

The Influence of Peranakan Chinese Visual Culture in Pekalongan

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Keywords: Pekalongan, Peranakan Chinese, Visual Culture

Abstract: Pekalongan was the first city in Indonesia which joined UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2014. It was located in the northern coast of Central Java, which made its geographical location quite strategic. Many foreign immigrants came there in the past and among them was the immigrants from China, who later settled in Indonesia. The acculturation of original Chinese culture and local culture created the new Peranakan Chinese culture, which had distinctive characteristics. This research analyzed the influence of Peranakan Chinese culture in the development of visual culture in Indonesia, especially in Pekalongan. The result of the acculturation can be seen in Pekalongan visual culture until now, such as batik tulis and architecture. The most legendary Peranakan Chinese batik tulis in Pekalongan is Oey Soe Tjoen batik, which has existed for three generations. Meanwhile, the building which has Peranakan Chinese architecture is The Sidji Hotel. The aim of this research was to encourage society to appreciate more about diversity and the role of acculturation in the development of Indonesia's visual culture.

1 INTRODUCTION

Pekalongan was the first city in Indonesia which joined UNESCO Creative Cities Network in 2014. It is well-known as 'Batik City' in Indonesia because plenty of batik manufacturers had been there since the 19th century. This city was located in the northern coast of Central Java, which made its geographical location quite strategic. Thus, many foreign immigrants came there in the past and one of them was the immigrants from China, who later settled in Indonesia.

Since the beginning of Common Era (1 CE/AD 1), the Chinese had been visiting Indonesia to learn about Buddhism and came to Buddhist sites. One of the most notable visitors was I-Tsing, who came to Sriwijaya at the end of the 7th century and spent ten years there for translating religious texts into Chinese language (Achjadi and Damais, 2006). Reciprocally, the rulers of Indonesia also came to China to pay their respects, or sending their embassies there to maintain good relationship. This had an impact in strengthening power of their kingdoms and also improving trading activities, which were beneficial

for the economy. At the sixth century, the Chinese immigrants began building their own settlements at the northern coast of Java (Roojen, 2001). They mainly came from the southern region of China, such as Fujian and Guangdong provinces. These provinces were the hometown of Meixian (Hakka), Guangzhou (Cantonese), Chaozhou (Teochew), Hokchia, Hokchiu, Hokkien and Hainanese ethnics (Knapp, 2012). The arrival of foreign traders, trading interaction in daily life and interethnic marriage created the new communities in coastal areas, which was called the *Peranakans*.

According to Tan Chee-Beng, in Malay language, the word *peranakan* has several meanings that derive from the word *anak* or child, means those who are the offspring and descendants of intermarriage between a local person and foreigner. The term *peranakan* is also used to describe people who locally born to distinguish them from immigrants born elsewhere. Tan Chee-Beng describes Peranakan as 'different kind of Chinese, a sub-ethnic category of Chinese', while Peter Lee describe Peranakan as 'a category of Chinese who has a non-Chinese ancestress somewhere in the family tree'. The Peranakan

Chinese community was not only found in Indonesia, but also in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Myanmar. There was a legend that the Peranakans were the descendants of a Chinese Princess named Hang Li Poh and her entourage of 500 young women and several hundred young men, who were dispatched by the Ming emperor to marry Sultan Mansur Shah of Malacca in the mid-fifteenth century. However, there were no living Peranakan Chinese who have records that link them to such a royal ancestors. Thus, it can be assumed that the Peranakan Chinese are the descendants of traders and labourers from China who came and married local Malay women in the seventeenth century (Knapp, 2012). According to Peter Lee, the Peranakans were ostensibly Chinese ethnic, but did not possess the supposedly correct characteristics of the Chinese. By the early nineteenth century, the Peranakan Chinese began to develop a new sense of identity, they differentiated themselves from the immigrants of China who were beginning to arrive in large numbers. These new immigrants were called the *Sinkheks* in Malaysia and *Totok* in Indonesia, which referred to full-blooded new guest from China (Lee, 2014). Thomas Stamford Raffles in *History of Java* (1817) also mentioned term *Pernákans*, which he described as a numerous mixed race which is often scarcely distinguishable from the native Chinese (the *Shinkeks* or *Totoks*).

The acculturation of original Chinese culture and local culture created the new Peranakan Chinese culture. It was the mixture of the Chinese culture brought from China and the local culture in the Southeast Asian countries where the Chinese people settled, in addition to the influence of cultures from the European countries during colonization (Muncenam, et al, 2017). It was visually unique and had distinctive characteristics since it combined multiple cultures into one new aesthetics. The Peranakan culture also had influence on Pekalongan visual culture until now, such as batik and buildings which have Peranakan Chinese style. Batik is a cloth made by resist-dyeing technique (Lee, 2007). Batik is also seen as the cultural heritage and life philosophy of Indonesian (Anas, et al, 1997). The most legendary Peranakan Chinese batik *tulis* in Pekalongan is Oey Soe Tjoen batik, which has existed for three generations since 1925. Meanwhile, the building which has Peranakan Chinese architecture in Pekalongan is The Sidji Hotel, which was built in 1918.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research analysed the influence of Peranakan Chinese visual culture in the development of visual culture in Indonesia, especially in Pekalongan. In this research, qualitative methodology was used by conducting interview and direct observation to the location. This main idea of this research is the influence of Peranakan Chinese visual culture in Pekalongan, which can be seen in Peranakan Chinese batik Oey Soe Tjoen and a hotel named The Sidji. The information about peranakan batik Oey Soe Tjoen was given by Widianti Widjaja (Oey Kiem Lian), the grand-daughter of Oey Soe Tjoen through a formal interview, along with the direct observation to the workshop of Oey Soe Tjoen Batik in Kedungwuni village, Pekalongan. Museum Batik Pekalongan and The Sidji Hotel Pekalongan were also visited for more thorough observation. The staffs in Museum Batik Pekalongan and The Sidji Hotel Pekalongan also gave many information through informal interview.

3 RESULTS

In order to describe the results more systematically, this section was divided into three sub-sections: the explanation about visual culture, Oey Soe Tjoen batik and The Sidji Hotel.

3.1 Visual Culture

Culture is the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group. It also can be defined as the systems of knowledge shared by a relatively large group of people. Moreover, visual culture is a field of study within cultural studies focusing on aspects of culture that rely on visual representations. It is a tangible form of conceptual and material culture. It can be seen by eyes and can be understood by human mind to increase the quality of life (Damayanti and Mukmin, 2018). Visual culture has a very vast range. In general, it can be categorized into four main areas. First, it can be found in fine arts such as painting, sculpture, drawing, installations, photo, video, architecture and performance art. Second, in crafts or design such as urban design, retail design, corporate design, logos and symbols, illustration, graphic design, product design, shoes, costume and fashion,

textile design, hairstyle, tattoos, landscape. Third, in performing arts such as theatre, acting, gesture, body language, dance, ballet, fashion shows, fireworks, concerts, panorama, ceremonies, beauty pageants and carnivals. Fourth, in mass and electronic media such as cinema, film, animation, television, newspapers, internet, multimedia, virtual reality, postcards, advertising, propaganda satellite, and computer imagery (Walker and Chaplin, 1997). The visual culture in Pekalongan is deeply influenced by foreign cultures, one of them was the Peranakan Chinese culture. It can be seen from batik and buildings which are the result of acculturation. Acculturation is the mixture of two culture or more, resulting in a new culture without completely changing the identity of the original culture. Powel see acculturation as culture borrowing, while Herskovits see it as cultural transmission process (Sachari and Sunarya, 2001).

3.2 Oey Soe Tjoen

Oey Soe Tjoen was a Peranakan Chinese batik entrepreneur who lived in Kedungwuni, a village located six miles from Pekalongan, a city at the northern coast of Java. During the 19th century, many Peranakan Chinese batik artisans lived there, but one that was considered the best was Oey Soe Tjoen (Elliott, 2004). He first opened his business with his wife, Kwee Nettie, in 1925. The signature of Oey Soe Tjoen's batik was high quality craftsmanship and full attention to detail. Moreover, Oey Soe Tjoen also cared about the personal taste of his clientele. Oey Soe Tjoen's early clientele were mostly local Peranakan Chinese, but later their fame spread into wealthy Indo-Dutch society and upscale Peranakan society overseas. Oey Soe Tjoen also numbered many of his patterns to make the ordering process easier for the customers. At its zenith, The Oeys even employed one hundred and fifty workers in their factory. Due to its popularity, many people try to imitate and sell fake batik by using Oey Soe Tjoen's name.

However, there are eleven characteristics of authentic Oey Soe Tjoen's batik to distinguish between the fake ones (Liong, 2014). First, Oey Soe Tjoen's batik is always be made by using 'tulis' technique, it is always fully hand-waxed, never stamp-waxed (*cap* technique) or even undergo printing technique. Second, it always uses the finest

quality of *prmissima* cotton. During the colonialism era, the 'Cent' stamped (*Tjap Sen*) *prmissima* cotton from Twente was used since it was considered the best. Now, the Oeys use 'Kereta Kencana' *prmissima* cotton made by Federation of Indonesia Batik Cooperatives (GKBI) from Medari in Yogyakarta, which also has fine quality.



Figure 1: The batik tulis making process in Oey Soe Tjoen's workshop (Budianto, 2018).

Third, the *prmissima* cotton is always be prepared first before *batikking*, by being soaked into peanut oil and other substances within three days (*dikethel*), so that the colour will be more brilliant and long lasting. Fourth, the cloth is always *batikked* on each surfaces with similar motifs and fillers (*isen*), just like the way classical batik is done in Indonesia. Fifth, there are only four principal designs in Oey Soe Tjoen batik, such as *Buketan*, *Cuwiri*, *Merak Ati*, and *Urang Ayu*.



Figure 2: Oey Soe Tjoen's *Buketan* batik (Liong, 2014).

Sixth, edging motif for the *kain panjang* cloth was divided into *Untu Walang* (cricket teeth) motif on the left and right ends, and *Setrip* (strip) along top and bottom edges. Seventh, Oey Soe Tjoen batik has its own particular style of *isen-isen* (filler motif). The *isen-isen* consists of tiny dots and has a significant role in Oey Soe Tjoen batik. There are three main functions of *isen-isen*, to fill the *tanahan* (backgrounds), to fill the flower petals and to fill the

leaves. Each of them has various kinds of patterns. The *tanahan* consists of *polosan* (without isen), *isen pentul*, *isen semanggan*, *isen pasiran*, *isen pacar*, *isen angkup*, *isen beras wutah*, *kawung beton* and *kembang tebu*. The *isen-isen* for flower petals usually made by using the *smallest canting* (waxing pen). Filler motifs for flower petals consist of combination of *isen tutulan* (dots) which has *nguku* (arch) shape, *alisan* (eyebrow) shape or *kuncungan* (tuft) shape. There are also *cocohan* and *gradil* shape for filler motif. To fill the leaves motifs, the Oeys usually use *sawut* (striations). Eighth, to ensure the authenticity of Oey Soe Tjoen batik, he usually signed all his pieces and included the name of Kedungwuni village.

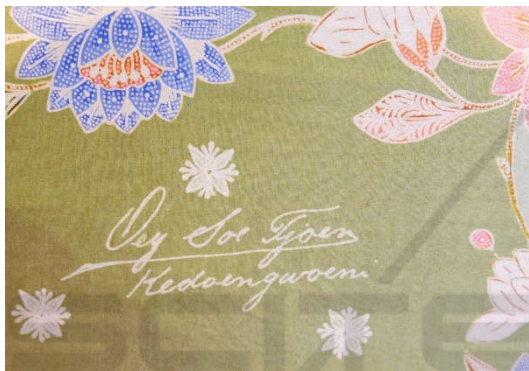


Figure 3: Oey Soe Tjoen's signature (Budianto, 2019).

Ninth, the Oeys only produce *kain panjang* (long rectangular cloth), *kain pagi sore* (a combined colors of long rectangular cloth), and *kain sarung* (sarongs). Tenth, the colors of Oey Soe Tjoen batik represent a balanced combination of softness and clarity. And the last, all colours are vat-dyed, since direct dyeing with brush is never used on Oey Soe Tjoen batik, even for the smallest pattern.

After Oey Soe Tjoen and Kwee Nettie as the first generation passed away, the Oey Soe Tjoen's batik workshop was managed by the second generation, Muljadi Widjaja (Oey Kam Long) and his wife, Istijanti Setiono (Lie Tjien Nio) from 1976 until Muljadi's death in 2002. Afterward, the business was run by Istijanti Setiono while preparing their daughter, Widianti Widjaja (Oey Kim Lian). Since 2006, Widianti Widjaja had been running the Oey Soe Tjoen batik business. She preserves the batik principal values (*pakem batik*) from her parents and

grandparents, while also developing new designs to enrich the variations of Oey Soe Tjoen batik.



Figure 4: Widianti Widjaja, the grand-daughter of Oey Soe Tjoen (Budianto, 2018).

3.3 The Sidji Hotel

The Sidji Hotel in Pekalongan was originally a house owned by Hoo Tong Koey and his wife, Tan Seng Nio. It was built in 1918 and the architecture design was done based on Tan Seng Nio's idea. The couple was very well-known in Pekalongan society, since they owned successful batik dyes enterprise and batik workshops at the back of their house. Hoo Kong Toey was born in Pekalongan in 1885 as the fourth generation of his family. His ancestors were originally from Amoy (now called Xiamen), a city in Fujian, a province on the southeast coast of China. By the late of 1700s, his ancestors came to Pekalongan and soon became the part of Peranakan Chinese community. Back then, Hoo Tong Koey was deeply interested in traditional music, so he formed a group of *gamelan* troupe which often perform for the upscale Peranakan society. Due to his initiative, he was awarded the title 'Lieutenant de Chinese' by the Peranakan community in Pekalongan. The title was the third highest rank for Peranakan in the colonial hierarchy.

The Sidji was first opened for business in March 2015. The main building of The Sidji Hotel can be considered as heritage building since it has Peranakan Chinese style in its exterior and interior. The design of The Sidji Hotel today was the combination of modern and Peranakan Chinese style. Today, the Peranakan building is functioned as lobby and meeting room, while the new modern building is utilized for visitor accommodation and ballroom. The



Figure 5: The Peranakan style façade of The Sidji Hotel (Budianto, 2018).



Figure 6: The Peranakan style lobby of The Sidji Hotel (Budianto, 2018).

Peranakan Chinese style can be examined through the shape and colours of the doors, windows, and façade.

4 DISCUSSION

In Indonesia, the status of the Peranakans as ‘Chinese’ has always been somewhat ambiguous. They are neither considered as real Indonesian here, nor as true Chinese if they went to China. The Peranakans had settled as traders and craftsmen in Southeast Asia long before the Europeans did, so they tended to have lost many of the Chinese cultural features, including everyday practices related to food, clothing and language (Ang, 1993). Sometimes the

Totoks, who uphold the Chinese traditions more tightly, regard the Peranakan Chinese as ‘unpatriotic’ and behave like ‘non-Chinese’. It is reasonable since the Peranakan seemed to develop their own new identity. In visual culture terms, the Peranakans had developed their own aesthetics, which was neither fully follow nor neglect the real aesthetical values of their origins. Their aesthetics was the partial combination of China culture and local culture where they reside. In this case, those were the Javanese culture and Dutch culture during the colonization era in Pekalongan. This mixed aesthetics can be seen from the motif in Peranakan Chinese batik and Peranakan Chinese architecture.

Batik makers in North Coast or *Pesisir* Java were open to many foreign influences and they integrated them into Javanese aesthetics. At the 19th century, Indo-Dutch women began hiring batik artisans and creating Batik Belanda (Indo-Dutch Batik) business. Seeing the promising business opportunity, the Peranakan Chinese followed and started their own batik workshops. They learned the skills of batik making and began their batik industries on the North Coast of Java, particularly in Cirebon, Lasem, Semarang, Pekalongan and Kedungwuni. The batiks produced by the Peranakans had their own unique motifs and rich in colours. It was the result of acculturation process between Chinese, Javanese and European cultures. Many designs were borrowed from Chinese textiles, embroideries and even porcelain wares. Genevieve Duggan (2001) describes that the symbolism of Chinese motifs are usually found on Peranakan batiks, such as swastika (*wan zi*), lozenge, coin, mythical animals (such as dragon and phoenix), birds, centipedes, fish, butterflies, flowers (such as peony and chrysanthemum) and plants. Apart from the Chinese-inspired motifs, the Peranakan also adopted many ornamental motifs from Central Java court, such as *kawung* and *parang*, into their batik designs. The adaptation was usually in a less significant way, sometimes only as background designs (Lee, 2016). In addition, the *Batik Belanda* also had a great influence on Peranakan batiks, particularly the *buketan* or floral bouquet designs. This visual culture influences can be seen in four principals designs in Oey Soe Tjoen batik, such as

Buketan, *Cuwiri*, *Merak Ati*, and *Urang Ayu*, along with the various design of its *tanahan* (background).



Figure 7: Oey Soe Tjoen's famous *Buketan* motif (Budianto, 2018).



Figure 8: Dragon motif on Oey Soe Tjoen's batik (Liong, 2014).

In accordance with the batik, the Peranakan Chinese architecture also has its own distinctive characteristics, resulted from the acculturation of Chinese, Javanese and European cultures. According to Bahaudin et al (2010), Peranakan architecture is famous for its design of shophouses and colonial bungalows. Bungalow was first introduced by the colonialist from Europe, and later adopted by the non-Europeans (Knapp, 2012). According to Ahmad (1994), the architectural style of Peranakan homes in those maritime town localities was fused with a combination of European, Chinese and Malay influences, known as 'Chinese Baroque' architecture as the buildings were predominantly influenced by

the design of Chinese and European building styles (Soon and Bahauddin, 2017). Lee Kip Lin also mentioned that the Peranakan building began to shed the Chinese elements and decoration, by adopting 'Western' appearance. Patricia Bjaaland Welch also described that the Peranakan's array of motif and design are so broad in scope and rich in colours. Some ornaments from classical Chinese motifs may be missed and some may have idiosyncratic themes borrowed from beyond Asia (Knapp, 2012).

The Sidji Hotel can be classified as bungalow type, its structure is closer to colonial bungalow than to shophouse. The architecture was also influenced by Dutch colonial architecture, which can be seen from the building design and the Art Nouveau stained glass windows. Now, the windows becomes the signature of The Sidji Hotel lobby. Another features that are prominent are the turquoise Peranakan-style doors, Javanese multi-coloured tiles (usually called *tegel kunci*) on the veranda, and the lion golden stucco at the top of the façade. Another things that enhance the Peranakan nuance in this hotel is the combination of



Figure 9: The pattern of Art Nouveau stained glass windows (Budianto, 2018).



Figure 10: Golden lion stucco at the top of the façade (Budianto, 2018).



Figure 11: Javanese multi-coloured tiles or *tegel kunci* (Budianto, 2018).

the interior elements, such as Peranakan Chinese antique bed, various Peranakan porcelain wares on the walls, European-style chandelier and traditional Javanese wooden chairs and furniture.



Figure 12: Peranakan style interior in The Sidji Hotel (Budianto, 2018).

5 CONCLUSION

The influence of Peranakan Chinese visual culture in Pekalongan is truly existed. It can be examined from Oey Soe Tjoen batik tulis pattern and The Sidji Hotel architecture. The unique combination of Peranakan Chinese visual culture, along with local Javanese and Dutch colonialist visual culture do contribute to the cultural transformation in Pekalongan. This cultural transformation also enriches the cultural diversity in Indonesia, which also has important role in Indonesia cultural heritage. However, this kind of cultural heritage is endangered to perish if it is not well-preserved. In the case of Oey Soe Tjoen batik, however, there is a hesitation from the owner whether the batik tulis business can be continued until the fourth generation, since the regeneration of skilful batik artisan is hard to accomplish. The younger generations in Pekalongan do not see batik artisan as a promising occupation, they prefer to work in office or retail stores instead. On the other hand, the heritage buildings in Pekalongan are quite rare to find. The Sidji is only one of a few old Peranakan buildings in Pekalongan which still survives and had good condition. However, it could be a good example for cultural heritage conservation and revitalization, which can promote the tourism of the city.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research had been supported by Indonesia Endowment Fund of Education (LPDP Kementerian Keuangan Republik Indonesia). Also, I am grateful to Mrs. Widianti Widjaja, the grand-daughter of Mr. Oey Soe Tjoen, for sharing the true story behind Oey Soe Tjoen Batik. Moreover, I also appreciate the staffs in The Sidji Hotel, Museum Batik Pekalongan, KESBANGPOL Pekalongan and BAPPEDA Pekalongan, who were very helpful during my research in Pekalongan. Last but not least, the completion of this research would not have been possible without the support of my family and lecturers in Bandung Institute of Technology.

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Pekalongan as UNESCO Creative Cities Network.
<https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/pekalongan>
Archived in Mei 8th 2018 on 12.37 pm.

