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The Narrative of Indonesian Cultural Heritage: Peranakan Houses in Pecinan Lasem, Indonesia

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ABSTRACTS

A narrative involves the process of telling all experiences related to culture and can form a new understanding of the object of research, so that a narrative affects the way people perceive historical buildings. The article focuses on narrating the historical building in Chinatown Peranakan houses in Chinatown, Lasem, intending to provide an overview of cultural acculturation, as well as the problems that occur in the Peranakan houses. This qualitative study is based on researcher's experiences and exploratory literature. Interview has been made and visual documentation has been taken during repeatedly observation start from December 2017 until December 2019. The discussion findings show that the Peranakan houses in Lasem have richness in cultural influence, such as Chinese, Javanese, and European, but unfortunately need serious attention from the owner, the surrounding community as well as the government. The houses are experienced being abandoned, destroyed, used on but suffer from over-decoration and are unfortunate in the event of exploitation. Thus the implementation of preservation and conservation properly should be carried out to avoid the shortage or even loss the identity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The narration will start to introduce Lasem (Figure 1). Nowadays, Lasem is a small area in the administrative district of Rembang Regency, Central Java, Indonesia. Although it is a small area, Lasem has historically been an important area (Darmayanti et al., 2020: 2-3). Old sources record of Lasem, the Nagarakertagama book mentioned that Lasem was known during the reign of Hayam Wuruk of the Majapahit Kingdom, and the Babad Lasem text also states that since that time, Lasem has been a busy port city (Djafar, 1978; Nastiti et al., 1988). Its glory continued when the Dutch controlled Indonesia in the 19th century, Lasem still had the charisma as a port city and was once a trading center of Opium which was legally traded at that time. Pigeaud stated in 1983, that Lasem was undoubtedly a trading city, with the Indo-Chinese bourgeoisie and became one of the most Chinese cities in Java. This place also known as the largest place for immigrants from China in Java even before Admiral Cheng Ho arrived (Suroyo, 1994; Handinoto, 2015). Lasem was known as home to Chinese immigrants when Admiral Cheng Ho from the China Ming dynasty came to Java, including Lasem. The immigrants married local women and their children called Peranakan. They have absorbed and integrated with the locals, this caused the strong influence of the Chinese culture into the Javanese local

culture, and vice versa. Thus, Lasem is a melting pot between the Local Javanese and Chinese, and the Peranakan houses is the evidence of acculturation between the Chinese and the Javanese (Basiroen, 2016 & 2020). The relationship between Chinese and local Javanese in Lasem is a social structure that requires each other and most of relationship occurs in Peranakan houses area in daily life (Jayusman et al., 2019). The statements is proven when the author went to Lasem and saw a good relationship between them occurred in various activities, especially in the making of batik tulis Lasem.

Actually, there is still no exact time regarding who the very first arrival of Chinese people to Lasem. Because, have been found the old Chinese coin, we called Koin Kepeng in September 2018 which were predicted from Song Dynasty (960-1127), Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368) and Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). In fact, this historic discovery is not the first time. Agni Malagina (2018), the Chinese philologist from Universitas Indonesia writes in National Geographic Indonesia stated that one of the oldest coins was found the Wu Zhu coin, found in Kaliori Village, Rembang (20 minutes from Lasem). The coin was allegedly produced in 118 BC to 618 AD. Due to that, the history is keep changing and keep up date. At the end of 1700 & early 1800. Lasem was the third place with the biggest Chinese community after Batavia & Cirebon in West Java (KITLV, Leiden).

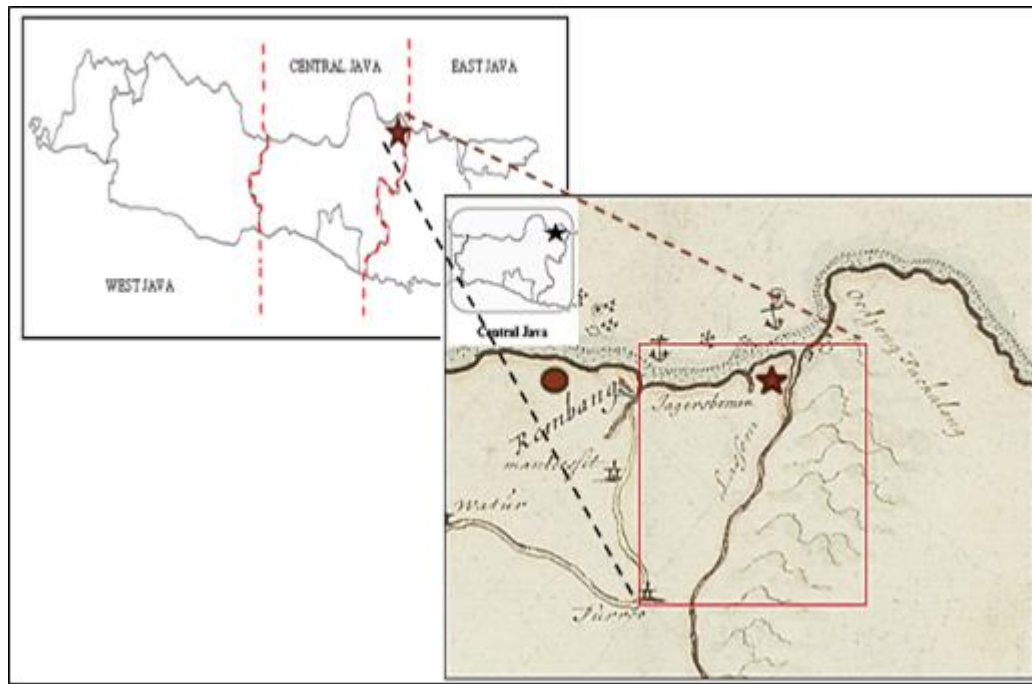


Fig. 1. The Gate of Peranakan Houses, Pecinan, Lasem above: Soditan, middle: Karangturi and below: Babagan (Modification from KITLV Leiden Archive, 2018).

Based on an extraordinary historical background, Lasem is part of historical and cultural heritage, one of which is the embodiment of Peranakan houses which are generally spread across three Chinatown villages (Pecinan). Refer to Tjiok (2017: 559), the embodiment of Peranakan houses comes from the existence of Chinese traders and migrants. From the 17th century, they were an important part to the Dutch East India Company that known as VOC.

The origin of Pecinan establishment based on two factors namely political and social. Political factor originated

during the Dutch colonial era in which the *wijkenstelsel* rules in 1836 - 1917. While social factor, Pecinan functioned as the centre for economic and trade activities. There are three areas in Lasem which fall into the ancient category, namely Soditan which was formed around the 1479s, while Karangturi in the 1740s and Babagan around the 1800s (Darmayanti, 2017 & Darmayanti et al., 2020). Figure 2 shows the Pecinan iconic features known as the gates which become an important part of Peranakan houses. The gates parade along the street, become the most visible identity of Lasem.



Fig. 2. The Gate of Peranakan Houses, Pecinan, Lasem above: Soditan, middle: Karangturi and bellow: Babagan (Author Documentation, 2017-2019)

There are two construction methods which are generally applied to Peranakan house in Pecinan, Lasem. First, build walls around the complex, build buildings inside the walls and closed by the gates. Then, the second way was built a wall around the complex, the gate and built a building inside the walls. The main building was built in the middle of the complex then surrounded by other buildings. Between these buildings will be formed front yard and backyards (Nas, 2002).

Besides the explanation above, according to Pratiwo's research in 1990, Peranakan houses in Lasem can also characterised by the type of roof which is a combination of Chinese and Javanese culture (Figure 3). The acculturation process is also expressed through the house zoning. In figure 4, shows that Chinese houses comprise several buildings. In Lasem, the main building in

Peranakan house (M - middle) has the same layout principle with Javanese traditional houses, but the building mass patterns still adhere to the Chinese architecture in China. The F in figure 4 represent Front zone and R is represent Rear area which is possible to have a different variation each houses. The statement is inline with (Purwanto et al., 2017), stated about the layout of the space, the Peranakan house Lasem (main building) has similarities with traditional Javanese houses, starting from a symmetrical floor plan, having a large front terrace called serambi, there are four bedrooms in the same position (left and right sides), there is space important place in the center of the front of the house known as prayer hall that consist of altar in the Peranakan house and called Omah Jero in the Javanese house, the family room behind the altar area, followed by the rear terrace.

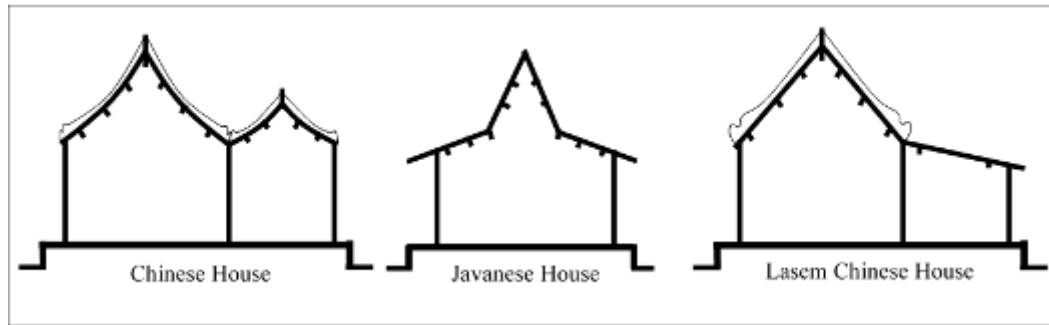


Fig. 3. The Roof Type of Peranakan Houses in Lasem (Modified from Pratiwo, 1990)

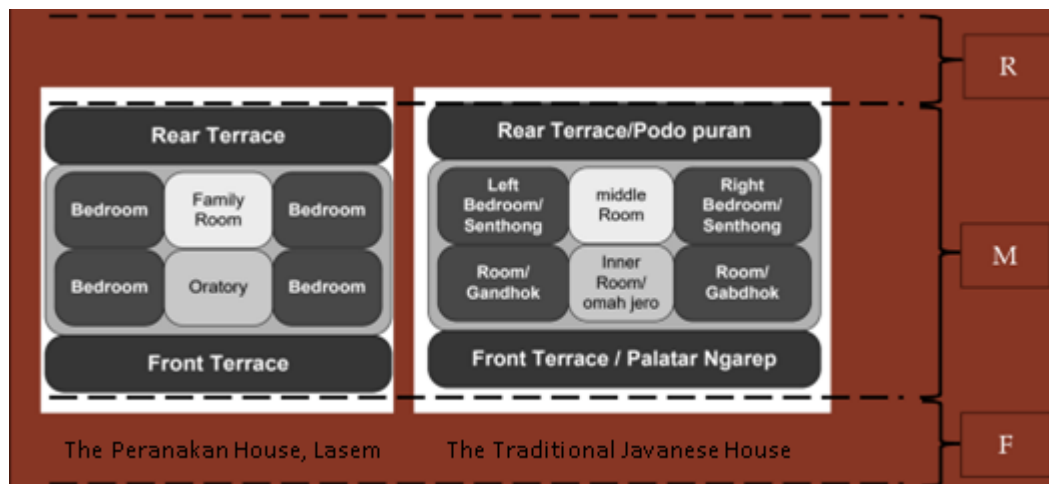


Fig. 4. The Similarity Layout Principle - Lasem Peranakan Houses and Javanese Traditional Houses. (Modified from Purwanto et al, 2017)

Why is this research important? This is due to the preservation phenomena in Lasem, which has changes in the function of Peranakan houses. However, within Darmayanti's research in the year of 2020, there is a "misunderstanding" in making these changes by not taking into account the cultural-historical values that are in it, so that even though physically it looks "cool" it is not attractive because it has lost its soul. The change is from (a) residential to (b) non-residential and commercial facility, or a combination of both (a and b). These commercial and non-residential facilities include batik shops, guesthouse, restaurants, museums, factories, warehouses or batik workshops. Through this article, the author wants to

provide the narrative of some of the Peranakan houses in Pecinan, Lasem, that can lead to understanding and appreciating the value of the historical buildings.

Research questions have been formulated to open up contextual perspectives and general background information (especially in cultural influences) in seeing Peranakan houses in Lasem - what cultural influence within Peranakan houses in Pecinan, Lasem? and what kind of changes in the Peranakan houses in Pecinan, Lasem?. Those questions will be answered through qualitative study with narratives approach which described in the next section.

2. METHODS

This qualitative paper is supported by research data with studies, then conducting field observations in Pecinan, Lasem and personal experiences by author in September and November 2017, in July 2018, July and December 2019. The author is the main instrument with the task of paying attention to research processes and products (Bogdan et al., 1992). While, the narrative used as a research strategy to telling the experience. (Bahauddin., 2017) stated about the purposes of narrative within Darmayanti's research in 2020, entitled - Pengaruh perubahan sirkulasi terhadap fungsi ruang di rumah Peranakan, Kampung Babagan, Lasem, that narrative involves the process of telling all experiences related to culture and can form a new understanding of the object of research.

For each Pecinan, several Peranakan houses were selected based on local

community recommendations. Soditan Village is represented by a house known as Rumah Candu or Lawang Ombo (KS-A).

Meanwhile, Karangturi Village is represented by a Peranakan house belonging to Lokhing Gwan (KK-A) which is more than 95 years old, and a Peranakan-Indische house (KK-B) with an owner named Hedi. The Babagan village, represented by Junaedi's Peranakan house (KB-A) (figure 5). Also, to answer the second research question, it will be supported by the issues in Pecinan that closely related to Peranakan houses. The houses are Peranakan house known as Rumah Kapitan from Soditan Village, Rumah Merah, and Rumah Kuning from Karangturi Village, while from Babagan Village is a Peranakan-Indische house style with Corobong-Semu (Figure 6).



Fig. 5. The Peranakan Houses in Three Pecinan, Lasem



Fig. 6. The Changes in Peranakan Houses in Three Pecinan, Lasem

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presented the discussion and the finding of the research questions that related to the cultural aspect of Peranakan houses in Pecinan, Lasem.

3.1 Cultural Influence within Peranakan Houses in Pecinan, Lasem

Lawang Ombo is wrapped with the opium history that happened in Lasem. According to [Rush \(1990\)](#), in 1860,

around 60 % of opium in Java was illegal, including in Lasem. This house became of the houses that were the place to store opium. During the field research, the author saw a hole in one of the room floors that connected to the Lasem river which is very likely to be used to smuggle opium. Based on that story, the house called Rumah Candu (opium house). Nowadays, this house brings back the spirit of old Lasem.

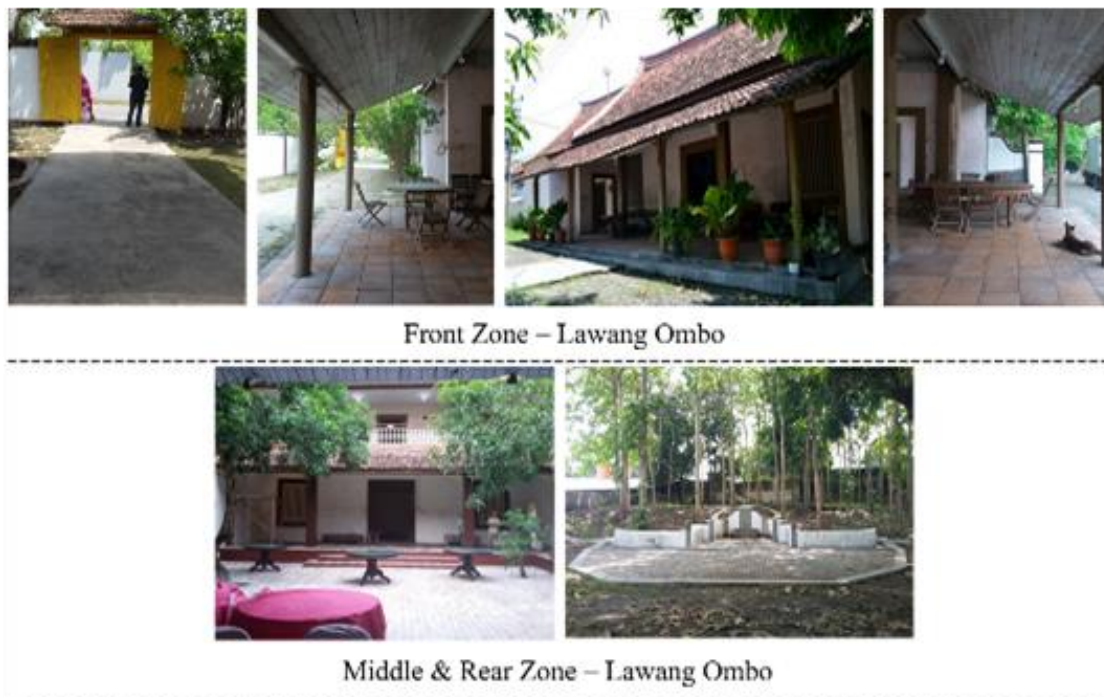


Fig. 7. The Peranakan Houses (KS-A) - Lawang Ombo, Babagan, Lasem

Besides the design of the house is included to “original type” of the Peranakan house in Lasem that dominated by Chinese culture (the roof shape -with the aesthetic element of swallow tail (ekor wallet) shapes on each right and left on the top of the house roof; gate; front terrace; main building prayer hall with an altar that still actively use; courtyard and rear building; and Chinese cemetery) (Figure 7).

Nowadays, this house also uses for gathering or celebration that relate to Lasem and Chinese cultures, such as the Cap Go Meh celebration or the opening of the Lasem Cultural Festival. These

activities brings “a life” to the community of Lasem and all house components deliver their own stories which creates a unique atmosphere.

European cultural influences that visible start from outside and inside the house. The use of triangle-shape in the house façade in which part of the house roof is similar to the embodiment of pediment in European classical architecture. The European influence also appears in the pillars in front terrace with Doric style in the column’s capital.



Fig. 8. The Peranakan Houses (KK-A), Karangturi, Lasem

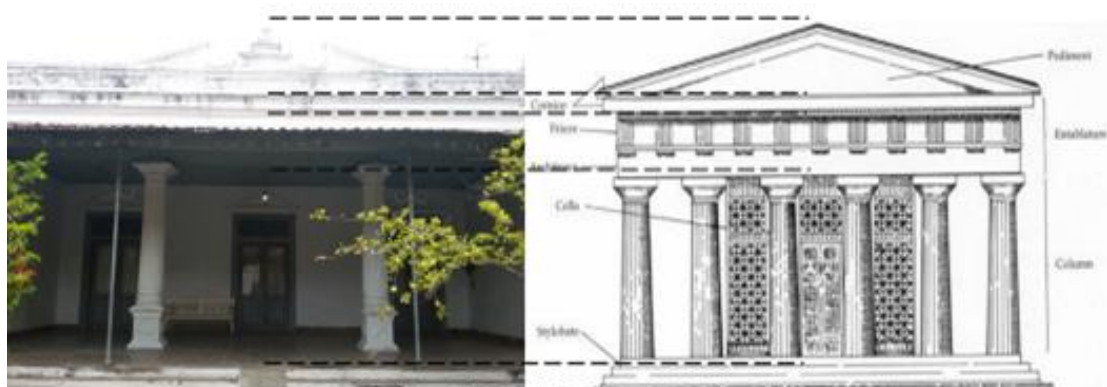


Fig. 9. The European Influences in Peranakan Houses (KK-A), Karangturi, Lasem



Fig. 10. The Peranakan Houses (KK-B), Karangturi, Lasem

The Peranakan house KK-B owned by Lokhing Gwan in Karangturi Village looks simple and modest than KK-A, even though the two houses are in the same area. This condition is due to differences in cultural influences on house building. The house KK-B predicted to have existed before the Dutch colonial influenced through culture.

The design of the main gate has a basic form with no classical pillar and any other European style influences. The façade and the embodiment of the front terrace represent Chinese-Javanese style influence, such as the use of teak wood in the building wall and ceiling that covered in soft green paint (Figure 10). The statement supported by (Rachmayanti et al. 2017). and

(Sudarwani et al. 2018) divide the Peranakan house in Lasem into two categories namely houses with authentic Chinese-Javanese influences and Chinese-Dutch Colonial style influences.

Figure 11 shows the basic characteristics of the Peranakan house which include Chinese cultural influence. This house has the attraction in the shape of the gate roof which resembles a swallow's tail.

This kind of design is usually found on the house roof. The design of front veranda has similarities with Lawang Ombo in Soditan Village, but with a wider version.



Fig. 11. The Peranakan House (KB-A), Babagan, Lasem

3.2. The Changes of the Peranakan houses in Pecinan, Lasem

From the observations shown the issues that happen in Pecinan, Lasem. Most of the Peranakan houses being abandoned by the heir or the owner that affects the condition of the houses. The houses look not well preserved, damaged, and even destroyed with ages (Figure 12).

The house appearance immediately identify which house belongs to a respected person. Hence, local people named the house Rumah Kapitan or Captain's House. Kapitan is a title given by the Dutch to the individuals who have influence in their community. Nonetheless, it was not a military title;

the selected person is responsible for managing the trade and streamlining the rules (Rush, 2012).

The Chinese culture is visible through the aesthetic elements at the dark brown wood gateway of Chinese calligraphy. Also, the top of the gateway is decorated with two boxes on the right and left side with pictures of legendary animals considered sacred, namely Qilin an animal with the appearance of half horse and half dragon, which symbolizes good fortune and virtue (figure 12-a). Objects with Qilin images often associated with a number of positive attributes, such as felicity, wise administration, honour, longevity and virility (Welch, 2008).

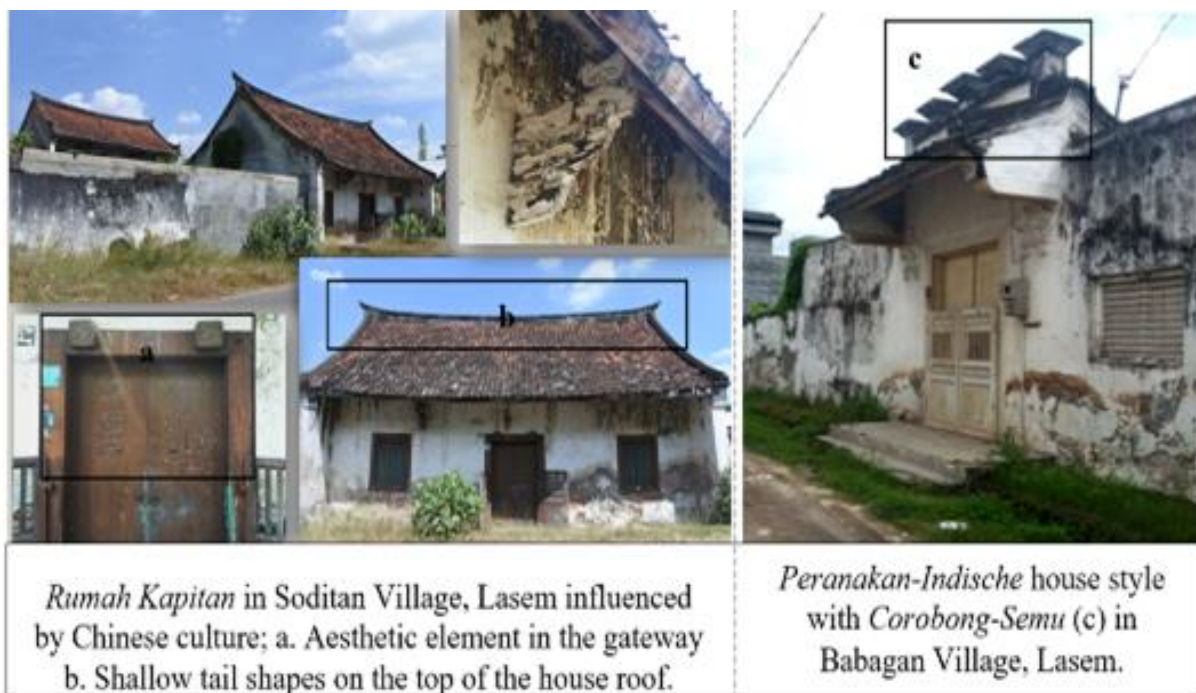


Fig. 12. The Issues in Pecinan, Lasem - Abandoned

This Peranakan house a representation of the Chinese and Dutch styles, which could be seen from the characteristic of the entrance elements. Unfortunately, at the beginning of 2019, this house included the gate that was gone but rebuilt the gate in December 2019 with a different design (figure 13). The dismantled house condition will affect the identity of the house, it is possible to reduce or even eliminate the character and identity of the house.

During its development, there are several ways for homeowners to care for the house and make it more actively used but unfortunately misunderstood the implementation. However, the Peranakan houses in Lasem is part of a cultural and historical heritage that has special rules to preserve it. Excessive decoration in Peranakan house can result in a loss of local identity and overuse the house will destroy the value contained therein.



Fig. 13. The Issues in Pecinan, Lasem – Dismantled



Fig. 14. The Issues in Pecinan, Lasem – Over Decoration & Exploitation

During its development, there are several ways for homeowners to care for the house and make it more actively used but unfortunately misunderstood the implementation. However, the Peranakan houses in Lasem is part of a

cultural and historical heritage that has special rules to preserve it. Excessive decoration in Peranakan house can result in a loss of local identity and overuse the house will destroy the value contained therein.

4. CONCLUSION

The acculturation was seen in the Peranakan house in Lasem. The fusion of Chinese culture not only involves local Javanese culture, but also European - Dutch culture. The Peranakan houses in Lasem divided by two categories namely houses with native Chinese influences and the Dutch colonial style. Even so, it cannot be denied, the circumstances of the times have resulted in several problems to occur involving the house. Therefore, these houses need to be preserved and conserved.

Based on the description above, it raises suggestions for both National and Local Government to give serious attention to the continuity of the Peranakan Lasem houses both from the physical aspects of the building and content - history and culture, as an effort to contribute to strengthening the various conservation efforts carried out by the owners or

residents of these houses. Preservation guidelines also need to be put in place so that local values both in terms of history, tradition, and culture remain so that their identity is maintained.

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