

Tangible Cultural Heritage Revitalization of Lasem as one of the Oldest China Towns in Java Island, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

As a small town with the nickname Little Chinese or “Petit Chinois” in Java Island of Indonesia, Lasem has undergone a transformation due to political transitions, changes in economic patterns, and modernization which have changed its identity in general. Chinese settlements that have existed since the 14-15th centuries have become historical evidence of the existence of Chinese communities who migrated to Southeast Asia, which initiated the birth of the “Peranakan” culture. In 2021, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing of the Republic of Indonesia revitalized the Lasem cultural heritage site with the aim of protecting historical values and infrastructure both related to Chinese culture and Islamic culture in Lasem. This paper reviews the cultural elements of Chinese culture that were lost in Lasem, and which are still intact, as well as reviews the positive and negative sides of the government's revitalization project implemented in the Little Chinese of Karangturi block and Islamic cultural heritage in the city square area. The result was that several physical cultural heritages had lost their authenticity due to revitalization that was not in accordance with the 2021 detailed engineering design (DED). However, marketing through social media has increased tourism activities through branding Little Tiongkok heritage and several festival celebrations in Lasem have attracted thousands of visitors.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Chinese community in Lasem (*Laosam* / Traditional Chinese: 啦森) is inseparable from the role of Admiral Cheng Ho, also known as Zheng He (Traditional Chinese: 鄭和), who lived during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) (Onghokam, 2017; Suryadinata, 2020; Wang, 2000). Zheng He later became renowned as a highly skilled navigator and simultaneously served as an ambassador who established diplomatic relations with kingdoms beyond China, which at that time still operated within imperial structures (Ming Dynasty) (Handinoto, 2015; Onghokam, 2017). His voyages extended to Japan, Southeast Asia, South Asia, West Asia, and the east coast of Africa between 1405 and 1433 (Sinn, 1998; Dreyer, 2006). Records of these journeys were widely documented in Southeast Asian royal archives as part of diplomatic exchanges with polities outside mainland China during the fifteenth century. At that time, Lasem functioned as one of the key ports within the Majapahit Kingdom (1293–1527) (Ma & Cartier, 2003).

Before anchoring in Lasem, Zheng He's fleet first landed at Regol quay, located approximately five kilometers east of the Lasem area (Onghokam, 2017; Pramono et al., 2020). Zheng He is widely believed to have been Muslim, as he originated from the Hui ethnic group, which is predominantly Muslim. In contrast, other members of the expedition, largely from the Han ethnic group, adhered to traditional belief systems such as Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (Liu & Van Dongen, 2013; Sinn, 1998; Liu, 2016). The majority of this group consisted of men who later settled in Lasem, married local Javanese women, and produced mixed descendants commonly referred to as *Peranakans* (McKeown, 1999).

The migration of Han Chinese into Lasem formed part of a broader diaspora originating from Southeast China, particularly the Guangdong and Fujian regions. These migrants played a crucial role in developing the maritime Silk Road, which connected trading centers in mainland China with major cities in Southeast Asia (Sinn, 1998; Wang, 2000; Suryadinata, 2020; Pramono et al., 2020). Today, Southeast Asia hosts the largest Chinese diaspora in the world,



estimated at more than 25 million people in 2010. Thailand ranks highest (approximately 7.5 million), followed by Malaysia (around 6 million), and Indonesia in third place with approximately 5 million people of Chinese descent (Suryadinata, [2020](#); Liu, [2008](#); Ma & Cartier, [2003](#); Liu, [2016](#)). Within Indonesia, this population is further divided into sub-ethnic groups based on dialect, occupational specialization, and cultural traditions, including Hokkien, To Chew, Hakka, and Cantonese. In Lasem, the Hokkien group constitutes the dominant sub-ethnic community (Pratiwo, [2010](#); Pramono et al., [2020](#)).

Lasem formed part of the Chinese Overseas community in Southeast Asia, commonly referred to as *Nanyang* during the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries (Liu, [2016](#); Pramono et al., [2020](#)). Over recent decades, however, the city has experienced a significant decline in its Chinese population due to migration to larger urban centers such as Jakarta, Bandung, Surakarta, and Surabaya (Malagina, [2023](#); Pratiwo, [2010](#); Negara & Suryadinata, [2018](#)). Many successful entrepreneurs and intellectuals originating from Lasem now reside elsewhere, as the city's relatively small population is considered less conducive to large-scale business development. Economic activities that persist locally are largely confined to middle-scale trading sectors, including electronics, logistics, building materials, and clothing. Meanwhile, one enduring medium-scale industry is the production of *batik*—a traditional wax-resist dyeing textile—supported by at least 48 artisans (Suryadinata, [2020](#); Pramono et al., [2020](#)).

Cultural acculturation in Lasem is evident through the interaction between Chinese migrants and the predominantly Javanese local population (Atabik, [2016](#); Kuhn, [2008](#); Malagina, [2023](#)). Since most migrants arriving in the fourteenth century were men who chose to settle permanently, intermarriage between Chinese men and Javanese women became common. In many cases, a ceremonial process marked the adoption of Chinese cultural elements within the family, including the use of Chinese names for women, often ending with the suffix “Nio,” meaning “mother.” These unions gave rise to the *Peranakan* community, a phenomenon also observed in other Southeast Asian regions such as Penang, Bandung, and Jakarta (Onghokam, [2017](#)). This pattern of acceptance was supported by positive social perceptions of Chinese men as hardworking, resilient, and responsible family heads. Both native Chinese and *Peranakan* communities were predominantly engaged in trade.

The earliest Chinese settlement in Lasem developed in the Soditan area, located east of the Babagan River, which flows northward into the Java Sea (Handinoto, [2015](#); Pramono et al., [2020](#); Martokusumo et al., [2024](#)). To the north, Soditan borders Dasun village, historically a shipbuilding center since the Majapahit era and continuing into the colonial period. This industry thrived due to the abundance of teak wood in the surrounding region. In the fourteenth century, a place of worship accommodating three belief systems—Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism—was constructed in Soditan, later known as the Cu an Kiong Temple. This temple is regarded as one of the oldest in Java and features a statue of Zheng He at its entrance (Pratiwo, [2010](#); Handinoto, [2015](#); Martokusumo et al., [2024](#)). Its architectural design reflects the *Minnan* (Hokkien) style from southeastern China, particularly Guangdong and Fujian, characterized by the distinctive *snowtail roof* (Traditional Chinese: 燕尾脊) on both ends. This style was also prominent during the Ming dynasty. The temple contains murals depicting scenes of life in ancient China and was constructed in stages with the assistance of craftsmen brought directly from China (Pratiwo, [2010](#); Pramono et al., [2020](#)). It served as both a religious and social center for Chinese residents in Lasem during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

By the eighteenth century, the northern settlement in Soditan had become densely populated, prompting expansion southward into Karangturi. This growth was further accelerated by migration from Batavia following the *Geger Pecinan* uprising in 1740, which led thousands of Chinese refugees to settle in Lasem. The construction of the Po An Bio Temple, oriented southward, marked the boundary between established settlements and newly developed areas. In 1930, the Dutch colonial government conducted its first census (*Volkstelling*), categorizing the population into four main groups: indigenous (*inlanders*), Europeans, Chinese, and other foreigners. In Lasem, the Chinese population numbered 4,101 individuals—1,871 men and 2,230 women—representing approximately 26.07% of the total population. This proportion was the highest in Central Java, surpassing Semarang, where the Chinese population accounted for 12.59% (*Volkstelling*, [1930](#)).

With their strong trading expertise, the Chinese community in Lasem—predominantly Hokkien—developed a leading economic sector in the form of Lasem *batik*, also known as *Batik Pesisiran*, during both pre-colonial and colonial periods (Pramono et al., [2020](#)). This product was marketed not only within the Indonesian archipelago but also internationally, including to the Netherlands, Malaysia, and Singapore (Handinoto, [2015](#); Malagina, [2023](#)). During the colonial era, Lasem, along with Juwana and Rembang, was also known as an opium trading center, where the commodity

was smuggled from China and distributed across Java. This economic activity contributed to the construction of warehouses, large residences, and buildings in the *Indische Empire* architectural style. One notable example is Lawang Ombo (Traditional Chinese: 大門) in Soditan. In addition, Lasem developed a shipbuilding industry that frequently fulfilled orders from the colonial government during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Over time, the Chinese settlement in Lasem has become a distinctive cultural attraction in Central Java, closely linked to its historical role as a trading and *batik* production center. There are approximately 250 houses exhibiting the Southern Chinese *Minnan/Hokkien* architectural style in Lasem (Pratiwo, 2010; Malagina, 2023; Handinoto, 2015; Taufan & Ghofar, 2023). Unlike Chinatowns in cities such as Semarang or Surakarta, Lasem's residential complexes are characterized by relatively larger land areas (Pratiwo, 2010). However, many building facades, particularly those along the main post road (*De Grootte Postweg*), now known as the Pantura highway, have undergone significant alterations due to road expansions carried out in 1970 and 1991 (Malagina, 2023; Pratiwo, 2010).

Revitalization initiatives undertaken by the government aim to restore historical sites and cultural assets that have deteriorated due to neglect or damage, thereby enhancing their functional and cultural value (Pramono et al., 2021). Similar efforts have been implemented in the Old Town area of Semarang. In Lasem, revitalization efforts focus on three primary sites: the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque complex, which includes the tomb of *Eyang Sambu* (and has initiated the development of the Nusantara Islamic Museum) in Kauman; the town square area, including the Lasem Creative Market; and the Chinese heritage zone in Gang 5 Karangturi and its surroundings. Compared to the overall extent of Lasem's Chinatown, these revitalization efforts cover only a limited area, despite the presence of numerous significant heritage assets requiring restoration and conservation (Taufan & Ghofar, 2023; Martokusumo et al., 2024; Aminullah et al., 2025). This study therefore seeks to map the distribution of key heritage sites in Lasem and to assess the extent to which current revitalization efforts align with the planned Detailed Engineering Design (DED) for the Chinese heritage area.

METHOD

In this study, a combination of literature review and survey methods is employed, supported by qualitative descriptive analysis within a mixed-method framework. Data are obtained through an integration of literature-based inquiry—including previous research and archival sources from the colonial period, such as the Digital Collections of Leiden University Libraries—and field-based interviews with key figures and visitors in the study area. These approaches complement one another, particularly in ensuring alignment between primary and secondary data. The analysis encompasses the historical background of significant sites, as well as both tangible and intangible cultural elements found in Lasem. In addition, questionnaires are distributed to evaluate the positive and negative impacts of revitalization in the Chinatown area specifically and Lasem more broadly. The questionnaire data are subsequently analyzed to assess the outcomes of revitalization from the perspective of users or visitors, including both local residents and non-local tourists.

A field survey was conducted to inventory Chinese-related buildings, including residential houses, places of worship, public facilities, commercial shops, restaurants, and office spaces. For analytical purposes, the Lasem area is divided into four quadrants, with the central reference point located in the Lasem Central Business District (CBD). Quadrant I encompasses the northeastern sector, Quadrant II the northwestern sector, Quadrant III the southwestern sector, and Quadrant IV the southeastern sector. This spatial division facilitates systematic observation and enables a clearer visualization of the distribution and density of heritage buildings, which tend to cluster within specific blocks, similar to other Chinatown areas in Java and across Southeast Asia.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Chinese Cultural Heritage Sites in Lasem

The concentration of Chinese heritage buildings in Lasem is distributed across at least six villages: Soditan, Karangturi, Dorokandang, Sumbergirang, Gedongmulyo, and Babagan. These structures include places of worship as well as numerous historic residences, such as Lawang Ombo (Wide Door), Rumah Merah (Red House), Rumah Oei (Oei House), Rumah Ijo (Green House), Museum Nyah Lasem, and many others. Soditan Village, located on the eastern side of the Babagan River—also known as the Lasem River—constituted the earliest center of Chinese settlement during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Handinoto, 2015; Pratiwo, 2010). Within this village stands the Cu An Kiong Temple

(Traditional Chinese: 慈安宮), constructed between the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and widely regarded as one of the oldest temples in Java, oriented westward toward the Babagan/Lasem River (Pramono et al., [2020](#)).

In general, the development of Chinese cultural heritage in Lasem occurred in phases closely linked to the historical evolution of Chinese settlement patterns, although both internal and external influences have contributed to the emergence of distinctive spatial configurations. Early settlement formation was closely associated with the construction of temples, which symbolically expressed gratitude and hope in a new environment. When Chinese migrants arrived in Lasem, local Javanese communities had already settled around the town square, or *alun-alun*, with a strong Islamic identity. Between 1588 and 1811, colonial regulations introduced by the Dutch administration led to significant transformations, including the relocation of the regent's office to Rembang and the reconfiguration of the urban core into a Chinatown adjacent to the Kauman complex (Taufan & Ghofar, [2023](#)). By 1841, the implementation of the *Wijkenstelsel* policy—an ethnic-based residential zoning system—designated Gedongmulyo as a new Chinese settlement area in Lasem (Malagina, [2023](#); Pratiwo, [2010](#); Martokusumo et al., [2024](#)).

The architectural characteristics of Chinese settlements in Lasem are identifiable through the front façades of buildings, which are typically enclosed by high walls and accessed through a main wooden gate consisting of two inward-opening doors (Pratiwo, [2010](#)). These gates are usually protected by tiled roofs and adorned with carvings in the form of *Hanzi* (Traditional Chinese characters) arranged vertically from top to bottom (Knapp, [1989](#); Knapp & Ong, [2010](#); Pratiwo, [2010](#)). Upon entering, one typically encounters a spacious front courtyard with a terracotta terrace. The main building features an entrance leading to an altar for prayer, positioned opposite the family or living room. On either side of the altar are primary rooms equipped with large windows for ventilation. Residential structures in Lasem were constructed using either teak wood or masonry walls (Pratiwo, [2010](#)). These architectural features closely resemble those found in other coastal and inland Chinese settlements across Java, including Rembang, Juwana, Semarang, and Parakan (Pratiwo, [2010](#)).

Prior to the widening of the postal highway connecting Semarang and Surabaya—which passes through Lasem and was expanded in 1970 and 1991 (Pratiwo, [2010](#); Taufan & Ghofar, [2023](#))—each alleyway was once marked by a gate featuring Minnan or southern Chinese architectural roof forms. These structures have largely disappeared, leaving only a single surviving gate located in the batik artisan area of Karangturi Heritage Village, bearing the inscription *anno 1800*.



Figure 1. Cu An Kiong Temple (Traditional Chinese: 慈安宮) with Minnan/Hoklo/Hokkien architectural style (Traditional Chinese: 閩南建築)

Source: Author's Documentation

In accordance with Law No. 11 of 2010 concerning Cultural Heritage, the historical development of Chinese settlements in Lasem—intertwined with the spread of Islam in Central Java—has established the city as an area with a significant concentration of cultural heritage assets and an important role in preservation efforts. An inventory has identified at least 253 buildings categorized as *Objek Diduga Cagar Budaya* (ODCB), or “Suspected Cultural Heritage Objects,” covering approximately 153 hectares within the old town area of Lasem. Several of these structures have been

Historical cartographic evidence from the Dutch East Indies period (1887), as shown in Figure 2, indicates that Lasem was connected through overland routes, including postal roads (*post weg*) and railway lines operated by SJS (*Samarang–Joana Stoomtram Maatschappij, N.V.*), a private railway company serving the northern coast of Central Java between 1879 and 1959. Lasem also possessed a small railway station that played a strategic role in transporting commodities such as batik to Semarang before further distribution across the Dutch East Indies or to international markets.

In this study, Lasem is analytically divided into four quadrants (Figure 3) based on the spatial distribution of Chinese heritage buildings, with the central reference point located at the Lasem Central Business District (CBD). Quadrant I encompasses the northeastern area, including the eastern part of Soditan Village. Quadrant II covers the northwestern area, incorporating the western part of Soditan and Gedongmulyo. Quadrant III represents the southwestern region, including Karangturi, Babagan, and Dorokandang. Quadrant IV corresponds to the southeastern area, including Sumbergirang Village. The spatial concentration of Chinese settlements is generally associated with the core of economic activity, particularly along the main arterial route (*De Grootte Postweg*) extending westward from the CBD, as well as Jatirogo Road, which leads southward. Archival data further indicate that Lasem experienced an influx of Chinese migrants from Batavia following the *Geger Pecinan* (Dutch: *Chinezenmoord*) uprising that occurred between 1741 and 1743.

This quadrant-based division facilitates a more systematic analysis of the distribution patterns of heritage buildings, as well as the identification of priority zones for revitalization, particularly those associated with Chinese and Islamic Javanese cultural heritage (Hagras, 2019; Roosmalen, 2013; Martokusumo et al., 2024). In general, the majority of Chinese heritage buildings are concentrated in Quadrants II, III, and IV. Quadrant II, which includes the western section of Soditan Village, represents the historical core of Chinese settlement development since the fourteenth century. This area was predominantly inhabited by upper economic groups, as reflected in the scale of residential structures and the imposing main gates adorned with *Traditional Chinese calligraphy*. The presence of such gates is deeply rooted in Chinese philosophical symbolism, often signifying the social status or economic standing of the occupants.

Survey findings from the 2019–2024 period indicate notable changes in property ownership patterns among residential buildings. Some structures have been well maintained through renovation and revitalization, while others remain abandoned and continue to deteriorate due to lack of occupancy. These conditions are often complicated by inherited ownership arrangements, which in some cases lead to disputes among heirs. A number of heritage buildings have been repurposed into functional spaces such as museums, restaurants, batik production centers, boutiques, cafés, hotels, schools, orphanages, and logistics-related businesses. Buildings located along major thoroughfares—particularly *Jalan Raya Pos* (Dutch: *Post Weg* / English: Post Road) and Jatirogo Street—typically function as commercial storefronts, while residential quarters are situated behind the commercial façade. Table 1 below presents several primary heritage sites in Lasem that meet the criteria of “cultural heritage” as defined under Law No. 11 of 2010.

Table 1. Several Heritage Sites under the Act No. 11 of 2010 in Lasem and their current status

No.	Name of Heritage Sites	Description	Village Division Location	Status
1.	Gie Yong Bio (<i>Erected in 1780</i>)	The youngest Chinese Temple in Babagan Lasem and has a special display of the Javanese figure of Raden Mas Panji Margono. The building functions as a Tridharma (<i>Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism</i>) community.	Babagan	Fairly well-maintained with few adherents. During Chinese New Year, some visitors (<i>mostly Chinese-Indonesian “Chindo”</i>) from various cities of Java came to worship. Revitalization in 2021 was not attempted in this temple.
2.	Cu An Kiong (<i>Traditional Chinese: 燕尾脊</i>) (<i>Erected in 1335</i>)	The biggest Chinese temple in Soditan and the entire Lasem, and also considered to be one of the oldest Chinese temples in Indonesia from the 14-15 th century. In front of the building, there are two Zheng He statues at the main gate that connect the foyer, which has Chinese murals on its right and left	Soditan	Well-preserved and has the highest number of visitors compared to the other temples in Lasem. On the special day of Chinese New Year, several activities are held in the area and attract many visitors. However, the number of local adherents dropped due to the high number of religious conversions (<i>mostly the Chinese community in Lasem are Catholic and Protestant followers at present</i>).

No.	Name of Heritage Sites	Description	Village Division Location	Status
		wall wings. Cu An Kiong possesses a typical southern Chinese style roof with a swallow tail edge roof.		Revitalization in 2021 was not attempted in this temple.
3.	Poo An Bio (<i>Chinese Traditional: 保安廟</i>) (Erected in 1740)	It is located in Southern Karangturi, at the edge of the Chinese settlement of Lasem next to the Vihara Maha Karuna. In front of the temple is a huge yard to hold annual Chinese festivities.	Karangturi	The building is in pristine condition and in good maintenance, however, compared to the two others. Po An Bio is considered to be the least visited temple.
4.	Lawang Ombo (<i>Wide Door/ Traditional Chinese: 大門</i>) (Erected in 1825)	A residential house in Soditan village of Lasem and considered as one of the oldest buildings in Lasem. The building is also well known as the Candu/ Opium House, a commodity that had been imported during the Dutch colonization in East Indische from mainland China. Due to its illegal item status, Opium was transported to several cities on the northern coast of Java, such as Rembang, Semarang and Juwana through the black market and directed to lower-class target markets. Lawang Ombo was previously owned by the Lim Cui Bun family.	Soditan	Lawang ombo still has its original condition without any renovation due to its status as a privately owned asset. Visitors can only enter after making an appointment with the guard of Mr. Gandor. Revitalization in 2021 was not attempted in this house and its surroundings.
5.	Rumah Merah Heritage (Erected in 1820 for the <i>Indische empire style architecture house, next to the building had older southern chinese style house</i>)	Rumah Merah heritage provides several functions as a batik shop, café and restaurant, hostels, museum and residential. The house represents a typical southern Chinese residential house of Fujian/ Guangdong and in the middle between the café and museum was a display building (<i>in which adopted Indische Empire architecture</i>).	Karangturi	Privately owned by Mr Rudy Hartono, Rumah Merah heritage has the most activities due to multiple purpose areas. The condition of the buildings is good with the red painting on the outside walls. Revitalization in 2021 only affects the primary alley in front of the site, including pedestrians, street with stone material, chairs, and decorative lamps.
6.	Jami' Baiturrahman Lasem Mosque (Erected in 1568)	Jami Mosque of Lasem plays as a center of Islamic religion activities in Lasem, and received an acculturation between Javanese and Chinese influence, especially in the roof style of the building. Located in the kampoong of "Kauman", Jami' was believed to be the oldest local Javanese community area next to a Chinese community complex in the south and west of the area.	Karangturi	Very well maintained, aside from praying activities, next to the main building there is a museum that collects some historic collections. In 2021, aside from the revitalization process, a new museum named Nusantara Islamic Museum was erected to store Islamic historical collections from the previous site near the mosque. One of the most well-known of those were old Quran manuscripts and the mosque top ornament from terracotta.
7.	Rumah Oei Heritage (Traditional Chinese: 黃)	Located in the commercial complex of Karangturi Jatirogo Street, Rumah Oei Heritage has been dedicated to four functions, namely shops, restaurant, family museum, and hostel. The building is well-preserved and has many photographs that are displayed throughout the rooms.	Karangturi	Privately owned by the Oei Family's seventh generation. Revitalization in 2021 affected the front walkway of Jatirogo street.
8.	Nyah Lasem Museum (Erected in 1850)	Nyah Lasem museum disseminated to Batik Lasem's trade history, equipped with samples of both original and copied documents from sellers and batik buyers from across Southeast Asia.	Karangturi	Privately owned by the Soesantio Family. Compared to some heritage sites in Lasem, this museum vastly developed through historical research activities that took place in that area. Revitalization in 2021 did not take place around the area,

No.	Name of Heritage Sites	Description	Village Division Location	Status
		Opened to the public in 2016, Nyah Lasem is an old Chinese building using a teak wood structure and an Indische building next to the museum.		even though the street in front of the museum needed a major betterment.
9.	Rumah Opa Gwan (Erected in 19 th century)	Owned by Lo Geng Gwan as the latest Lo family. Opa Gwan is considered as the oldest generation of Lasem. In 2023, he passed away and made this house empty. The house was formerly used as a family-based batik making factory in Lasem in the 20 th century.	Karangturi	The front gate of the house received a revitalization impact in 2021. However, many historians question the originality of the structure due to massive change, and it looks unauthentic or artificial.
10.	Museum Tegel Lie Thiam Kwie (Leipziger Comment Tegelfabriek/ LZ) (Erected in 1910)	Located on the side of Lasem’s main street between Surabaya and Semarang, Lie Thiam Kwie was previously the one and only tiles industry in Lasem. The name LZ derives from Leipziger from Leipzig, a city in Germany where the tile machine maker comes from.	Karangturi	Privately owned and in a mild condition. Visitors can only make visitation through an appointment with the house representative.

Source: Compiled by writers from various documents and field survey

Revitalization efforts in Lasem primarily focus on road rehabilitation, the provision of supporting facilities, improvements to public infrastructure, and the aesthetic enhancement of key areas. At least three principal focal points can be identified. The first involves the revitalization of Islamic cultural heritage within the Lasem Grand Mosque complex, which includes the tomb of *Eyang Sambu*—a site dating back to the Majapahit period—as well as the Grand Mosque itself (Taufan & Ghofar, 2023; Aminullah et al., 2025). The second focuses on the revitalization of the Little China Heritage area, particularly the Karangturi block or village located south of the mosque complex. Interventions in this area include upgrading road infrastructure by replacing asphalt surfaces with natural stone paving, installing street lighting, improving drainage systems, and providing seating facilities for visitors. Restoration efforts have also been undertaken on selected heritage structures, although some buildings are no longer considered suitable for full restoration. The third focal point concerns complementary heritage elements surrounding the Lasem town square, which was formerly used as a traditional market and has since been transformed into an open public space, accompanied by the development of a modern market intended to promote batik-based cultural tourism in Lasem.



Figure 3. Lasem divided into four quadrants representing the spatial density of Chinese heritage buildings; the city contains at least 200 buildings exhibiting southeastern Chinese architectural styles.

Source: Author’s Documentation

Field correspondence with visitors in 2024 indicates that visitors can generally be categorized into local and out-of-town tourists. Visitors from outside the region are typically drawn by Lasem's historical significance and distinctive cultural character, which motivates their decision to visit (Pasaribu, 2022; Martokusumo et al., 2024). During holiday periods, for instance, more than one hundred visitors have been recorded visiting Rumah Merah Heritage to experience batik-making processes and purchase hand-drawn batik from official outlets. Visits may be arranged individually or through organized travel groups, often coordinated by travel agencies that facilitate exploration of various heritage sites in Lasem and its surrounding areas. Some visitors also have ancestral ties to Lasem but now reside in other cities, returning to reconstruct personal and collective memories of a small town with a dense and historically rich Chinese cultural presence. The revitalization initiatives undertaken in 2021 have indirectly contributed to branding Lasem as a heritage destination worthy of visitation, especially considering the relative scarcity of major tourist attractions along the northern coastal region of Rembang Regency.

As a small town with a layered historical legacy shaped by Javanese, Chinese, and Dutch cultural interactions, Lasem faces structural challenges, particularly due to outward migration. This phenomenon reflects the current reality in which many southeastern Chinese-style houses have been abandoned as their owners relocate to larger cities such as Jakarta, Semarang, or Surabaya in pursuit of broader economic opportunities. The decreasing strategic importance of Lasem has further accelerated this trend. At present, one of the primary factors sustaining the town's vitality is the batik industry, which continues to be revitalized and promoted by cultural practitioners, local entrepreneurs, and academics, thereby preserving Lasem's cultural identity.

From a cultural perspective, tangible elements in Lasem primarily consist of public-use buildings such as Chinese temples or monasteries, as well as residential structures. Meanwhile, intangible cultural elements—including language, culinary traditions, and belief systems—have undergone processes of acculturation and assimilation with local contexts. Only a small segment of the older generation remains capable of communicating in southeastern Chinese dialects, particularly Hokkien, while younger generations generally lack proficiency in both verbal and non-verbal forms of the language. This decline is partly attributable to historical restrictions on Chinese cultural expression in Indonesia during the 1950s and 1960s, notably through policies enacted by the *Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat Sementara* (MPRS), including Decree No. XXXII/MPRS/1966 during the Guided Democracy era. These regulations included limitations on Chinese-language publications, which indirectly contributed to the decline of active speakers in Indonesia.

In Lasem, many traditional Chinese houses originally featured Chinese calligraphy on their main exterior doors, which were later concealed or painted over during periods of cultural restriction, until these limitations were lifted under President Abdurrahman Wahid through Presidential Instruction No. 6 of 2000, which abolished discriminatory policies against Chinese culture. Earlier, Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 had imposed restrictions on Chinese religious practices, beliefs, and customs during the New Order period under President Soeharto. These policies contributed to a wave of religious conversion among adherents of traditional Chinese belief systems—many of which were not officially recognized—toward Protestantism and Catholicism. As a result, the number of adherents to *Tridharma* beliefs declined significantly, leading to reduced activity and attendance in temples, including those in Lasem.

Revitalization efforts have also extended to intangible cultural dimensions, particularly through improvements in urban infrastructure. These include pedestrian pathway enhancements along the northern section of the *Post Road* in Lasem (542 meters), *Jalan Gang 4 Karangturi* (309 meters), sections of *Jatirogo Road* (273 meters), and *Karangturi Road* (309 meters). Building revitalization has been limited to selected sites, including the *Jami Mosque*, the *Nusantara Islamic Museum*, the *Lasem Creative Market*, and the market area within the town square (Aminullah et al., 2025). The revitalization process is guided by a *Detailed Engineering Design* (DED) document, which plays a critical role by outlining technical drawings, specifications, structural calculations, budget planning, and implementation strategies.

Despite these efforts, the revitalization process in Lasem has attracted criticism from local communities, particularly regarding technical specifications and implementation methods. Concerns have emerged due to limited public participation in the planning and execution stages of the project. Residents have expressed dissatisfaction with certain outcomes, such as the construction of sidewalks along *Jalan Jatirogo*, which has reportedly reduced accessibility for shop owners and residents compared to pre-revitalization conditions. Another concern involves the loss of historical memory, particularly the disappearance of an ancient water channel along *Gang 4 Karangturi*—considered a potential cultural heritage feature—which was replaced by a new road during the revitalization process.

CONCLUSION

The revitalization of the Chinatown area in Lasem is broadly oriented toward reactivating and strengthening elements of cultural preservation. This effort is implemented through improvements to primary and supporting physical facilities (*tangible cultural heritage*), alongside initiatives that support the continuity of *intangible cultural heritage*. The long trajectory of cultural acculturation in Lasem—beginning in the fifteenth century, followed by Dutch colonial rule, and continuing through post-independence Indonesia across the Old Order, New Order, and Reformasi periods—has profoundly shaped both the present physical landscape of the city and the social fabric of its inhabitants.

The dominance of revitalization efforts, particularly those focused on the tangible heritage of physical structures, is most evident in Quadrant III, which includes the villages of Karangturi and Babagan. Interventions in this area include the upgrading of supporting infrastructure, such as the replacement of asphalt roads with natural stone paving, the installation of lighting facilities, the addition of seating along the main street surrounding Rumah Merah (Red House), the repair of drainage systems, and the restoration of selected building façades—particularly Opa House—located along Gang 4 in Karangturi Village. In addition, large-scale improvements have been undertaken along the Pantura corridor, extending from Babagan Bridge to Lasem Square, including pedestrian enhancements, the renovation of Jatirogo Road, and the transformation of the traditional Lasem market into a more integrated and modern marketplace.

Despite these developments, the revitalization of the Little China Heritage area in Lasem has not been universally perceived as positive. Concerns have emerged regarding both the effectiveness of community outreach and the tendency of certain interventions to prioritize aesthetic enhancement or “beautification,” particularly in the installation of decorative lighting in the Gang 4 area. Alterations to several building façades and boundary walls in Karangturi’s Gang 4 have been criticized for creating an artificial appearance and diminishing the authenticity of the historic environment. The process of upgrading the main road and drainage systems in this area highlights the importance of meaningful coordination and communication with local residents to ensure that historically significant features—such as the traditional water channels—are preserved in accordance with the *Detailed Engineering Design* (DED) for the Lasem Heritage revitalization project. Notably, the historic water channel in Karangturi was in fact categorized as an *Objek Diduga Cagar Budaya* (ODCB), or suspected cultural heritage object, and held considerable historical value before being lost during the construction of new road infrastructure as part of the revitalization process.

Budgetary constraints and prioritization decisions have also limited the scope of revitalization, leaving many historically significant buildings and areas in Lasem—often in less well-maintained condition—unaddressed in the 2021 program. This situation bears resemblance to revitalization efforts in the Old City of Semarang, where many historically valuable properties remain privately owned. As a result, visitors to Lasem may predominantly associate the city with the “Little China Heritage” area and batik production, without fully encountering other historically important sites that also merit attention. Further research is therefore necessary to assess whether the long-term outcomes of revitalization efforts in Lasem tend toward positive or negative developments, particularly in relation to the ongoing challenges of cultural heritage preservation.

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