

The relationship between Chinese community traditions and belief systems and the architectural form of the Chinatown area in Lasem, Central Java

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Article history:</i> Received June 26, 2025 Received in revised form Jan. 02, 2026 Accepted March 12, 2026 Available online June 01, 2026 <i>Keywords:</i> Architectural form Chinatown Chinese architecture Chinese settlements Chinese traditions and beliefs Heritage buildings *Corresponding author: Julindiani Iskandar Doctoral Program in Architecture, Faculty of Civil Engineering, Universitas Katolik Parahyangan, Indonesia Email: 9111901004@student.unpar.ac.id	Historical records indicate that Chinese communities have consistently adapted to their surrounding environments. This adaptive capacity has influenced both activities and architectural styles found within Chinatown areas. Although the architectural forms of Chinatowns may appear similar on the surface, they often embody an integration of traditions and belief systems that shape their design. This study aims to explore, analyze, and define the relationship between the traditions and belief systems of the Chinese community and the architectural forms of Chinatown in the Lasem Chinatown area, Central Java. A qualitative approach is employed in this research to collect primary data through two main methods: (1) conducting interviews with key informants to gather data on traditions and beliefs related to activities, and (2) carrying out field observations to collect data on the architectural forms of Chinatown. The data are analyzed and interpreted to reveal the relationships between the interview information obtained and the observational findings. In the context of residential buildings, the traditions and beliefs of the Chinese community are transmitted from generation to generation without significantly altering the architectural form. Chinese architecture functions as a pragmatic replication of ancient structures from their homeland, brought by Chinese immigrants to Indonesia, particularly to Lasem. The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the relationship between traditions and belief systems and the architectural forms of Chinatown, and propose strategies for the sustainability of contemporary Chinese architectural practices.

Introduction

The development of Chinatown architecture in Indonesia demonstrates a consistent physical form across different periods of construction. Despite being situated in diverse locations, Chinatown architecture maintains a similar visual appearance. For example, studies focusing on the spatial patterns and morphology of Semarang's Chinatown emphasize key architectural elements, including roof forms, layout patterns, and the use

of color. This research reveals that traditional Chinese houses in Indonesia, particularly in Semarang's Chinatown, serve social and cultural purposes and reflect historical design principles (Stevens and Thailand 2024).

The formation and historical evolution of Chinatowns are closely intertwined with the traditional values of their communities, encompassing philosophical, cultural, and ideological dimensions. Traditional Chinese architecture embodies the cultural and ideological

beliefs of the Chinese community, and even as Chinese communities develop within new environments, their architectural identity persists, underscoring the enduring influence of traditional values. The Chinese communities highlighted in the case studies continue to grapple with understanding various cultural elements, including myths, legends, belief systems, rituals, and core values that shape Chinatown architecture. The artistic synthesis of Chinese traditions and local or colonial influences in Karawang's Chinatown, West Java, has produced a distinctive architectural character rich in symbolic meaning. This condition indicates that residents' understanding of these symbols may vary and, in some cases, remain limited, illustrating the combined influence of Chinese and local cultures.

Another example can be found in San Francisco. San Francisco's Chinatown presents a case in which architectural styles reflect cultural interactions between Chinese and Western influences. This synthesis shapes how people interpret myths, legends, and belief systems in diverse ways (Yang 2024).

Evidence indicates the influence of traditions and beliefs on architectural elements and symbols in Lasem's Chinatown; however, concrete evidence in the form of detailed architectural analysis remains limited. This includes several key observations: (1) The architecture of Chinese settlements in Lasem has demonstrated resilience to political and economic changes over centuries. This resilience is evident in temples and public spaces that preserve their original architectural designs, imbued with socio-cultural values (Sudarwani et al. 2020); 2). Lasem's Chinatown stands out from other Chinatowns due to the absence of a typical shophouse model, instead presenting substantial residential areas characterized by unique architectural styles that have endured for 150 to 200 years. Its spatial configuration incorporates corridors flanked by high walls, reflecting a deep connection to traditional forms and their associated meanings (Sudarwani et al. 2022); 3). In Lasem, historic buildings such as Rumah Oei, Rumah Merah, and Nyah Lasem have been restored and transformed into commercial spaces. These structures display a harmonious integration of traditional and modern elements, reflecting the values and ideas

of the local community (Putri 2023); 4) Traditional Chinese architectural symbols, visible in temples and various buildings, embody the profound cultural and religious values of the community. Many modern designs incorporate these symbols, preserving links to historical and cultural heritage (Orlenko et al. 2020); 5) Local influences, including history, economy, tradition, religion, kinship, and social community structures, underpin the architectural form of Lasem's Chinatown. These factors reinforce the distinctive identity and resilience of the area (Sudarwani et al. 2022). While some evidence illustrates how traditions and beliefs shape the architecture of Lasem's Chinatown, specific examples of architectural elements and symbols remain scarce. Nevertheless, the distinctive architectural characteristics and cultural representations embedded in heritage buildings demonstrate a profound connection to traditional values and belief systems.

Methods

Case study

The research location is situated in the Lasem Chinatown area, considering that Lasem represents the oldest Chinatown along the northern coast of Java Island, where buildings originating from Chinese architecture are still extant and retain their complete primary architectural elements. The research case studies encompass significant buildings located in Soditan Village, Lasem Chinatown. These buildings are represented by Tjoe An Kiong Temple as a religious structure, Lawang Ombo House as the residence of a Chinese kapitan, and the residence of Mrs. Frida's family as a vernacular dwelling that remains actively inhabited by the local community. In this study, Tjoe An Kiong Temple is selected to represent the other buildings as the primary case study, as it is the oldest example of Chinese architecture in the area, preserves its complete primary architectural elements, and functions as a religious building in which the traditions and belief systems of the Chinese community in Lasem Chinatown continue to be actively practiced.



Figure 1. Location of Soditan Village, Lasem Chinatown, Central Java

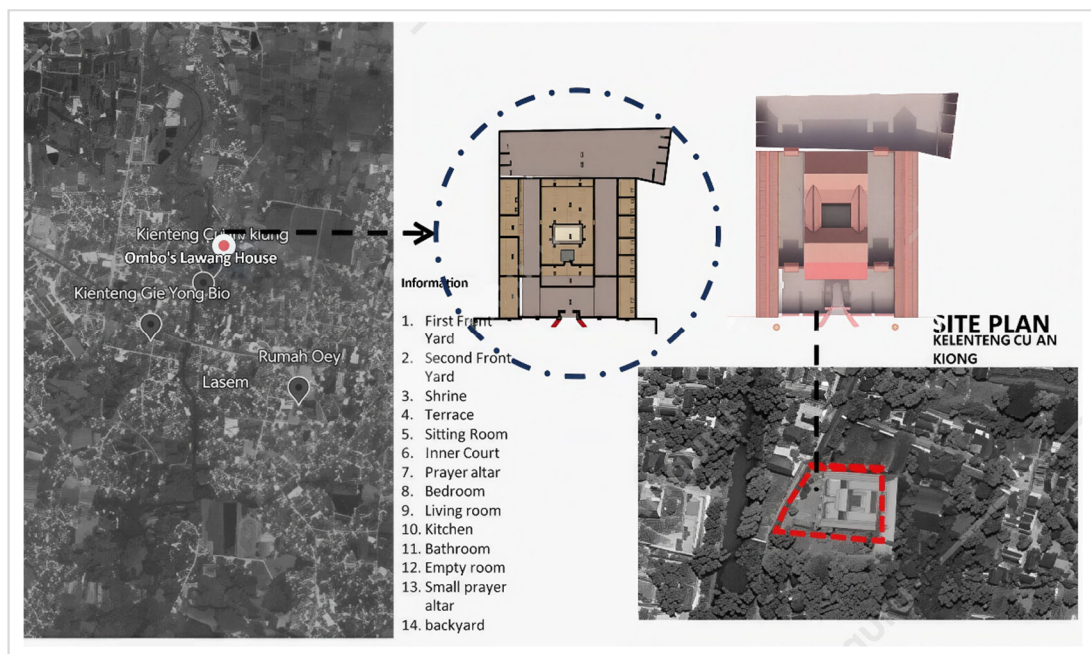


Figure 2. Block plan, site plan, and floor plan of Tjoe An Kiong Temple

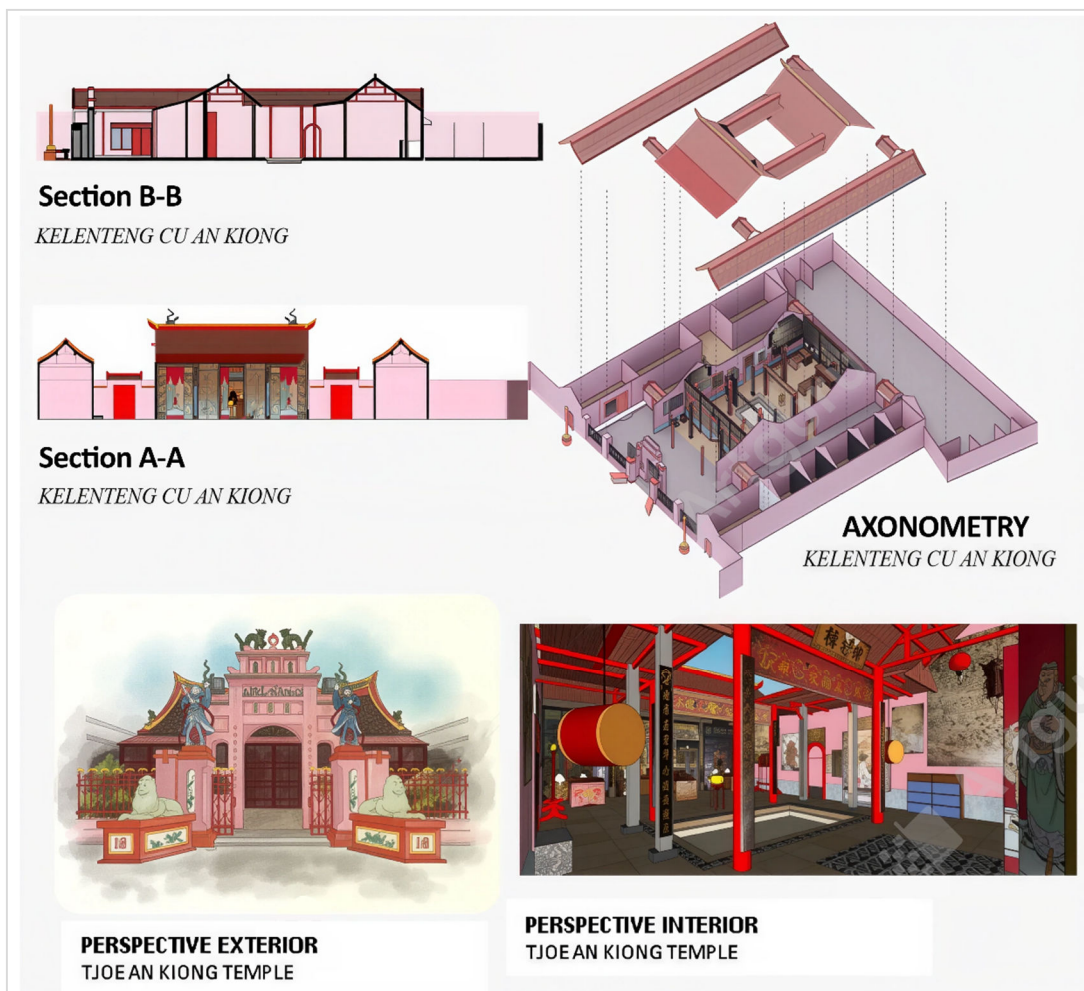


Figure 3. Section B – B' , Section A – A' , Axonometric Projection, Exterior Perspective, and Interior Perspective of Tjoe An Kiong Temple

Method

The process of tracing the relationship between traditional activities and the belief systems of the Chinese community and the architectural form of Lasem's Chinatown is structured into four main stages, namely: (1) the data collection stage, (2) the data analysis stage focusing on activity concepts and Chinatown architectural concepts, (3) the stage of interpreting relationships and findings, and (4) the stage of drawing conclusions.

The data collection stage (Stage 1) involves reviewing theories relevant to the research topic. The relationship between traditions and beliefs that shape Chinatown architecture is divided into two components to allow for a comprehensive examination. First, data on traditions and belief systems influencing the activities of the Chinese

community are collected. Second, data on the architectural forms of the Chinatown case studies are gathered, focusing on typological morphology. These two components serve as the foundation for exploring concepts of activity and form, which are further developed in subsequent stages. The field data collection process aims to obtain information on both the conceptual framework of Chinese community activities and the architectural forms of Chinatown through the following approaches: (1) conducting interviews (primary data) and literature reviews (secondary data) related to traditional activities, including (a) Lasem community rituals, (b) worship rituals in temples, and (c) rituals within residential houses; and (2) collecting observational data (field observations, documentation, and primary visual data) concerning locations and activities

associated with architectural forms and facilities, including (a) kirab or jutbio processions, (b) temples, and (c) residential houses.

The theoretical elaboration and analysis stage (Stage 2) examines data on activities and architectural forms with the objective of developing concepts related to activity categories and architectural forms. This analysis comprises: (1) decomposing all activities using the theory of Property and Composition (Salura's theory) to explore their underlying concepts; (2) interpreting concepts associated with key terms, Lasem community, temples, and residential houses, guided by Property and Composition, through interviews with cultural experts and local government representatives to reveal fundamental concepts, including (a) the ancestral concept, (b) the local government concept (cultural heritage), and (c) the local/Javanese concept; (3) analyzing all case study forms through observation and re-imagining based on anatomical analysis (Channel Theory) within the scope of the research, covering (a) environment, (b) building, (c) interior space, and (d) ornamentation; (4) conceptualizing empirical areas (documented findings) based on Property and Composition using Lynch's theory, Path, Edge, Node, District, and Landmark, and applying Loexc typomorphological theory through redrawing to identify building types; and (5) analyzing the underlying concepts of each formation by comparing the investigated

typological morphologies with those documented by Pratiwo (2010), focusing on conditions that are (a) still maintained, (b) lost, or (c) transformed.

The subsequent analysis examines the relationship between activities and the architectural forms of Chinatown (Stage 3), utilizing insights derived from the definition of activity concepts, the Ancestral Concept, the Local Government Concept (Cultural Heritage), and the Local Concept obtained through interviews to identify dominant underlying ideas. Furthermore, the analysis of architectural form is informed by current field observations and references to previous research (Pratiwo, 2010) to assess whether existing forms have disappeared, remained unchanged, or undergone transformation. The findings regarding prevailing conceptual foundations are further analyzed to explore the relationships between these two aspects through expert interviews with architects (researchers). Ultimately, this stage presents how activity concepts relate to form concepts and vice versa.

The final stage involves drawing conclusions from the research findings (stage 4). These conclusions are used to deepen the understanding of activity concepts and architectural form concepts. The interpretations reveal insights into active functional aspects and existing architectural forms, emphasizing choices that align with the established criteria.

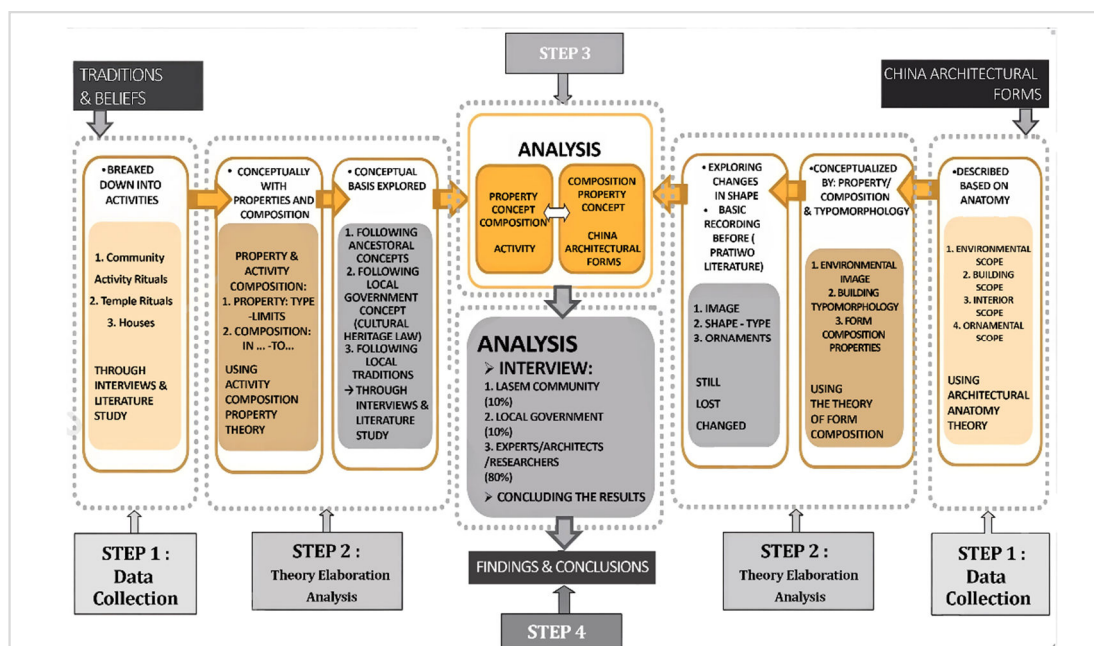


Figure 4. Research method framework

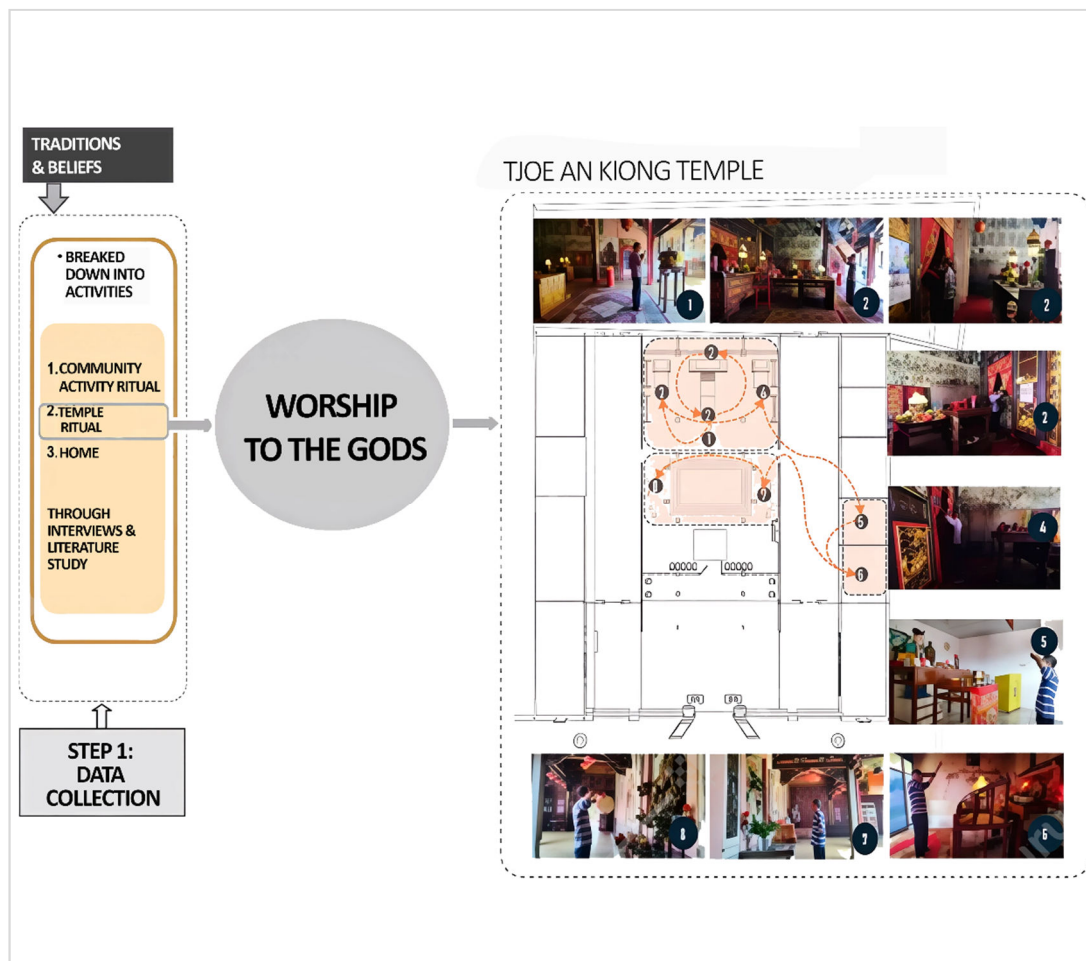


Figure 6. Diagram of stage 1 implementation and sequence of Worship Activities to the Deities at Tjoe An Kiong Temple, Soditan Village, Lasem, Central Java

Architectural form

Data on properties & composition of architectural forms in Lasem Chinatown (macro scale)

The collection of data on the properties and composition of facilities/architectural forms in Lasem Chinatown (macro scale) employed Lynch's *Image of the City* theory (1960) to determine the urban image of Lasem Chinatown as a case study by examining elements that constitute the city image: a. Paths: the streets within Lasem Chinatown. b. Edges: the boundaries between Chinese-descendant settlements and indigenous settlements. c. Districts: parts of the city characterized by identifiable features or activities, such as the high

walls surrounding Chinese-descendant houses and Chinese-style houses that dominate the area. These include houses with swallow-tail roofs, a distinctive feature of Chinese-descendant residences in Lasem Chinatown. d. Nodes: strategic areas or intersections where paths or activities converge and can lead to other directions or activities. Examples include traffic intersections, stations, airports, bridges, the city as a whole, markets, parks, plazas, and spaces where circulation occurs, such as Lasem town square. e. Landmarks: visually striking symbols due to their placement, often differing in form and scale from their surroundings, such as the Grand Mosque of Lasem, located near the town square.



Figure 7. Diagram of stage 1 implementation and map of the “Little China” Chinatown Area, Lasem, Central Java

Data on properties & composition of architectural forms at Tjoe An Kiong Temple (micro scale)

Data on the properties and composition of architectural forms were collected through observation (field documentation, drawings, and primary data) of the case study site, specifically the locations/facilities used for the *kirab/jutbio* procession and the Tjoe An Kiong Temple

building itself. Data collection was conducted by analyzing the architecture according to its anatomy (Salura’s architectural anatomy theory), covering: a. Environmental scope b. Building scope c. Interior space scope d. Ornamental scope This analysis involved documentation and drawing of block plans, site plans, floor plans, elevations, and sections for the case study.

Activities

Analysis of traditional activities and beliefs (macro scale)

Once the data were collected, a theoretical elaboration analysis was performed to identify concepts related to activity categories. This was conducted using the Activity Property & Composition theory, tracing the conceptual foundations of each main activity (Lasem Community, Temple, Residential House) through interviews with cultural experts, local government representatives, and the Lasem community.

This process produced the following conceptual insights: 1. Following the Ancestral Concept: The *jutbio/kirab* activity in Lasem Chinatown is an intergenerational tradition maintained by the local Chinese community. The procession route and the sites visited have become customary practices of Lasem Chinatown, rather than being strictly based on ancestral beliefs from China, the original homeland of Lasem's Chinese ancestors. Similarly, activities conducted within the case study buildings are based on traditions passed down over generations, rather than on scriptural or doctrinal mandates. Worship rituals in the temple and within residential houses are performed solely according to these inherited traditions. 2. Following the Local Government Concept (Cultural Heritage): In addition to being a long-standing intergenerational tradition, the *jutbio/kirab* procession in Lasem Chinatown is

officially designated as a ritual path according to the Regent of Rembang Regulation No. 47 of 2019 regarding the Building and Environmental Plan of the Lasem Heritage Area, Lasem District, Rembang Regency. The ritual path is outlined in Chapter V, General Plan and Design Guidelines, Section One, Land Use Structure, Article 11, stating that the macro land-use plan includes areas with conserved buildings, which are directed to be part of the ritual path to support heritage tourism in Lasem. 3. Following the Local Concept (Current *Jutbio/Kirab*): The local concept refers to activities conducted according to intergenerational traditions maintained by the Lasem Chinatown community. The *jutbio/kirab* procession is the only activity actively performed by the Chinese community in Lasem Chinatown (macro scale). The procession follows a fixed route starting from Tjoe An Kiong Temple and returning to it at the end, with specific sites along the way that must be visited according to tradition. Similarly, worship activities to the deities (micro scale/temple) at Tjoe An Kiong Temple are conducted according to intergenerational tradition. Devotees of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism do not use any sacred text or prescribed guide for the sequence of worship. Instead, the rituals are performed following the order established by the temple, based on traditions handed down from elder community members.

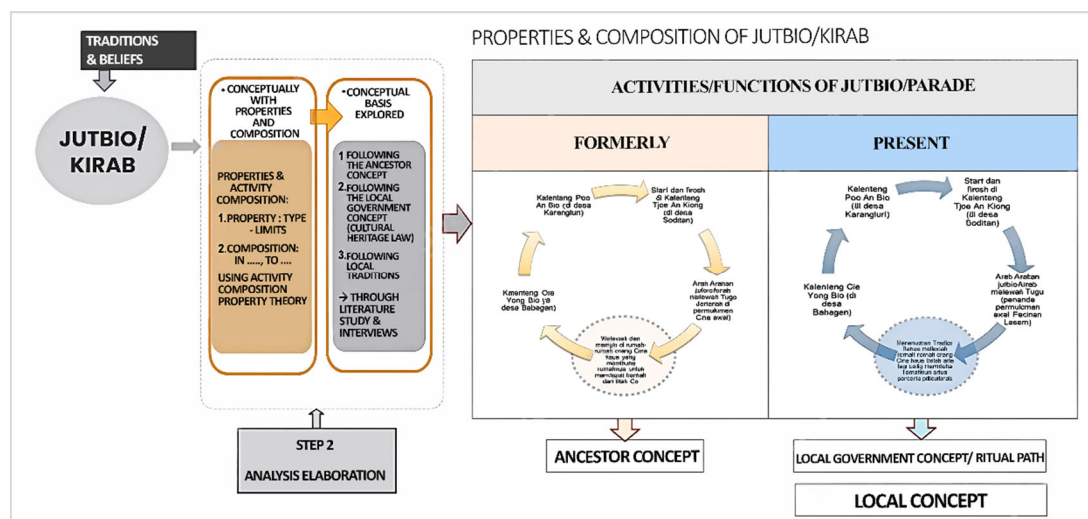


Figure 9. Diagram of stage 2 implementation and sequence of Jutbio/Kirab Activities in Soditan Village, Lasem, Central Java

Analysis of Worship activities to the deities at Tjoe An Kiong Temple (micro scale)

Worship activities within the temple are conducted according to a ritual sequence that has

been maintained over generations. The worship sequence, numbered from 1 to 8, is standardized, with each altar table assigned a specific number in the order. There is no sacred text or manual guiding the order of worship activities within the temple. The findings indicate that the worship

activities to the deities at Tjoe An Kiong Temple are performed strictly according to intergenerational traditions maintained by the Lasem Chinatown community (Local Concept), without reliance on any doctrinal texts prescribing the sequence of rituals.

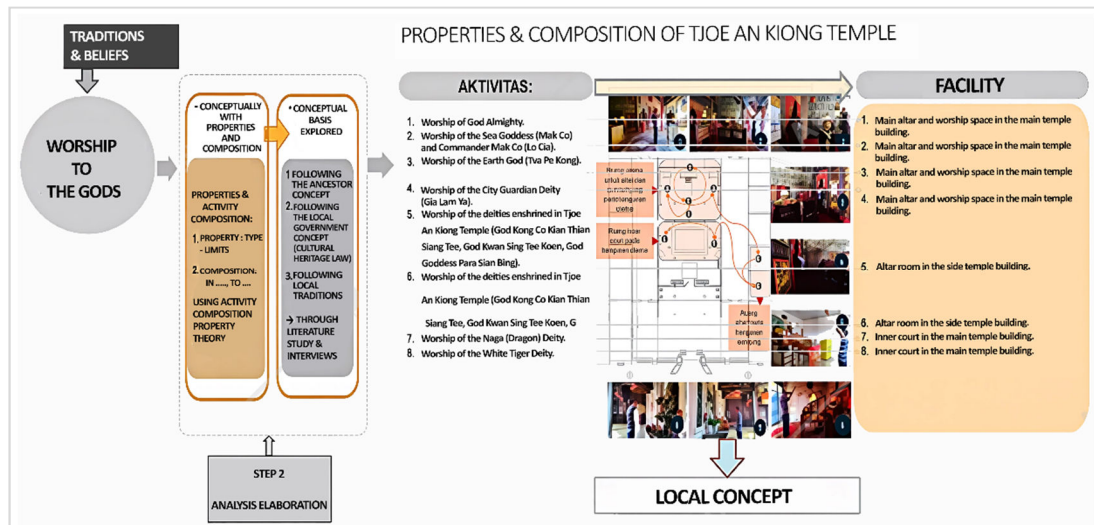


Figure 10. Diagram of stage 2 implementation and sequence of Worship Activities to the Deities at Tjoe An Kiong Temple, Soditan Village, Lasem, Central Java

Architectural form

Analysis of properties & composition of architectural forms in Lasem Chinatown (macro scale)

The analysis of the properties and composition of architectural forms in Lasem Chinatown (macro scale) was conducted by comparing data from field documentation with previous records/research by Pratiwo (2010). Key observations include:

Path: The residential streets exhibit the distinctive characteristics of Lasem Chinatown, visually marked by high boundary walls along the street frontages of houses.

- ✓ Path: The residential streets exhibit the distinctive characteristics of Lasem Chinatown, visually marked by high boundary walls along the street frontages of houses.
- ✓ Edge: The boundary between Chinese-descendant and indigenous settlements remains clearly visible, reflected in the differing architectural styles of residential buildings.
- ✓ District: Areas of the city with identifiable characteristics or activities are marked by

Chinese-style buildings with distinctive roofs (swallow-tail “wallet” roofs), making Lasem Chinatown easily recognizable as a unique urban district.

- ✓ Nodes: Strategic intersections or areas where paths or activities converge and can redirect movement. Examples include traffic intersections, stations, airports, bridges, markets, parks, plazas, and circulation hubs. In Lasem Chinatown, the town square serves as the primary node for community movement and activities.
- ✓ Landmark: Visually striking symbols due to their placement, form, and scale relative to surrounding buildings. The Grand Mosque of Lasem serves as a city landmark because of its visually prominent form and scale, distinguishing it from nearby structures.

The urban image of the “Little China” area, documented in Pratiwo’s research in the 1980s (Pratiwo 2010), remains identifiable today. The characteristic urban elements used to trace the area’s form are still present, preserving the unique features of Lasem Chinatown.

minor changes have occurred, primarily through added functions or facilities.

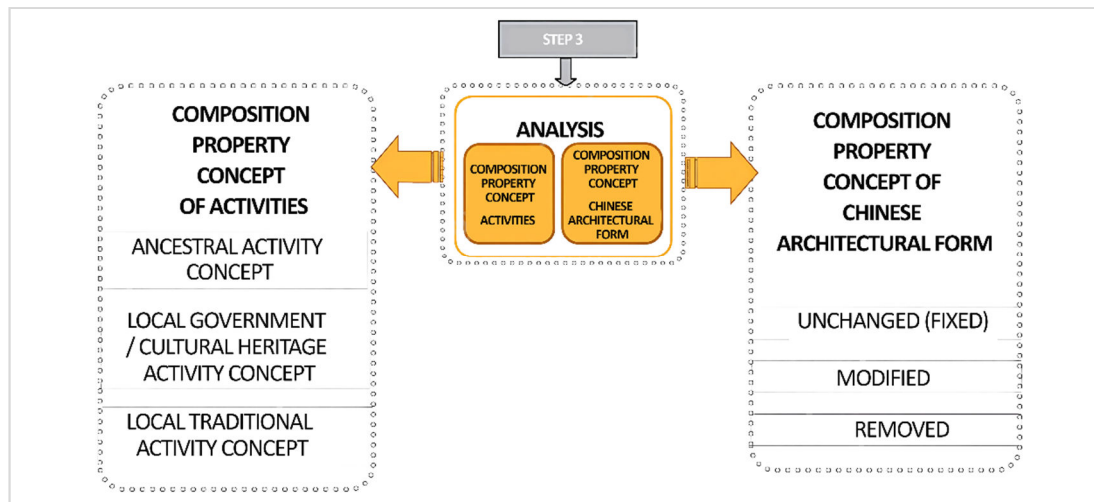


Figure 13. Diagram of stage 3 implementation, analysis comparing activity concepts with architectural form concepts of Lasem Chinatown, Central Java

D. Implementation of stage 4

Stage 4 involves analyzing the relationship between activity concepts and architectural form concepts to determine the Relation of Activity Concepts to Architectural Form Concepts in the case study. The dominant conceptual foundations

of both activities and forms were juxtaposed to identify their relationships through interviews with experts, architects, and researchers. The results provide the relationship of activity concepts to architectural form concepts, and the relationship of architectural form concepts to activity concepts.

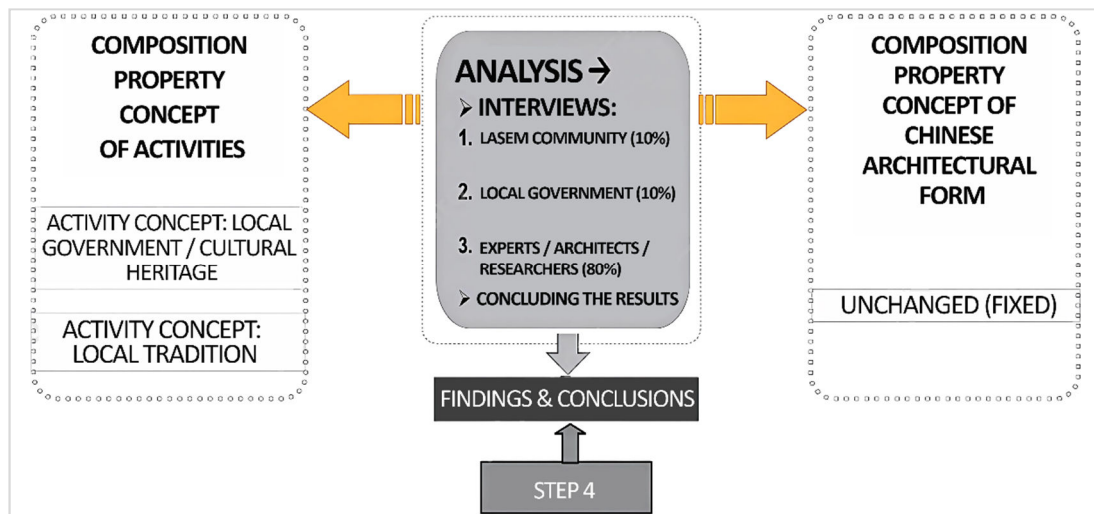


Figure 14. Diagram of stage 4 implementation, analysis comparing activity concepts with architectural form concepts of Lasem Chinatown, Central Java

Findings

Relationship of activity concepts to architectural form concepts in the case study at soditan village, Lasem Chinatown

Interviews conducted to confirm the results of tracing dominant activity concepts and architectural forms in the Lasem Chinatown case study, with local community leaders, local

government representatives, and Chinese architecture experts/researchers, indicated that:

1. The relationship from activities to architectural forms is Adaptive.

2. The relationship from architectural forms to activities is Accommodative.

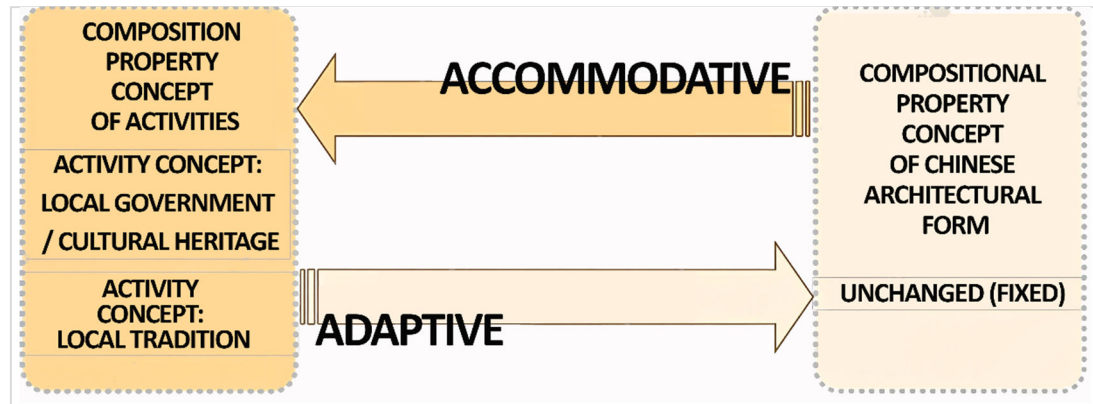


Figure 15. Diagram of stage 4 implementation, results of analysis comparing activity concepts with architectural form concepts of Lasem Chinatown, Central Java

Conclusions

Although the architectural form of Chinatown may appear similar, it is believed that there is always an adaptation to traditions and beliefs that influences its architecture. This study confirms that, although the architectural style may appear similar, Lasem's Chinatown reflects adaptations rooted in the traditions and beliefs of the Chinese community. The distinction lies in the fact that the deities paraded by the Lasem Chinatown community do not strictly adhere to their original religious beliefs but instead uphold the traditions of their ancestors. The architectural style of Lasem Chinatown still preserves elements of traditional Chinese architecture, which emerge more from the imitation of prior forms rather than the pragmatics of internal activities.

The concept of shaping traditions and beliefs of the Chinese community in Sodita Village, Lasem:

- a. Local Concept: The *jutbio/kirab* tradition remains the sole practice upheld by the residents of Lasem Chinatown. Historically, the *jutbio/carnival* event is rooted in the belief of receiving blessings from the sea goddess, who was believed to traverse the Chinatown area. However, this tradition has evolved and is now conducted more as a ritual, detached from its original belief system but passed down from generation to generation.

- b. Local Government Concept: The *jutbio/kirab* activity is officially recognized as a ritual pathway in accordance with Rembang Regent Regulation No. 47 of 2019, which relates to the Building and Environmental Plan of the Lasem Heritage Area in Lasem District, Rembang Regency. This ritual pathway is outlined in Chapter V of the General Plan and Design Guidelines, Part One, Land Allocation Structure, Article 11. It stipulates that macro land allocation includes conservation buildings intended to support tourism within the Lasem heritage area, aligning with the overall ritual pathway.

The current relationship between Tradition, Belief, and Chinatown Architecture in Sodita Village, Lasem:

- a. Macro and Mezzo Research Scope – Relationship: The core of the *kirab/jutbio* practice, which is based on ancient Chinese tradition, endures. While the original sites essential to this practice have disappeared, the tradition of visiting these now non-existent locations continues, demonstrating the strong *kirab/jutbio* habits preserved by the Lasem Chinatown community. The community adapts by organizing carnival celebrations even without the previously important stops, which remain a dynamic practice.
- b. Micro Research Scope – Relationship: While some traditions persist and shape architectural

forms, they remain practical and uphold tradition (e.g., prayer spaces). What once served as ancestral prayer spaces entrusted with honoring and receiving blessings now functions solely as memorial spaces. c. The relationship between activities and architectural forms is flexible. d. The relationship between architectural design and supporting activities is interconnected. Consequently, the findings of this study specifically pertain to Lasem Chinatown. However, they may also be relevant to other Chinatowns in Indonesia with the necessary adjustments. These findings can further serve as hypotheses or a conceptual framework for future research.

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Author(s) contribution

Julindiani Iskandar contributed to the research concepts preparation, methodologies, investigations, data analysis, visualization, articles drafting and revisions.

Purnama Salura contribute to the research concepts preparation and literature reviews, data analysis, of article drafts preparation and validation.

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