under the category group of heritage. Based on that statement and through this research, there is a suggestion for the government to give more attention and provide property protection. The *Peranakan* house in Lasem is a cultural heritage. It must be remembered, must be dynamic, used and shown, rather than being static and abandoned.

## 7. AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

Data can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

## 8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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