

PROCEEDING

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CHINESE DIASPORA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDIES

(Socio Cultural Research of the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia)

November, 25th - 27th 2022



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Editors:

Asst. Prof. Dr. Jirawat Vongphantuset

Dr. Krismanto Kusbiantoro, S.T., M.T., CIQaR

Dr. Pauw Budianto, S.T., M.Si., M.Lit.

Qianqian Luli, Ph.D.

Prof. Tsuda Koji, Ph.D.

Prof. Dr. Yang Xiaoqiang

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Chinese Mythology in Lasem Batik Motifs

Christopher Dhanika Suwandi*, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Indonesia

Avelina Garcia Paulus, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Indonesia

Violetta Patricia, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Indonesia

Ariesa Pandanwangi, Universitas Kristen Maranatha, Indonesia

* christopherdhanika@gmail.com

Abstract: Since 2009, Indonesian Batik has been recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage because batik has become increasingly famous on the international stage. Many foreigners come to Indonesia to see and enjoy the beauty of batik, one of which is Batik Lasem. The Lasem Batik motif is a blend of Chinese and Indonesian cultures. Batik Lasem comes from Lasem District, Rembang Regency, Central Java. In general, Batik Lasem consists of two motifs, Chinese and non-Chinese motifs. The purpose of writing this article is to reveal the meaning of the motifs contained in Lasem batik motif. Researchers used a qualitative descriptive method through data collection techniques with literature and documentation studies. The results of this study indicate that the koi fish motif has the meaning of longevity, and it is believed that fish can live for a long time, the butterfly motif has the meaning of teenage love and true love, the phoenix motif has the meaning of good nature and purity because in the legend there is the belief that this bird is ridden by the bride in Chinese culture. This motif is then acculturated with the local culture, so that it becomes a characteristic of the Batik Lasem motif.

Keywords: Acculturation; Batik Lasem; Indonesian culture; Chinese culture; fish motif; bird motif; butterfly motif.

BACKGROUND

Batik is one of Indonesia's cultural heritages which has been passed down from generation to generation. Batik is a painting art that uses mori cloth, canting, batik wax, and dyes as basic materials. Many people like this art because batik art depicts the beauty of nature and the outlook on life and the purpose of the works. To this day, there are still many batik enthusiasts from Indonesia and from abroad because they can enjoy the values of beauty, traditional customs, and religious values from batik (Rahayu & Alrianingrum, 2014).

Batik is one of the cultural assets inherited from the ancestors of Indonesia that developed from the Majapahit Empire. Since batik was recognized as a cultural heritage by UNESCO on October 2, 2009, the potential of batik has been explored in several fields, demonstrating the characteristics of each region and opening up new business opportunities in each region. The process of pioneering batik in Indonesia itself is quite long. The next stage was the UNESCO Closed Test which was held in Paris on 11-14 May 2009. The Malaysian delegation itself became a witness for 114 countries. Indonesian batik competes with patterned fabrics from Malaysia, Japan, China, India, Africa, Germany and the Netherlands, which authoritatively declare batik as one of the human heritages brought by Indonesia. (Putri, 2013, pp. 2–3)

Batik Lasem, is a type of batik originating from the city of Lasem district, Rembang regency, Central Java. This city is the second largest city in Rembang regency after the city of Rembang. The city of Lasem is also referred to as "little China" because it was the city when the Chinese landed at Java. Lasem batik motifs that are influenced by Chinese culture such as butterfly motifs, *Feng Huang* bird motifs, and fish motifs. This Lasem style batik is influenced by elements of art and culture from China and Campa (Cambodia), this is because many Chinese people live and become local residents, resulting in cultural acculturation, namely Lasem Batik. Batik Lasem is batik with a coastal batik style. According to Suminto in a journal entitled *Melirik Ciri Khas Batik Lasem* (2015:23), he explained that Batik is classified into 2 groups, namely *Batik Pedalaman* and *Batik Pesisiran*. *Batik pedalaman* are types of batik produced from areas far from the sea. Batik with this pedalaman batik model can be found in Surakarta, Yogyakarta, Indramayu, Semarang, and some other areas. The colors of *batik pedalaman* are generally earth colors such as brown, dark blue, brownish white, or bluish white. Meanwhile, *pesisiran batik* is a type of batik produced in areas close to the coast such as Pekalongan, Cirebon, Lasem, Tuban and Madura. The colors of this type of *batik pesisiran* are generally bright colors, such as green, yellow, bright red, bright blue, orange, and pink (R. S. Suminto, 2015).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method which is a type design, or research design that is commonly used to examine natural research objects or in real conditions and is not regulated as in experiments. This type of research refers to problems that are formulated and produces descriptive data in the form of written words derived from literature studies (Creswell, 2014; De Vaus, 2002; Pandanwangi et al., 2021)

In relation to the theme of this research, the selection of a qualitative descriptive research form aims to be able to describe in detail about Chinese Mythology on the Diversity of Lasem Batik Motifs. The strategy used in this research



is that researchers collect data from literature studies, journals, and from websites that are perused and selected appropriately and in accordance with the research title.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

History of Lasem Batik

Before the Japanese army arrived in 1912, Lasem was a reliable with prime quality batik producer. Since the end of the 18th century, Chinese and Arab traders have traded home-made batik collected from various villages in northern Java Island. After that, batik makers appeared who were paid for by batik makers who made batik according to the tastes of the batik business owners or according to the market tastes (Purwanto & Titiek S., 2017; Putra, 2016; Sudardi & Rizali, 2017).

Batik Lasem, called *Laseman*, is heavily influenced by Chinese culture. According to Putra in the journal entitled *Batik Lasem Sebagai Simbol Akulturasi Nilai-Nilai Budaya Cina-Jawa*, the city of Lasem was the first city visited when Chinese traders came to Indonesia. According to many historians, Admiral Cheng Ho arrived in Lasem in the 13th century. Starting from Lasem City, Chinese traders spread to Kudus City, Demak and other Javanese areas. Some of the Chinese traders then settled in Lasem City. Therefore, until now in Lasem there are still old houses with high walls with a typical Chinese style of building. Because there are many relics of houses with typical Chinese development arrangements, Lasem City is called "Little China". Chinese society in the 400 AD century has sailed and anchored all over the country. The purpose of the migration of Chinese in ancient times many of the Chinese sailed to India to study Buddhism. At that time India was one of the centers and origins of teaching Buddhism. (Putra, 2016)

In 1413, Admiral Cheng Ho stopped by the Lasem area to repair ships and treat his sick crew. After the admiral's ship was repaired, some of the admiral's crews asked permission to stay in Lasem because they liked the hospitality of the Javanese people, one of whom was captain Bi Nang Un. After much deliberation, Admiral Cheng Ho agreed to the will of the crew who wanted to stay and sailed back to mainland China with the remaining crew members. (S. Suminto, 2015; Putra, 2016).

The Duke of Lasem at that time, namely Prince Wijayabadra, allowed the captain to stay in Kemandung (Lasem Kidul), after which he moved to the area which is now called Binangunan (Bonang Beach area). Captain Bi Nang Un brought his wife, Na Li Ni with their first son Bi Nang Na (5 years), and youngest daughter Bi Nang Ti (3 years). Apart from that, he also brought Campa residents who were experts in making batik, gold jewelry, gamelan craftsmen, and Bi Nang Un also brought black sticky rice seeds, blungko mangoes, sugar cane, pomegranate, cempo chicken, blue peacock, and klewer rice (Rahayu & Alrianingrum, 2014; Unijiya, 2014).

At first Bi Nang Un lived in Kemandung (Lasem kidul), not long after moved to the Binangun area which is now the Bonang Beach area. When he lived in Kemandung, Na Li Ni taught the people of Kemandung how to make tobacco wallets from peacock feathers, dance, and how to make batik. Growing up, Bi Nang Ti's daughter was proficient in batik, embroidery, weaving, and making herbal medicine, with this being the beginning of batik making in Lasem. Bi Nang Ti finally married Prabu Badranala, who was later appointed as Adipati Lasem. The name Bi Nang Ti was finally changed to Winarti Kumudawarni. The Chronicle of Lasem written by Mpu Santri Badra in 1401 also tells that Na Li Ni began to learn batik and was active in making batik with motifs, *hong* birds, dragons, chrysanthemums, *banji*, coins with blood-red colors. These motifs are one of the characteristics of Lasem batik. Even at the early of the 19th century lasem batik already exported to Thailand and Suriname (S. Suminto, 2015; Putra, 2016).

Characteristics of Lasem Batik

Batik Lasem has a characteristic in its color visualization, this is influenced by geographical factors. Namely the local natural water in Lasem, has the characteristic of producing a red color which cannot be produced in other batik centers. As for the colors of Lasem, they will be described below:

Color

Color is an important element for batik to make it look more beautiful and more attractive. The color scheme for *Laseman* is *kelengan* (motif with a milky white base color), *bang bangan* (red motif with a milky white base color), *bang biron* (red and blue motifs with a milky white base color), *bang ijo* (red, green and blue motifs), on a milky white background), *bang ungon* (purple or purple and red motifs on a milky white background), *irengan* (black motifs on a milky white background), *tiga negeri* (patterns with red, blue and brown colors) and *empat negeri* (batik with red, blue, brown and purple) (Suminto, 2015: 25).

The colors above are greatly influenced by China and have special meanings, namely: Red: Symbol of joy and wealth. Blue: Symbol of hope for a higher position. White: Symbol of old age and purity. Green: A symbol of life, therefore it must always be combined with red. Purple: Symbol of calm and loyalty. Yellow: Symbol of fame and progress. Black: Symbol of darkness and death.

The hallmark of Lasem batik is its red color, which is different with batik from other regions, which is called red chicken blood (*getih pitik*). In ancient times, Lasem was known as red lasem or '*abang getih pitik*' (a color of red that resembles chicken blood) because of its red color. Originally, red color was made specifically with natural dyes, namely the root of the noni tree (*Morinda citrifolia* L). The bright red color in Lasem batik is caused by the water in Lasem which contains minerals.

According to Suminto, in the journal entitled *Melirik Ciri Khas Batik Lasem*, he explained that around the 20th century, there were three countries batik cloths, which were long cloths with red and blue sarongs on a sog (brown) background. In the beginning of this type of cloth is called the cloth of the three countries because it is dyed in three different places, each of which is famous for its distinctive color. The red color is from Lasem, the blue color is from Pekalongan, and sog (brown) is from Solo or Kudus. Lasem and Pekalongan also made batik cloth from their own three countries, with red and blue motifs with a sog background (Suminto, 2015:26).

Motif

The arrival of Chinese people in Java, especially in Lasem, created a new culture that was accepted by the people, called Lasem batik. Initially, Lasem batik was known as '*batik encim*', a batik worn by elderly women of Chinese descent. Through the influence of Chinese culture, Lasem batik has very distinctive colors, patterns, motifs and varieties.

1. Lasem Batik with Butterfly Motif



Figure 1. Lasem batik with butterfly motif.

This Lasem batik motif has been influenced by Chinese culture. For Chinese people, the butterfly has a symbol of teenage love and true love that cannot be separated. The philosophical meaning of the Lasem Batik motif of the butterfly is interpreted in the legend of *Liangshan bo yu Zhu Yingtai* (梁山伯与祝英台) or known as San Pek and Eng Tay. The Lasem butterfly batik is also inspired by the metamorphosis of a butterfly which teaches wisdom and the authenticity of life. The life of a butterfly that starts from an egg, then becomes a caterpillar until finally a butterfly can fly is a reflection of a path of helplessness, growth and ending in the implementation of beauty to be of benefit to others.

According to Restiyati in the journal *Makna Motif dan Warna Kain Batik Peranakan Tionghoa Jawa di Banyumas* (2020: 71), she stated that in the results of her interview the butterfly symbol symbolizes women. The legend of San Pek and Eng Tay tells of a girl named Eng Tay who loves a young man named San Pek. However, San Pek was rejected by the Eng Tay family due to differences in social status. Apart from that, Eng Tay had also been arranged by his family with another young man named Ma Tjun. After knowing this, San Pek died of a broken heart. On her wedding day with Ma Tjun, Eng Tay asked her family to pass by San Pek's grave, so she could pray at the tomb. Eng Tay prayed to the gods to open San Pek's tomb and when the tomb door opened, he entered the tomb and did not come out again. Ma Tjun was angry knowing this and ordered to open the tomb of San Pek so he could find Eng Tay. However, only a pair of butterflies that he found in the tomb, it is believed that San Pek and Eng Tay had turned into a pair of butterflies.

2. Lasem Batik with The Phoenix Bird Motif (*Fenghuang*)



Figure 2. Lasem batik with Fenghuang motif

This Lasem batik motif has been influenced by Chinese culture, usually the main ornament of the Lasem Batik motif is the Bird symbolized by a phoenix, peacock and a bird on a comb. The phoenix bird has a symbol of good nature and purity because in legend, this bird is ridden by gods. Lasem batik with this motif is usually worn by Chinese brides. There are also those who say that this bird has other symbols such as "feng" which means male phoenix and "huang" which means female phoenix, and there are legends that argue that "feng" means wind which indicates that phoenix was known as the god of wind. The phoenix for the Chinese people is one of the supernatural beings (*si ling*) along with dragons (*long*), kilin (*qilin*), and turtles (*gui*). The phoenix motif was popularized by batik makers from the palace or royal circles in Java (Restiyati, 2020:70).

The phoenix bird first began to be used as an ornamental motif during the reign of Emperor Huang Ti (2698 BC - 2598 BC) and then reappeared during the reign of the Han Dynasty (206 AD - 220 AD). At that time, the phoenix began to become an instrument of offerings and a symbol of praise for rulers who succeeded in leading the country peacefully. Since the Han Dynasty, phoenixes and dragons have always been a decoration in every palace built at that time.

In subsequent developments, the phoenix bird became a regal symbol that could only be worn by the empress of the Chinese emperor and became the only official royal motif used for embroidering the empress's robes, crowns, hair jewellery, hairpins, and other luxury accessories that could only be used by the empress.

As the times changed, the phoenix motif became more accessible to the public. Because the phoenix in the eyes of the public is the most beautiful bird, it is often known as the symbol of a beautiful woman who seduces with a twinkling of an eye and is nicknamed the 'phoenix glance'. Not a few phoenix motifs are used in traditional Chinese wedding dresses as a symbol of 'queen for a day' and if you happen to find a painting of a pair of black or red phoenixes dancing, it is a symbol of one of the positions of lovemaking in Chinese 'kamasutra'.

3. Lasem Batik with The Koi Fish Motif



Figure 3. Lasem batik with koi fish motif

One specific fish that is believed to be a symbol of good luck in life is the koi fish (double fishes). Koi fish are believed to be able to bring Chinese people into a successful life space because koi fish are also called gold fish. Koi fish is also symbolized by longevity because it is believed that fish can last a long time. The double fish has a rich history in Chinese culture and symbolism. A pair of fishes symbolizes goodness that is brought to life by science (Khumairoh, 2021).

According to Kumairoh, in the article *Makna di Balik Lukisan Simbol Ganda Menurut Feng Shui* (Kumairoh, 2021) it is explained that in Taoism, practitioners often refer to images of two koi fishes spinning as a union of yin and yang, representing the taichi symbol. One example is the wedding event, the double fishes symbol symbolizes the meaning of a harmonious union between the couple which carries the meaning of fertility, marital happiness, and the pleasure of intimacy. This motif is usually found on embroidered sheets, pillowcases, and newlywed clothes. The koi fish symbol is widely used in home decor in the form of two fishes hanging from a stone bell. Hanging these two koi fishes express happiness.

In a journal entitled *Pemahaman Tabib Etnis Tionghoa di Surabaya Mengenai Yīnyáng*. This yinyang symbol consists of two colors, namely black and white, with a little white dot on the black part and a little black dot on the white part. There is a yin element within the element, and in the yin element also contains a yang element, which shows that there is no eternal perfection in this cosmos. Yinyang symbolizes balanced harmony, is also a unity that supports and opposes each other. The black yin symbol is always placed on the left and the white yang symbol is always placed on the right. If the position is reversed, then the symbol is incorrect. The concept of Yinyang, even in the era of the Han Dynasty, there was a man named Dong Zhongshu who made teachings that classify wife and children as yin whereas father and husband as yang. (2013:3)

CONCLUSION

Batik is a cultural heritage owned by Indonesia which has been passed down from generation to generation. Batik is much-loved by the public because batik is a painting that depicts the beauty of nature, outlook on life, and the goals of the work. Batik itself has developed since the Majapahit kingdom period.

Lasem batik is a type of batik produced in the town of Lasem sub-district, Rembang district, Central Java. Batik Lasem is the result of cultural acculturation from the Chinese community who live with local residents in the Lasem area. Batik Lasem is batik with a pesisiran batik style, namely batik that is produced in areas close to the coast. The colors of this type of coastal batik are generally bright colors, such as green, yellow, bright red, bright blue, and also orange and pink.

Batik Lasem, known as Laseman, is heavily influenced by Chinese culture. The city of Lasem has long held trade with merchants and had relations with Chinese merchants since the 14th century. Batik Lasem is also closely related to the arrival of Admiral Cheng Ho in 1413. Admiral Cheng Ho originally came to Lasem to treat his sick crew members and carry out ship repairs. One of Admiral Cheng Ho's crew members, captain Bi Nang Un, saw Lasem as a nice area to live in. Not long after, he asked permission from Admiral Cheng Ho not to accompany him in continuing his voyage and settled in Lasem. Bi Nang Un brought his wife Na Li Ni and their two children, son Bi Nang Na and daughter Bi Nang Ti. Na Li Ni and also her daughter Bi Nang Ti first taught Lasem residents how to make batik.

The characteristics of Lasem batik are the colors and motifs that have been influenced by Chinese culture. For example, the red color is different from batik in other regions, which resembles chicken blood (getih putih). Initially, Lasem batik was known as "encim batik", which is the batik worn by women of Chinese descent. Through the influence of Chinese culture, Lasem batik has very distinctive colors, patterns, motifs and varieties. For example, Lasem batik with a butterfly motif means teenage love and true love that cannot be separated. There is also a Lasem batik motif with a phoenix (fenghuang) motif which means good nature and purity and Lasem batik with a koi fish motif which means good luck. Koi fish is also symbolized by longevity because it is believed that fish can last a long time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Christopher Dhanika Suwandi: Student at Maranatha Christian University, Faculty of Language and Culture, Bandung, Indonesia, christopherdhanika@gmail.com, first author and correspondence author, collecting data related to batik in general and the history of Lasem batik, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung, Indonesia

Avelina Garcia Paulus: Student at Maranatha Christian University, Faculty of Language and Culture, Bandung, Indonesia, 2146012@lang.maranatha.edu, second author, collecting data related to the characteristics of Lasem batik, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung, Indonesia

Violetta Patricia: Student at Maranatha Christian University, Faculty of Language and Culture, Bandung, Indonesia, 2146009@lang.maranatha.edu, third author, assists the first and second authors in describing batik in general, the history of Lasem batik, and the characteristics of Lasem batik, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung, Indonesia.

Ariesa Pandanwangi: Lecturer at Maranatha Christian University, Faculty of Arts and Designs, Bandung, Indonesia, ariesa.pandanwangi@maranatha.edu, fourth author, helps in completing data, look for references, and inspect the article, Maranatha Christian University, Bandung, Indonesia.

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