

## Hybridity of *Peranakan* Chinese House Design in Lasem: A Case Study of Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2025  
Official Conference Proceedings

### Abstract

The dynamic interaction between history, culture, and power relations forms cultural identity, which is represented in visual design. The case study is the design of *Peranakan* Chinese houses in Lasem, which the complexity of the identity representation issue makes it interesting. In addition to experiencing external colonialism originating from Dutch colonialism, they also experience internal colonialism originating from the dominance of Javanese culture. The *Peranakan* Chinese ethnic group acculturated Javanese culture as part of a survival strategy to be able to interact with local communities and gain social positions, to enter the highest class of society held by Javanese nobles before the 19th century. The research question relates to the problem of hybridity of form due to the acculturation of Chinese-Javanese culture. How is the shift in form that occurs when this *Peranakan* design is compared with its original design in China? What is the meaning behind the hybridity? The study uses a case study research method. The case is Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage. The analyzing variables are generated from hybridity and cultural identity theory. The result is that the tropical climate, the communalism of the local Javanese community, and the colonial design style originating from the Dutch colonial culture have influenced the *Peranakan* Chinese design forms in Lasem. The meaning of hybridity is related to the negotiation of identity, that hybridity as a third space is a dialogue between differences. Identity, constructed by history, culture, and power, is always in the process of formation (identity of becoming).

*Keywords:* hybridity, *Peranakan*, Chinese, history, identity

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## Introduction

The current postmodern era is an era of pluralism and multiculturalism. Pluralism is a school of thought or belief that in a society of various political, ideological, cultural, or ethnic groups, no group should think and feel dominant. Each should respect political, ideological, and cultural differences (including religious and ethnic differences). Multiculturalism is a belief or movement to recognize and accept diversity, differences, and identities (social, cultural, racial, and ethnic identities) (Piliang, 2003). Multiculturalism in Indonesia has occurred since ethnic Chinese began to come to Indonesia to trade. Then, they settled and lived mixed with the local community in Java. The Chinese first came to Indonesia in the 5th century AD (Monk Fa Hien was stranded in Tarumanegara in 414 AD) and began to arrive in large numbers in the 7th-10th centuries AD (618-907 AD Chinese people went to Sumatra and Java to seek direct contact with spice traders), the wave also took place on the 15th century (Cheng Ho's expedition) and during the Dutch colonial period (during the Qing Dynasty in the late 19th century there were crop failures, stagnant agriculture and famine in China). The opening of new mines by the Dutch East Indies Government required much labor, thus encouraging Chinese people to migrate from China (mostly from Fujian and Guangdong) to Indonesia (in this case Batavia in Java, then migrated to Lasem in Central Java), to seek a better life. The acculturation of Chinese and Javanese culture in the archipelago is strengthened by Denys Lombard's statement that Java, before the Dutch colonial era, was very open to cultures mixing from outside, which were generally brought by trade missions, including from China (Lombard, 2005).

Lasem is a sub-district town in the east of Semarang, Central Java, which is nicknamed The China of Java (see Figure 1). Lasem still has many traditional Chinese houses, temples, and colonial Chinese houses. The Chinese first landed in Lasem during the Singasari Kingdom (1222-1292). This is confirmed by data that the Chinese troops under Kublai Khan of the Yuan Dynasty (1280-1367) who came to Java to attack Kertanegara (the last king of Singasari, 1268-1292) because Singasari refused to pay tribute, stated that when they landed on the northern coast of Java, they found that there were already Chinese intermediary traders, farmers, and artisans living side by side with the local community (Setiono, 2008). Then, in the 15th century (1413), when Cheng Ho's expedition landed in Lasem, the captain of Cheng Ho's ship, namely Bi Nang Un, was interested in settling in Lasem and spreading Islam. According to the book by Santi Badra (1966), there was already a Chinese community in Lasem, the majority of whom were Confucian and Buddhist and had skills in dancing, batik making, and playing gamelan.

This study took a Chinese house in Lasem as its case study. This house is currently used as a homestay called the "Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage," a hybrid of traditional Chinese-Javanese and Chinese-colonial (Indische Empire) styles. This house was chosen as a case study because it is an intensity sampling (Morris, 2006), an example of a case that can explain the theory of hybridity, provide a lot of data (relevant), and provide access to conduct in-depth interviews. The research questions are related to the hybridity of the Red House of Lasem Heritage's design: (1) What is the form of hybridity, and (2) What is the meaning behind the hybridity of form?

A case study research method is used to answer this question. This study uses a case study research model because the final answer sought is related to the meaning of the hybridity of *Peranakan* Chinese design, which is associated with the conceptual idea of hybrid identity or multicultural identity. The study aims to conduct a study that proves the contact, mixing, and

compounding of Javanese and Chinese cultures to form a hybrid *Peranakan* Chinese identity, which is different from the Chinese identity in its country of origin.

**Figure 1**

*The Location of Lasem in North Coast of Central Java, Java Island, Indonesia*

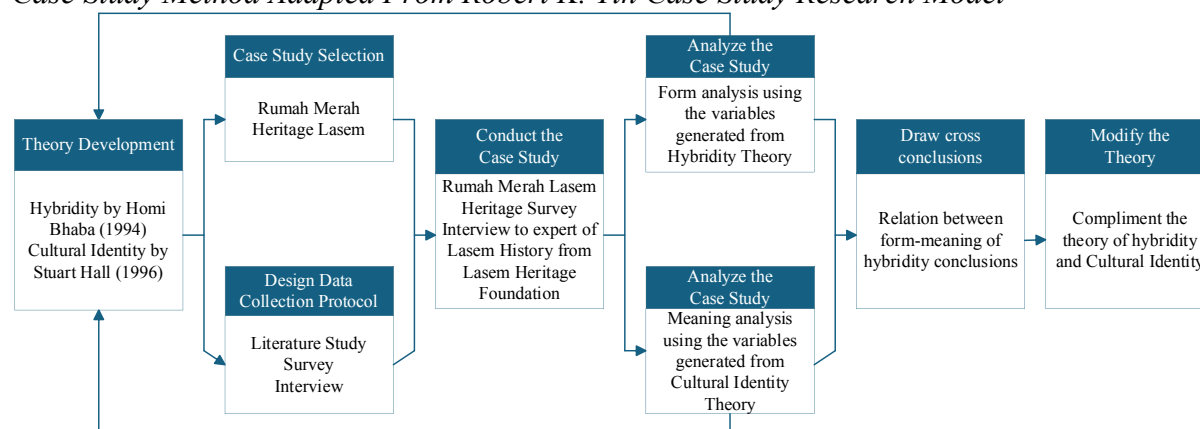


## Methods

According to Robert K. Yin's research model (Yin, 2014), case study research is preceded by a theory development stage. In this study, the hybridity theory or the third space theory of Homi Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994) is used to analyze the hybridity of design forms. Meanwhile, Stuart Hall's cultural identity theory is used to analyze the meaning behind the form, namely the representation of identity (Hall, 1993, 1996). After the theory development stage, the next stage is the selection of a case study, in this case, the Rumah Merah Heritage Lasem, and the design of data collection methods, namely literature studies, field surveys, and interviews. After that, a case analysis was carried out using analysis variables derived from the theory of hybridity and cultural identity. The analysis is divided into two parts, namely, the analysis of the hybridity of form and the meaning behind the hybridity of form. The next stage is the analysis of the research results and their comparison with previous theories on hybridity and cultural identity, whether the research results contribute to science to modify or develop previously existing theories. The case study method adapted from Robert K. Yin's case study research model can be summarized in the following research flowchart:

**Figure 2**

*Case Study Method Adapted From Robert K. Yin Case Study Research Model*



Source. Yin, 2014

## Results

### The Form of Hybridity

The Red House Complex has three building masses; two are used as homestays, and one building mass is used as a batik gallery. From the design of the building facade, the Red House has an Indische Empire building style. The Empire style is part of or the second phase of the European Neoclassical style originating from France (1804-1814). This style arose or developed to fulfill the wishes of Napoleon Bonaparte, who wanted to combine the grandeur of the style of ancient Egyptian buildings with that of the Roman Empire. Along with the growth of Napoleon's power in Europe, this style spread to other European countries, including the Netherlands, and was introduced by the Governor of the Dutch East Indies to Indonesia in the early 19th century. However, when introduced to Indonesia, this style underwent adjustments to the tropical climate, which was marked by adding a large front and back terrace with a broad roof canopy, which was later called the Indische Empire style. The Indische Empire style of the Red House is characterized by a symmetrical facade, wide front and back terraces, wide roof canopies, and Tuscan-style Roman columns (2 homestay building masses) or Doric-style columns with a more complex pediment style (1 batik gallery building mass) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Indische Empire Style of the Red House*



Indische Empire Style Facades of 3 Buildings in Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage complex: 1<sup>st</sup> Home stay Building (3a), Batik Gallery (3b), 2<sup>nd</sup> Home Stay Building (3c)

*Picture Source.* Hidayat, 2025

Although the building is in the Indische Empire style (Dutch colonial culture), the building complex is surrounded by a high wall typical of a Chinese residential complex with an entrance gate adopted from the traditional Chinese style (see Figure 4). Likewise, the main entrance, although it follows the Empire style (3 in number, symmetrical, high with a bouvenlicht at the top of the door), on the left and right of the door is equipped with verses containing hopes or advice for the residents of the house which is the style of a traditional Chinese house (see Figure 4). The main entrance gate has a roof shape adopted from the style of a traditional Chinese house gate roof combined with a low, transparent barred door called the wind door (see Figure 4).

In addition to being an adaptation to the tropical climate, the wind door is also a form of influence from the communal lifestyle of the Javanese people in Lasem. In the traditional Chinese style in China, the residential complex is surrounded by high walls and closed doors because for the Chinese, privacy and security are important values. Chinese families generally adhere to familism, where communal relations are maintained among extended family members. The traditional Javanese house is the opposite, having a low and open fence due to the communal lifestyle. Communal relations in Javanese society are between members of society in their environment. When the house's occupants are in the house, the high gate will be opened, and the occupants sitting on the terrace can exchange greetings with

neighbors passing in front of the house. When Chinese-Javanese people lived in Lasem, they adapted to the communal lifestyle of the Javanese people and the tropical climate, so open wind doors were installed in addition to the closed main entrance gate.

**Figure 4**

*High Wall Around Rumah Merah Residential Complex, Main Entrance Gate, Main Entrance*



Picture Source. Hidayat, 2025

The same thing goes with the house's interior; the spatial organization shows the type of Indische Empire building plan, namely the bedrooms on the left and right sides of the house, which are arranged symmetrically. However, in the Chinese family home, the middle room is adapted into a prayer room, where extended family members gather to pray to the gods or ancestors. When the Red House is used as a homestay, the prayer room is used to place statues of gods. The hybridity of form occurs when the building and spatial organization in the Indische Empire style are filled with traditional Chinese furniture with traditional Chinese ornamental patterns such as mythological animals, namely dragons and phoenixes (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Chinese Ornamental Patterns*



Interior of Rumah Merah (5a), Furnitur (5b), Furniture Ornaments (5c, 5d)

Picture Source. Hidayat, 2025

## The Meaning of Hybridity

The hybridity represents the hybrid identity of *Peranakan* Chinese formed or constructed by the historical background, culture, and power relations of *Peranakan* Chinese in Lasem. The historical context that determines the identity of *Peranakan* Chinese in Lasem is the social assimilation and cultural acculturation with the local Javanese population, interaction with the Dutch colonialists, the arrested development or undevelopment of Chinese culture during the New Order government, and the freedom to develop Chinese culture during the reformation era. Social assimilation occurred because the Chinese immigrants who came to the archipelago were initially all men (traders, farmers, laborers, unemployed, and political refugees). Most of them came from the provinces of Fujian and Guandong in Southeast China and came to Indonesia following the Sino-European trade route known as the Silk Road.

Initially, they settled temporarily while waiting for the monsoon winds to return to China, but eventually decided to settle, build permanent homes, and build Chinese community villages. Chinese immigrants who were married or unmarried then married local women who were generally Muslim and then converted to Islam. If they still practice Confucianism or Buddhism, they marry Balinese Hindu women who are not against eating pork.

Chinese-Javanese cultural acculturation was the next thing that followed after the social assimilation through mixed marriages between Chinese and Javanese people took place. Acculturation is a social process that occurs when a group of people from a particular culture are confronted with elements of a foreign culture in such a way that the foreign culture is gradually accepted as part of a larger culture without causing the loss of the dominant cultural personality, or the personality (identity) of the foreign culture. Thus, the nature of acculturation is like the nature of a mixture. The mixing of Chinese culture with Javanese culture produces a mixed Chinese-Javanese culture. An example of Chinese-Javanese cultural acculturation is how Chinese familialism coexists with Javanese communalism. Prioritizing family over personal interests coexists (not changing) with prioritizing group interests over family interests. The patrilinealism coexists with the matrilinealism when sometimes the wedding party is held by the woman's family, and the husband lives in the middle of the woman's family, or when inheritance is also given to daughters, not only to sons (traditional Chinese family culture considers daughters to belong to the husband's family).

Power relations in social and political interactions influence material culture, including houses. At the beginning of the arrival of Chinese people in Java, the nobility and the Javanese Kingdom (Singasari and Majapahit) held the power. Understanding that, the Chinese community then built social relations with the rulers for trade security and the potential to become suppliers to the kingdom. Chinese houses also adapted to the communal style of Javanese culture. The ornaments in Chinese residential furniture are a blend of Chinese and Javanese ornaments. When the Dutch colonized Indonesia, the rulers changed into the Dutch colonizers. Rich Chinese people also tried to enter the circle of the rulers by building houses similar to those of the rulers, namely in the European neoclassical style, such as the Indische Empire.

When Indonesia became independent, during the New Order (1968-1998), President Soeharto banned the celebration of Chinese culture outside the family environment. In the 1950s, along with the anti-Indonesian Communist Party movement, many Chinese schools were disbanded and banned from being established in Indonesia. The anti-Indonesian Communist Party movement was regarded as the same as the anti-Chinese movement, so the government banned using Chinese as the daily language of instruction, so Mandarin was only used among Chinese people (internal circles). Government regulations that limited the development of Chinese culture in Indonesia during the New Order (President Soeharto's reign) directly or indirectly caused the younger generation of Chinese to be unable to speak Chinese, not to know Chinese traditions, and not to understand their own culture. This circumstance affected the architecture of Chinese houses, where modern Chinese people sought a safe path by not showing their Chinese identity by building modern-style houses that were neutral regarding ethnic identity. Traditional Chinese houses in Lasem also removed the Chinese characters written on the gates not to highlight their Chinese cultural identity.

In the reform era, restrictions on Chinese New Year celebrations were lifted during the administration of President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001) and Megawati (2001-2004). Since then, Chinese New Year has been celebrated as a national holiday. As there was no



longer a ban on publicly celebrating Chinese holidays, the young generation of Chinese seemed to rediscover their Chinese identity. The power relations in the modern Chinese generation came from the reform era government and universal modern culture that made modern Chinese people reinterpret their traditional culture and past design codes in new ways that were sometimes personal. This development influenced the design of living spaces in the form of a combination of modern design elements and traditional design elements. However, these design elements from the past were presented in new ways, which sometimes were the subjective preferences of the occupants. In the Red House, when the occupants painted the walls with the traditional Chinese-style entrance gate with a specific red and a certain yellow, also by the Red House logo; this was a subjective preference and interpretation of the symbols of red and gold in Chinese culture which meant happiness and wealth (prosperity).

## Discussion

In the discussion section for the hybridity of forms, we will discuss the findings of the hybridity of forms, namely the existence of adoption, adaptation, and adaptation strategies in presenting the hybridity of forms. Meanwhile, for the meaning of hybridity as a representation of identity, what needs to be discussed and reflected on is the existence of dynamic identity construction that constantly demands to be reinterpreted because the context of history, culture, and power relations continue to change and develop over time.

### Strategy of Creating the Hybrid Form: Adoption, Adaptation and Adeptation

In the context of creation, adoption is the uncritical imitation of a form in the sense of merely imitating and not producing anything new. However, this strategy falls into the strategies for creating hybridity because even imitation can create differences. Design is a language because design is a medium for communication; design is a visual language. When someone from Indonesia speaks English, even though he pronounces the language with an uncritical imitation strategy instead of trying to pronounce it as closely as possible according to how native speakers speak, people can still recognize him as a non-native speaker. Why is that? Because of the adoption of language here, the imitation of the use of language still has elements of dialect or accent that can distinguish a native speaker from a non-native speaker, original and non-original. Likewise, when adoption is used as a strategy to present the past, translation, or a way of copying that is influenced by the background of the maker, it affects the results of adoption.

**Figure 6**

*Entrance Doors of Rumah Merah*



The First Phase of Hybridity: Adoption with Translation. Indische Empire Typical Architecture as shown by The Colonial House in Batavia in 19 Century (6a) (Handinoto, 2009), Typical Plan of Indische Empire House (6b) (Handinoto, 2009), Rumah Merah Façade (6c), Rumah Merah Main Gate (6d).

*Picture Source.* Handinoto, 2009; Hidayat, 2025

Combining subjective or contextual translation with the imitated objective design pattern creates hybridity. In the context of Rumah Merah, the adoption strategy is displayed in the facade design of the colonial Chinese house in the Indische Empire style. Although it adopts the Indische Empire style, individual translation still occurs. Example: The iron bars on the *bouvenlicht* part of the entrance doors of Rumah Merah are an abstraction of the Rumah Merah logo in the form of a star or sun (see Figure 6). Adoption is presented to appreciate the beauty of past design and culture, both in form and the values behind the form. In this case, the aim of preserving the Chinese-colonial house is to learn about the intervention of Dutch colonial culture in the history of the development of *Peranakan* Chinese culture in Lasem as a consequence of the interaction between wealthy traders and the colonizers as rulers when the house was built; design as a representation of history, culture and power relations (Hidayat, 2007).

Adaptation is a strategy to adjust design elements when presented in different spatial and temporal contexts related to adjustments to climate differences, adjustments to changes in construction techniques, material processing techniques, and functions. In this context, the Indische Empire style is an adaptation of the Empire style to the tropical climate by equipping the Empire-style house with a spacious front terrace with a broad roof canopy. The Red House also underwent an adjustment in function from a residence to a homestay so that the bedrooms are equipped with modern bathrooms that create double coding (modern and traditional codes are present together in one space).

Adeptation occurs when past elements are presented together with modern design. However, these past elements are presented in a new way, which is often subjective and not found in the original design reference that formed it (not in the traditional Chinese design pattern that formed it. The purpose of adeptation is no longer to represent the identity of the Chinese group or community in Lasem but is already a representation of the identity of the owner (subjective preference) of Rumah Merah Lasem Heritage. An example of adeptation is the main entrance gate of Rumah Merah, which follows the pattern of the entrance gate of a traditional Chinese house but is painted in red, yellow, and black with white checkered colors and is equipped with a wind door as an adaptation to the Javanese communal lifestyle. This composition (syntax) is not in the traditional design pattern of the main entrance door of the traditional Chinese house that formed it (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Traditional Design Pattern of the Main Entrance Door*



Adeption of Rumah Merah Main Entrance Gate (7d). Form structure is the same with the pattern of main entrance gates in China (7a, 7b, 7c) but the colour is the owner subjective preference following the brand colour of Rumah Merah. It Has Been Added by the Low and Semi-transparent Wind Door As the Adaptation of Tropical Climate and Communal-Life Style of Local Javanese, Creating the New Syntax of Main Entrance Gate Design.

*Picture Source.* Knapp, 2005 (7a,7b, 7c); Hidayat, 2025 (7d)



## The Meaning of Hybridity: Representation of Identity of Becoming

Referring to Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity (Hall, 1993, 1996), there are two types of identity. The first identity is original identity, which is an identity related to a person's initial existence, which can be identified most easily from their racial, ethnic, religion, gender, and other standard criteria that exist in a particular cultural system. In this case, identity is a fixed and uniform value for *Peranakan* Chinese. However, understanding identity as a fixed value and related to equality is an oversimplification of the problem because the reality of a person's life journey, including Chinese people in Lasem, is very complex. In social interactions, education, and cyberspace-based interaction, a Chinese person is influenced by various cultural factors. The second identity is formed identity, which is an identity that is always in the process of formation and in the process of becoming. This identity can be seen clearly in the history of the *Peranakan* Chinese community in Lasem and is reflected in the design of their hybrid homes. Initially, Chinese culture in Lasem was influenced by Javanese culture, which became *Peranakan* Chinese culture. Next, it is influenced by Dutch colonial culture and then modern culture. This is reflected in the house, which is a mixture of design elements originating from Chinese, Javanese, and modern cultures. As long as the occupants of the house are still alive, the design of the house continues to develop because the occupants continue to be influenced by foreign cultures, especially in the era of internet technology like today, where conversations are not limited to physical meetings and friendships are not limited to people from the same culture and the surrounding environment. Rumah Merah, as a homestay, is also visited by various foreign tourists, so it is required to keep developing to meet modern hotel standards and the needs of foreign tourists while maintaining a hybrid Chinese identity.

## Conclusions

The design of *Peranakan* Chinese houses in Lasem is a hybrid, combining design elements from traditional Chinese, Javanese, Dutch colonial, and modern cultures. The hybrid design of *Peranakan* Chinese houses will continue to evolve along with the development of the culture of its users and residents. The meaning of the hybridity of the design of Chinese houses in Lasem, in this case Rumah Merah, represents the hybrid cultural identity of *Peranakan* Chinese. Identity is a dynamic formation formed by historical background, culture, and power relations. Hybrid identity in Lasem is a natural or logical consequence of the history of *Peranakan* Chinese, who received intervention from Javanese, colonial, and modern cultures. From a Chinese cultural perspective, assimilation is a natural process, in line with the view of life in Chinese culture that goes with the saying, "When in Rome, do as Romans do." Chinese people must live in harmony, acculturation, and assimilation with local cultures. Orientation towards economic activities as part of an effort to survive also requires economic actors to interact with the authorities for their business's security, potential, and profit. Ultimately, hybridity is a space for identity negotiation that is always in the process of formation (identity of becoming).

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