

PRESERVING IDENTITY, EMBRACING CHANGE: THE SURVIVAL OF PEKALONGAN PERANAKAN BATIK

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Abstract: *Indonesia is famous for its cultural heritage. One of the acknowledged heritages is Pekalongan Peranakan batik, a delicate and beautiful craftsmanship influenced by Asia, Arab, and Europe. The Peranakan batik combines Javanese batik-making artistry with the Chinese design planning and trading strategies. This article investigates the survival of Pekalongan Peranakan batik as an endangered culture and how the artisan batik adapts with the modern era. The method used in this study is literature review, interview with the owner of the last producer of Pekalongan Peranakan batik and descriptive-qualitative analysis. The findings reveal that although UNESCO's recognition of batik as intangible heritage, and Peranakan batik holds centuries-old heritage of cross-cultural exchange, this art form now risks extinction. This paper examines its historical development and contemporary challenges, arguing that revitalization through innovation is essential for its survival. Besides that, this research contributes to archiving the process and the portrait of artisan batik Liem Ping Wie in Kedungwuni, Pekalongan.*

Keywords: Chinese Javanese Peranakan Batik; cultural heritage; revitalization

Introduction

Batik is known as a traditional art form, drawn on fabric with wax, then dyed through immersion techniques. Batik is not just documented knowledge in books, articles, or videos; it is a living tradition passed down from generation to genera-

tion, a symbol of cultural identity, and a history woven with philosophy and meaning in its motifs. This skill of batik-making is to be inherited by the next generation.

UNESCO designated batik as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (United Nations Education-

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al, 2009) on October 2, 2009. Following this, the Indonesian government established National Batik Day. Batik is valued, worn with pride, and preserved as a national identity across generations.

Batik in the archipelago has always been shaped by time. It is created through the interplay of dialectics and creativity dialogue between continuity and obstacles, resulting in innovation. In North Coast Java (Pekalongan), batik developed under the influence of Indian, Chinese, Arab, and European cultures. Constantly changing and adapting, batik transformed to meet the needs of its era.

Today, Pekalongan—historically known as the City of Batik, faces an urgent challenge as one of its most unique traditions, the Pekalongan Chinese-Javanese Peranakan batik is on the verge of extinction. Peranakan batik is rich with symbols and meanings, produced, exchanged, and reinterpreted over time. In Peranakan batik, foreign cultural motifs were adopted and adapted, forming a new cultural identity through images, patterns, and colors.

Peranakan batik is recognized as coastal (pesisir) batik with vibrant colors. Its motifs are dominated by:

1. Geometric patterns: triangles (from bamboo shoots) and banji (the swastika-like motif from India symbolizing prosperity and happiness, introduced by Chinese migrants).
2. Botanical motifs: leaves and flowers.
3. Animal motifs: butterflies, birds, dragons, qilin.
4. Human figures.

Designs typically consist of two parts: the head and the body (Vedhuisen, 1993). The head, placed at the fabric's edge, often features tumpal (rows of triangles). In the 1930s, floral motifs (dlorong) became popular, arranged vertically or diagonally

(Sumarsono et al., 2013). The body was filled with flora, fauna, or narrative depictions.

Importantly, Peranakan batik is egalitarian—wearable by anyone, without restrictions of social class or status. Peranakan batik is an evolution that has been diversely influenced by other cultures:

- Indian chintz and patola textiles shaped early patterns such as jlamprang and floral designs.
- Chinese influence introduced banji, dragons, phoenixes, and qilin, symbolizing prosperity, strength, and spiritual harmony.
- Dutch influence in the 19th–20th centuries introduced buketan (floral bouquets) and fairy tale scenes such as Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood.
- Japanese occupation led to the emergence of Djawa Hokokai batik with pagi-sore (morning-afternoon) dual designs (Ratnadewi et al., 2020; Vedhuisen, 1993).

Peranakan batik became a melting pot of cultures, producing unique motifs and styles through centuries of global interactions. Initially, Chinese traders bought batik from local Javanese artisans and sold it across Java and Sumatra. Gradually, they settled, married locals, and began producing their own batik from the 1920s onwards. Early designs imitated Dutch batik, later evolving with Chinese mythological motifs (Budianto & Sunarya, 2019).

World War I influenced the decline of Dutch batik fashion. The war disrupted the cotton fabric import from Netherlands which impacted the price of the materials. Because batik price rocketed, buyers could no longer afford it. The change in fashion among Indo-European community worsened the situation. Batik was replaced by long European dresses

(Vedhuisen, 1993).

The batik home industry in Pekalongan was impacted by all these factors. As a result, many workshops went bankrupt.

During the Japanese occupation, Djawa Hokokai batik was created. It was based on the pagi-sore (Morning-Afternoon) batik design, a fabric with two different colors and patterns combined diagonally to be worn in the morning and afternoon (Wulandari, 2011). Djawa Hokokai combined floral patterns like Sakura and Chrysanthemum, with Javanese classic motifs like kawung and parang.

For over two centuries Peranakan batik evolved due to various complex pressures. These changes have given rise to many artisans and producers. Notable producers included Oei Khing Liem, Ny Lie Boen In, Sie Kie Siang, Oey Kiem Boen, and others. Today, only a handful remain. The legacy of Oey Soe Tjoen (OST) spanned three generations before closing in 2025. Meanwhile, Batik Liem Ping Wie, passed down to the third and fourth generations, remains the last surviving Chinese Javanese Peranakan batik workshop in Pekalongan. The craft of batik-making cannot be sustained solely through documentation; it requires years of hands-on apprenticeship. Artisans like Sutinah, who learned from her grandmother and mother, struggle to pass the skill on to younger generations, who often prefer more accessible jobs in retail or services.

Despite the pride, the heritage faces threats of extinction. In 2025, Kedungwuni – a district in Pekalongan – has only one remaining producer of Chinese Javanese Peranakan batik: Batik Liem Ping Wie. In the same year, the finest hand-drawn batik producer of Kedungwuni, Batik Oey Soe Tjoen, ceased its production, marked by the exhibition “Batik Oey Soe Tjoen: Perseverance in Preserving Heritage, an Exhibition of Three Generations over 100 Years” in Jakarta, July 26 – Au-

gust 3, 2025, (Rumah Batik Oey Soe Tjoen, n.d.).

With declining interest from the youth to carry on the tradition, long hours of producing a fine hand-drawn batik, and a diminishing pool of skilled batik artisans, the prospects for Peranakan batik appear increasingly grim (Oey Soe Tjoen, Batik Tulis Alus Peranakan Diambah Kepuhuan, Satu Kain Dibuat Selama 3 Tahun, 2021).. Thus, concrete solutions are urgently needed to prevent its extinction. This paper examines the historical development, challenges and survival opportunities of Pekalongan Peranakan batik, arguing that while this heritage embodies centuries of cross-cultural exchange and rich symbolism, it now faces threats of extinction that demand revitalization through innovation and adaptation in the modern era.

This research focuses on Batik Liem Ping Wie, the last remaining Peranakan batik studio in Pekalongan as a case study to understand how artisans' batik navigates the pressures of modernization while preserving identity. While previous research has examined batik from historical or aesthetic perspectives, few studies analyze the contemporary survival strategies of local artisans after UNESCO recognition.

Therefore, this research will answer the following question: how does Pekalongan Peranakan batik specifically Batik Liem Ping Wie sustain its cultural identity amid social and economic transformation and what adaptive strategies can ensure its continuity in modern era?

The scope of the study will cover challenges: exploring the decline in generational artisanship, competition with batik printing, and opportunities to revitalize Peranakan batik; examining ongoing and potential strategies.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the survival of Pekalongan Peranakan batik as a living cultural heritage. Data were collected through a combination of a literature review method, analyzing primary and secondary sources such as books, academic articles, historical archives, and media reports.

As part of this research, a short documentary about Batik Liem Ping Wie was produced to build public awareness of the uniqueness and fragility of artisan batik in Kedungwuni, Pekalongan. The film functions both as a medium of education and as an archival record, documenting the story of one of the last remaining artisan workshops founded in the 1950s. Through visual storytelling and interviews, the documentary aims to inspire appreciation for hand-drawn batik craftsmanship and encourage broader recognition of living heritage preservation. This initiative aligns with the concept of culturally sustainable development, in which creative documentation and community participation serve as practical instruments for sustaining local heritage (Throsby, 2017).

Interviews were conducted with several people including a tour guide from the Pekalongan Batik Museum, senior batik artisans and worker of Liem Ping Wie. The interviews explored themes such as artisan livelihood, market challenges, intergenerational knowledge transfer and cultural preservation. Then, data gathered were transcribed and analyzed to identify key issues and recurring patterns related to the question of why traditional batik producers like Liem Ping Wie struggle to survive. The transcripts also informed the documentary editing process, helping to visually articulate the relationship between cultural heritage, production practice and survival strategies.

The authors conducted field study

to Kedungwuni, Pekalongan, and interviewed Liem Poo Hien, the owner and artisan of Batik Liem Ping Wie. Data are examined using descriptive–qualitative analysis to understand the present-day challenges of Peranakan batik.



Figure 1. Authors (standing with Liem Poo Hien (left front and her sister)

(Source: Personal research documentation)

Result

The research reveals that Pekalongan Chinese Peranakan batik is in critical position, facing complicated threats to its survival that includes production, generational succession, market dynamics, and the irreversible loss of core cultural motifs.

1. The hand-drawn (batik tulis) sector has experienced a catastrophic decline. As of 2025, only one producer remains operational: Batik Liem Ping Wie. The future of this last workshop is critically uncertain, as its master artisan, Liem Poo Hien, is currently in recovery. All other producers have ceased operations, unable to sustain the immense production demands. The core challenges are the high cost of production and the extraordinarily long creation time—requiring between one to three years to complete a single piece of fine hand-drawn batik.

2. The production of authentic Chinese Peranakan motifs—such as floral patterns derived from chintz with Dutch bouquet arrangements, and brightly colored dragonflies or butterflies—has

ceased. These styles were uniquely produced by workshops like Oey Soe Tjoen (now closed) and Liem Ping Wie. For survival, Liem Ping Wie, has shifted to a strategy of artistic diversification, accepting commissions for producing stamped batik and batik's souvenir such as scarves, and men's shirt with special design non-Pekalongan motifs. This indicates that to stay economically viable, the core cultural identity of the craft is being diluted.



Figure 2. Hand-drawn pagi-sore batik produced by Liem Ping Wie
(Source: Personal research documentation)



Figure 3. Batik Liem Ping Wie
(Source: Personal research documentation)

3. Field observations revealed that most artisans and workers at Liem Ping Wie are elderly with limited opportunities to pass their skill to the next generation. Younger people often seek more stable and profitable employment in urban industries. This indicates a fundamental breakdown in intergenerational knowledge transfer, resulting in the likely extinction of these specialized skills.

4. The market for batik is now saturated with mass-produced printed batik, which is significantly cheaper and more readily available than the handmade alternative. Within the context of a current economy, consumers are increasingly opting for this affordable batik. Consequently, the high-value, artisan hand-drawn batik is being marginalized and is unable to compete, further eroding its economic viability and market presence.

5. As part of this research, a short documentary about Batik Liem Ping Wie was produced to build public awareness of the uniqueness and fragility of artisan batik in Kedungwuni, Pekalongan. The film serves as a medium of education and as an archival record- documenting the story of one of the last remaining artisan workshops founded in 1925s. Through visual storytelling and interviews, the documentary aims to inspire appreciation for hand-drawn batik craftsmanship.

Discussion

The vitality of traditional art forms is contingent upon the will of their inheritors across generations. The finely hand-drawn Chinese Javanese batik of Pekalongan currently faces a critical situation. Today, the producers struggle to sustain the tradition amid diminishing resources.

Despite such challenges, Peranakan batik has historically demonstrated resilience through creative adaptation. Its emergence was shaped by eighteenth-cen-

tury global trade monopolies. The British replication of Indian chintz via printing technologies not only decimated India's traditional chintz industry but also created conditions for new local creativity. The scarcity of chintz, once a commodity in the spice trade, stimulated the rise of Chinese Javanese domestic batik production in Pekalongan.

The motifs of Peranakan batik also attest to its hybrid cultural roots. Patterns reveal diverse influences: jlamprang from Indian patola weaving, floral designs from chintz, geometric (banji) motifs and mythological creatures (dragon, phoenix, qilin) from China, bouquet patterns and folktale imagery from Indo-European women, and unique wartime designs developed under Japanese occupation. These motifs mark the distinctive identity of Peranakan batik.

Although Peranakan batik is currently in a vulnerable position, it can still become the source of artistic innovation. An example of revitalization is the adaptation of Liem Ping Wie's batik designs to tableware. This innovation is a result of cooperation between PT Nuanza Porselen Indonesia, a Central Java-based tableware producer and Batik Liem Ping Wie. The company proves how tradition can encourage modern craftsmanship by applying these motifs to porcelain products. Integrating aesthetic complexity with technical skill, batik designs are manually applied onto three-dimensional objects, like cups. This adaptation illustrates the potential of Peranakan batik not merely to survive, but to evolve in response to modern creative demand.

To preserve hand-drawn batik requires active involvement from many parties. The Pekalongan local authorities must work together with producers and The Pekalongan Batik Museum to create batik preservation programs that appeal to the younger generation, tourists and researchers who are interested in research-

ing batik. Thus, the Batik Museum not only functions to display the history of batik, but also as a center for education and knowledge transfer. In addition, collaboration with UNESCO could be pursued to organize international events that protect this cultural heritage, ensuring that preservation efforts are promoted not only at the local level but also within international arenas.



Figure 4. Adaptation of Peranakan batik to Cups produced by PT Nuanza Porselen Indonesia
(Source: Personal research documentation)

Conclusion

The evolution of Pekalongan Peranakan batik demonstrates how cultural heritage is shaped by both resilience and vulnerability. Peranakan batik emerged as a form of cultural evolution when the world was losing Indian chintz fabric. This art developed by combining Indian, Chinese, European, and Japanese influences, thus forming a distinctive visual identity. The design created not only represents cross-cultural encounters but also prove the creativity of local artisans in adapting to difficult conditions.

Nowadays, however, this tradition faces critical challenges. The complex skills required for hand-drawn batik, the time-consuming production process, and

high costs make it less competitive than mass-produced printed batik. Changing fashion trends have also weakened its cultural position. Without regeneration and structured support, this tradition is at risk of disappearing.

However, opportunities for revitalization are still open. The rich collection of motifs inspires contemporary applications, as seen in Liem Ping Wie's design on tableware. Local government initiatives, educational programs through the Pekalongan Batik Museum, and potential collaborations with UNESCO offer concrete ways out for protecting and reviving this heritage.

Therefore, the survival of Pekalongan Peranakan batik depends on changing challenges into opportunities. Strategies like creative adaptation, policy support, and cultural pride can preserve this batik not only as a valuable heritage from the past, but also as a form of art that is alive and relevant for future generations.

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