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**Twenty-Five Years of Resilience:  
The Enduring Sociocultural Impact of  
the 1998 Tragedy on the Christian Chinese  
Ethnicity in Sarang, Rembang, Central Java**

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145-160

**Abstract**

In the aftermath of the tumultuous events 1998, the Sarang Subdistrict in Indonesia experienced profound socio-cultural transformations. This study examines the lasting impacts of that unforgettable year on Sarang's Christian Chinese community, known for its strict religious culture, including numerous pesantrens and influential figures who shape its cultural identity. The study uses qualitative methods to conduct in-depth interviews with six Chinese individuals who have chosen Sarang as their residence. The goal is to explore the significant links between the 1998 tragedy and the transformation of the Chinese ethnic landscape. The study also investigates whether the psycho-cultural phenomenon of identity reconstruction and assimilation, as described by participants, plays a role in these changes. Thus, it offers insights into broader societal dynamics within the country.

**Keywords:** tumultuous events of 1998, psycho-cultural phenomenon, Sarang's Christian Chinese.

## Introduction

In 1998, Indonesia experienced widespread turmoil, ethnic strife, political instability, and economic turmoil.<sup>1</sup> The rise in prices of essential goods such as rice and cooking oil led to violent protests across Indonesia, much of it aimed at the ethnic Chinese minority who dominate the retail economy.<sup>2</sup> The May 1998 Indonesia riots were incidents of mass violence, anti-government demonstrations, and civil unrest in Indonesia in May 1998, mainly in the cities of Medan, Jakarta, and Surakarta,<sup>3</sup> with minor incidents in other regions of the country.<sup>4</sup> The events were primarily targeted at ethnic Chinese Indonesians.<sup>5</sup> The enduring presence of the Chinese ethnic group in the evolving landscape of the Sarang Subdistrict raises questions about identity and belief systems, particularly in light of conversions that have taken place since the tragedy up to the present day.

The profound and lasting impacts of the 1998 tragedy not only reshaped the social fabric of this subdistrict but also left an indelible imprint on its inhabitants' identities and belief systems.<sup>6</sup> The repercussions were felt in the shifting social dynamics of various regions across Indonesia<sup>7</sup>—and the Sarang Subdistrict was no exception. By delving into the transformation from an initially moderate and heterogeneous community to one that may have taken on a more exclusive character, whether by choice or as a result of acculturation, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into the enduring impact of the 1998 tragedy at the grassroots level. It also offers a glimpse into the broader implications for Indonesia's social structure. Implicitly, it represents an intriguing journey of exploration, seeking to discern whether there exist connections between the events of 1998 and the phenomena observed in the present day, especially for injured Chinese ethnic community<sup>8</sup> and their identity conversion in a personal or social context, or even though it doesn't matter if it's relevant or vice versa. By unpacking the drivers behind the phenomenon, it is hoped that this will lead to an explanation of the multifaceted nature of this socio-religious transformation or psycho-cultural dynamics.<sup>9</sup>

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1 Heri Samtani, "DIASPORA ETNIS TIONGHOA DAN MEMORI PENDERITAAN TRAGEDI MEI 1998 DALAM CERPEN NYONYA RUMAH ABU KARANGAN VIKA KURNIAWATI," *Bahtera Indonesia: Jurnal Penelitian Bahasa dan Sastra Indonesia* 8, no. 1 (2023): 96–103, <https://doi.org/10.31943/bi.v8i1.323>.

2 Nurus Shalihin, Firdaus, Muhammad Sholihin, dan Andri Ashadi, "The Social Violence and Regime Changes in Indonesia," *Humanities And Social Sciences Reviews* 8, no. 4 (July 2020), <https://doi.org/10.18510/hssr.2020.8481re>.

3 Chandra Linsa Hikmawati, "Opresi berlapis perempuan etnis Tionghoa: Pemerkosaan massal terhadap perempuan etnis Tionghoa dalam tragedi Mei 1998 di Jakarta," *Jurnal Politik* 2, no. 2, Article 4 (2022): 1–28, <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/politik/vol2/iss2/4>.

4 Thaus Sugihilmi Arya Putra, "Hilangkan Rasisme dan Diskriminasi Terhadap Etnis Tionghoa dengan Asimilasi Integrasi Tionghoa-Indonesia Tanpa Paksaan," *Kanwil DJKN Kalimantan Barat*, 11 February 2022, <https://djkn.kemenkeu.go.id/kanwil-kalbar/baca-artikel/14721/Hilangkan-Rasisme-dan-Diskriminasi-terhadap-Etnis-Tionghoa-dengan-Asimilasi-Integrasi-Tionghoa-Indonesia-Tanpa-Paksaan.html>.

5 Arief Budiman. "Portrait of the Chinese in post-Soeharto Indonesia," in *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*, ed. Tim Lindsey and Helen Pausacker (Singapore: Institute of South East-Asia Studies, 2005), 99.

6 Suranjan Weeraratne, "Ethnic entrepreneurs and collective violence: Assessing spatial variations in anti-Chinese rioting within Jakarta during the May 1998 riots," (WIDER working Paper no. 2010/55, The United Nations University World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), 2010, <https://hdl.handle.net/10419/54158>).

7 Siew Min Sai, "'Eventing' the May 1998 affair: problematic representations of violence in contemporary Indonesia," in *Violent Conflicts in Indonesia*, ed. Charles Coppel (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 69–70.

8 Chang Yau Hoon, How to be Chinese: Ethnic Chinese Experience a 'Reawakening' of their Chinese Identity, *Inside Indonesia* 78, (2004), 14, [https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss\\_research/834](https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/834).

9 Eunike Mutiara Himawan, Annie Pohlman, and Winnifred Louis, "Revisiting the May 1998 Riots in Indonesia: Civilians and Their Untold Memories," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 41, no. 2 (August 2022): 240–257, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18681034221084320>.

In psycho-cultural (primarily based on ethnography phenomenon) terms, a comprehensive study of the transformation, such as in Sarang Subdistrict, from a community initially characterized by moderate and diverse cultural values into a community that may have adopted more exclusive tendencies, whether out of urgency or dynamics of acculturation, is needed. Necessity at the local level resonates nationally with the digital era's publications. However, all traumatic events and their consequences in various regions cannot be justified by humanity. Nevertheless, a deeper understanding of how historical trauma can shape collective and individual psycho-cultural identities needs to be seriously examined. This can serve as a lesson for all parties striving to consistently humanize individuals, even in the smallest contexts, such as families and local communities.

This research focuses on (1) The connection between the 1998 events and contemporary cultural phenomena in Sarang; (2) The psycho-cultural impact of the historical trauma of the Chinese ethnicity in Sarang; (3) Socio-ethnocultural Transformation and its Role in Community Reconciliation in this subdistrict reflecting broader discourses in regions across Indonesia. In detail, our study elaborates on the enduring influence of past traumatic events on current cultural, social, and psychological dynamics. It also encompasses how historical trauma shapes collective and individual psycho-cultural identities, meaning understanding how individuals and groups cope with and adapt to historical trauma in a local context. Thus, the context will build implications towards enhancing understanding and reconciliation at the community level.

## Literature Review

### The 1998 Riots in Indonesia: Recovery and Reconciliation

The tragic events of 1998 in Indonesia have left an indelible mark on the nation's history, impacting the Christian Chinese ethnicity communities across the archipelago.<sup>10</sup> This literature review examines the multidimensional sociocultural effects of the 1998 tragedy,<sup>11</sup> shedding light on its factual origins, its economic, political, and social dimensions, how Chinese communities sought refuge and solutions, the enduring historical trauma, and the protective measures, adaptations, and resilience exhibited by these communities<sup>12</sup>. To understand the 1998 tragedy's sociocultural impact, one must first acknowledge its factual basis. The riots and violence that erupted in May 1998, predominantly in urban areas, were marked by widespread looting, arson, and violence, disproportionately affecting Chinese-owned businesses and communities.<sup>13</sup> The fact of these riots serves as a foundation for comprehending the subsequent consequences. Finally, the role of both government and society should be supported in mitigating the effects.<sup>14</sup>

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10 Hikmawati, "Opresi Berlapis Perempuan Etnis Tionghoa," 15-16.

11 Sia Kok Sin, "Etnis Tionghoa Kristen Paska Kerusuhan Mei 1998," *Theologia Aletheia* 8, no. 15 (September 2005): 90, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337757490\\_Etnis\\_tionghoa\\_kristen\\_paska\\_kerusuhan\\_mei\\_1998](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/337757490_Etnis_tionghoa_kristen_paska_kerusuhan_mei_1998).

12 Hoon, "How to be Chinese," 13.

13 Refugee Review Tribunal, *RRT Research Response: Indonesia*, Research Response No. IDN30694 (Australia: Refugee Review Tribunal, 5 October 2006), 4-5, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4b6fe1eb0.html>.

14 H. Bhaskara, 'Fear haunts ethnic Chinese', *The Jakarta Post*, 11 April 2008, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/04/11/fear-haunts-ethnic-chinese.html>.

Numerous studies have underscored that the 1998 tragedy was not an isolated event but a culmination of economic, political, and social factors. For instance, research by Purnomo et al.<sup>15</sup> highlights the role of financial crisis and political instability in creating an environment of desperation, where marginalized communities like the Chinese were disproportionately affected. Additionally, studies by Himawan et al.<sup>16</sup> and Hans et al.<sup>17</sup> delve into the intersection of economic and political factors, emphasizing that the desperation arising from economic turmoil and political uncertainty played a pivotal role in the riots. This socio-political-economic nexus is crucial to understanding the tragedy's broader implications.

A significant body of research has explored how Chinese communities sought refuge and solutions in the wake of the 1998 tragedy. Mulyanto reported the experiences of Chinese Indonesians who sought asylum abroad, shedding light on their motivations and challenges during this turbulent period.<sup>18</sup> Research by Sidel provides insights into the diaspora of Chinese Indonesians in countries like Singapore, Australia, and China, illustrating the global dimension of their search for safety and solutions. These studies underscore the profound disruption experienced by these communities and their quest for stability.<sup>19</sup>

Historical trauma is a thread that runs through the post-1998 experiences of Chinese communities in Indonesia. The traumatic events of the riots have led to deep-seated psychological and emotional scars. Research by Hoon,<sup>20</sup> just like above on historical trauma, emphasizes that it affects not only immediate victims but entire communities, creating a collective memory of suffering. The sociocultural consequences of this historical trauma are multifaceted. They include shifts in cultural identity, attitudes towards integration, and reevaluating religious affiliations.<sup>21</sup> These consequences are illuminated by studies like Tong's research in Radelet<sup>22</sup> on religious conversion among Chinese Christians, which explores the complex interplay between identity, religion, and trauma.

How do individual traumatic events have communal psycho-cultural implications? In the face of historical trauma and sociocultural upheaval, Chinese communities have exhibited remarkable resilience. Research by Robert et al.<sup>23</sup> on resilience highlights the ability of individuals and communities to withstand adversity and adapt positively.

15 Vicki Dwi Purnomo, Andrie Irawan, & Ishvi Joenaini Koenti. "The Polemic of the May 1998 Riots Against the Chinese Ethnicity," *Journal of Legal and Cultural Analytics*, 2 no. 2 (May 2023): 119–130, <https://journal.formosapublisher.org/index.php/jlca/article/view/4336>.

16 Himawan, Pohlman, and Louis, "Revisiting the May 1998 Riots in Indonesia," 544.

17 Hans Pols and Eunike Sri Tyas Suci. "The Contentious Social Positions of People of Chinese Descent in Indonesia. Mental Health in China and the Chinese Diaspora: Historical and Cultural Perspectives," in *Mental Health in China and the Chinese Diaspora: Historical and Cultural Perspectives. International and Cultural Psychology*, ed. Harry Minas (Parkville: Springer Cham, 2021): 181-196, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65161-9\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65161-9_13).

18 Randy Mulyanto, "No place like home': ethnic Chinese who fled Indonesia for Taiwan remember the deadly 1998 riots that changed their lives," *South China Morning Post*, May 14, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3010083/no-place-home-ethnic-chinese-who-escaped-indonesia-taiwan-wake>.

19 John T. Sidel, *Riots, pogroms, jihad: Religious violence in Indonesia*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007). In March 2007 John T. Sidel, from the London School of Economics and Political Science, produced an assessment of the situation for minorities in Indonesia in a report commissioned by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Status Determination and Protection Information Section (DIPS).

20 Hoon, "How to be Chinese," 14.

21 Yahya Ariyanto Putro, Hamdan Tri Atmaja, and Ibnu Sodik, "Konflik Rasial Antara Etnis Tionghoa Dengan Pribumi Jawa di Surakarta Tahun 1972-1998," *Journal of Indonesian History* 6, no. 1 (January 2017).

22 Steven Radelet, *Indonesia: Long Road to Recovery*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1999), 117.

23 Andrea L. Roberts, Stephen E. Gilman, Joshua Breslau, Naomi Breslau, and Karestan C. Koenen, "Race/Ethnic Differences in Exposure to Traumatic Events, Development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Treatment-Seeking for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in the United States," *Psychological Medicine* 41, no. 1 (2011): 71-83, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291710000401>.

Chinese communities in Indonesia have demonstrated this resilience by preserving cultural traditions, maintaining a sense of community, and adapting to their new sociocultural environments. These protective measures include community support networks, religious institutions, and adaptive strategies to protect their cultural heritage.<sup>24</sup>

### **Psychocultural Remapping: Post-Tragedy Reconstruction**

Psychocultural narratives among different groups (and for sure, latent-dramatic ethnography landscape) aren't always destructive; they can have constructive aspects.<sup>25</sup> Linenthal highlights that despite the potential for negative narratives, there is room for constructing progressive ones to restore peace. Kelman argues that societal conflicts can be resolved by altering psycho-cultural narratives since emotions drive them.<sup>26</sup> Changes can occur through modifications in cultural symbols and rituals rooted in historical events, festivals, and oral traditions. Furthermore, another important psycho-cultural narrative within Indonesia's identity landscape intersects with religious issues. Dogmatic religious perspectives often give rise to narratives of perceived threats to alternative interpretations. In this situation, the presence of radicalism has exacerbated interreligious tensions in Indonesia, posing a threat to multiculturalism. Another layer of conflict arises at the intersection of religious narratives with indigenous belief systems. Indigenous belief systems like Kejawen (Central and East Java), Sunda Wiwitan and Buhun (West Java), Parmalim (North Sumatra) and many others. This alienation can, in extreme cases, result in expulsion, as seen with the Ahmadiyah and Shia communities. Through these cases, the intertwining of psycho-cultural narratives in Indonesia is closely related to religious identity.

Finding solutions to various religious—and ethnic—issues in Indonesia becomes increasingly difficult when imbalanced narratives trigger interreligious conflicts. Even after the fall of the New Order regime, the starting point of the nation's tragedy has not changed. This criticism appears in newspaper opinions, academic journals, and revised history textbooks. It has become a prevalent theme in contemporary Indonesian literature after the fall of the New Order regime. Alternative narratives in the form of poetry, journals, and films have also proliferated. This critical narrative serves as an alternative voice that had been silenced for so long.

Consequently, research on psycho-cultural narratives reveals the importance of recognizing how these narratives can be harnessed constructively to bridge gaps between different groups and build a more inclusive national identity.<sup>27</sup> By acknowledging the role of cultural symbols, rituals, and shared memories, Indonesia can foster a sense of belonging among diverse communities. However, it is essential to remain vigilant about the potential manipulation of psycho-cultural narratives for political or divisive ends. While narratives

24 Hikmawati, "Opresi Berlapis Perempuan Etnis Tionghoa," 8.

25 Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Preserving memory: The struggle to create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 114.

26 Herbert C. Kelman, "Contributions of an unofficial conflict resolution effort to the Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough." *Negotiation Journal* 11 (1995): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02183488>.

27 Marc Howard Ross, "Psychocultural Interpretations and Dramas: Identity Dynamics in Ethnic Conflict," *Political Psychology*, 22 no. 1 (March 2001): 160, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3791910>.



can be healing instruments, they can also be tools of manipulation and division.<sup>28</sup> Thus, a nuanced understanding of these narratives is crucial for their responsible use in promoting peace, unity, and understanding in Indonesia. Finally, the process of psycho-cultural reconstruction in Indonesia is ongoing, marked by challenges and opportunities. The nation can continue to reshape its narratives through literature, research, and open dialogue, encouraging healing and fostering a more harmonious and inclusive society.

## Research Method

This qualitative research employs in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. These interviews focus on gaining insights into the experiences and perspectives of five Chinese ethnic individuals who have chosen to reside and assimilate into the majority community of Sarang. The research design prioritizes deeply exploring their unique experiences, motivations, and the factors that have shaped their assimilation.

Six participants for this study were selected through purposive sampling. The criteria for selection include individuals of Chinese ethnicity who have resided in Sarang for an extended period, assimilated into the majority community, adopted the majority religion and culture, and demonstrated a willingness to share their experiences and perspectives. This sampling approach ensures that the participants chosen have relevant experiences and insights related to the research objectives. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected participants. These interviews were guided by open-ended questions that allowed participants to express their experiences, challenges, motivations, and perspectives in their own words. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable and confidential setting to encourage candid responses.

The data collected through interviews was processed as a thematic analysis. This process involves (1) interviews that are transcribed verbatim to maintain the integrity of the participant's responses and (2) theme development, which means data was grouped into themes and subthemes, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. The questionnaire was designed for particular themes, but the researcher conducted and chose only a psychological paradigm (what did they feel and purpose), sociocultural landscape, and ethnocultural phenomenon.

In conducting this research, ethical considerations are paramount. Participants were provided with a clear and comprehensive understanding of the research's purpose, their role, and their rights as participants. Before any interviews, informed consent is diligently obtained from each participant, ensuring they willingly and knowingly agree to participate. The participants' identities were treated with utmost confidentiality, and pseudonyms were utilized in all research documentation to safeguard their privacy. Importantly, participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and participants are free to withdraw from the research at any point without facing any adverse consequences.

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28 Amarina Ashar Ariyanto, et al. (Eds.) "Diversity in Unity: Perspectives from Psychology and Behavioral Sciences," in *Proceedings of the Asia-Pacific Research in Social Sciences and Humanities, Depok, Indonesia: Topics in Psychology and Behavioral Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2016): 478, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315225302>.

In the final part, the study's findings are reported in a narrative format, summarizing the experiences and perspectives of the participants. Quotes and anecdotes from the interviews may be used to illustrate key themes and provide context. The report aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the assimilation of Chinese ethnic individuals into the majority community of Sarang and the factors influencing this process.

## Results

A long time ago, the Chinese community actively participated in the economic and social life of the Sarang subdistrict. This coexistence created a multicultural social landscape where various religions and cultures unite uniquely. However, despite the strong economic ties within the community's structure, the Chinese community in Sarang faced multiple challenges. These challenges included limitations on their political rights and discriminatory treatment by certain parties. The manipulation of political rights, perceived as particularly disheartening by this ethnic group, was a common sentiment among many Indonesian citizens unless they were willing to declare allegiance to a specific group or party. Nevertheless, they continued to participate and contribute to the advancement of their region.

Mr and Mrs Ting, the Father of Mr B as our active respondent, have operated a store since the 1960s, located very close to the Islamic boarding school in Karangmangu Village, Sarang. Many students (*santri*) from the boarding school would purchase their daily necessities here. There was almost no underlying religious divide in this community. Mrs. Ting was well-known for her involvement and integration within the local community. The Irawan family also resided adjacent to the MIS Islamic boarding school (in the past, still part of MUS Islamic Boarding School), precisely to the east of KH. Faqih Imam's residence, the former of the boarding school. While there are no clear records of their interactions with the students (*santri*) and the boarding school, this Catholic family devoutly operated a fishing equipment store for the fishermen of Sarang. Likewise, Mr. Y, now of advanced age, remains active in the sewing equipment trade. According to his account, he converted to Islam in the early 2000s. During the tragedy, he temporarily sought refuge at his family's place in Semarang. Many years later, he returned and resumed his business activities. These are a sample of interactions that were rarely influenced by ethnic or religious backgrounds, that was a harmony.

**Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants**

Name/Initial	Age	Sex	Employment	Religion (now)	Religion (past)
Mr. B	51	M	Photography studio owner	Muslim	Christian
Mrs. N	50	F	bottled water business	Muslim	Christian
Mr. Y	64	M	grocery store owner	Muslim	Christian
Mr. L	71	M	electronics store owner	Muslim	-
Mr. K	-	M	fishing equipment store owner	Not mentioned	-
Mrs. G	60	F	unemployed	Not mentioned	-

*Source: Conducting In-Depth Interviews with the Sarang Chinese Communities*

After the tragic events, it became hard to stay in touch with those who had left Sarang, as there were no instant ways to communicate across long distances. Over time, these close connections weakened like fragile threads. Sadly, many of those who had sought safety in other places didn't make it, leaving behind grieving families and a sense of loss in Sarang. Despite these challenging times, Sarang's Chinese community showed incredible resilience. They worked hard to rebuild their lives and repair the bonds that had been strained. While these bonds weren't as strong as before, they were not entirely broken. Ongoing efforts to reconnect with those who had left, honor their memory, and rebuild a sense of community show the enduring strength of the human spirit.

During the interview with Mr. B and Mr. L, they shared their experiences during the events of 1998 in Sarang. They explained that during that time, the situation in Sarang became extraordinarily challenging and unsafe for the Chinese community. Although they did not experience deep psychological trauma, they faced difficult decisions on how to survive in an increasingly unstable situation. Unlike Ms N, who was not married to Mr W then, Ms N and her father, Mr S, laid a prayer mat in front of their door to affirm that they were Chinese Muslims, regardless of any prevailing tendencies at that time. As well as Mr. B said;

"... It was a very long time ago, Mrs. Ni\*\*k married Mr. \*\*Wono, so it was all safe, but I had a difficult time back then. I actually started working in a year after. But Sarang makes me miss it..."11Q1

Furthermore, Mr B explained that at the onset of the events, he and his family decided to seek refuge in his relative's home, an area considered safer. They did not experience significant psychological trauma, but rather, they were concerned and vigilant about the situation around them. Their decision to move to their relative's house was a rational one aimed at ensuring the safety of their family and seeking economic stability in a safer area.

Mr. L had a similar experience. He also chose to stay with his uncle in Lasem temporarily. For him, this decision was based on practical considerations to protect his family from potential dangers. Although there were concerns, he did not feel a deep psychological trauma during that period. He explained that even though Lasem was quite close,



Sarang subdistrict was his world, always his home. It was a world where he experienced his childhood, growing up with his friends. Returning to Sarang was his top priority as soon as everything was safe.

A year later, both men returned to Sarang when the situation became more stable. They believed it was time to restore the social and economic relationships the events disrupted. While their relationships may have been strained after their departure, they felt that returning and making efforts to rebuild social bonds within their community was an important step. They also recognized that the loss of material possessions was incomparable to the loss of colleagues and community members.

The interview with Mrs. G reveals with her tears a tragic story in which her husband passed away during their evacuation to Semarang. They faced an incredibly challenging situation with no financial resources or belongings, having to endure for two years in an unfamiliar place. Despite unimaginable hardships, Mrs. G and her family eventually returned to Sarang with nothing to their name. Mrs G's experience reflects the indomitable human spirit that can emerge even in the darkest times, demonstrating the strength found within individuals and communities when they come together to face life's most challenging moments. She also mentioned;

“ ... for me, it wasn't a loss of possessions, but Sarang was my home. At that time, all I could think was I had to return, even without my husband. My neighbors and friends, they are good people. They were also helpless at that time. And here I am, accepted so kindly by them as if nothing had ever happened ...”

Mrs. G, Mr. B, and Mr. L are entirely convinced that the original inhabitants of Sarang would never have condoned such violence. For them, the people of Sarang held a deep respect for harmony, and their actions were primarily driven by provocation. Many of their friends and acquaintances were kind-hearted individuals who supported them during these trying times. Some even provided protection and maintained communication while they were in evacuation.

In present-day harmony, they show enthusiasm in their interactions with the community. There is no trace of the tragedy, or at least they have forgotten it. They participate in cultural festivals such as “*sedekah laut*,” independence celebrations, join “*tahlilan*” when a neighbor passes away, actively engage in mosque activities, and more. Mr. B even became a mosque committee member in Sendangmulyo and participated in documenting several contests.

## Discussion

### The Trauma and Psycho-cultural Restructure

In contrast to the perception of profound trauma, the actual experiences of Sarang's Chinese residents in the aftermath of the 1998 tragedy reveal a different narrative. Instead of pervasive psychological trauma, rational fears and anxieties prevailed. It's essential to distinguish between genuine psychological trauma and rational concerns stemming from

a challenging situation<sup>29</sup>. Many families, particularly those within larger extended families, relocated to larger cities as their primary response. This decision wasn't primarily driven by overwhelming psychological trauma but rather by a pragmatic assessment of the circumstances. Families left Sarang for urban areas they believed to be safer, offering more stability and economic opportunities. Their motivation was to protect loved ones and secure a better future, guided by rational considerations rather than emotional trauma.

The idea of severe psychological trauma wasn't a dominant aspect of the experiences of Sarang's Chinese community during this period. What significantly contributed to the perception of trauma was sensationalized media coverage of the events. Local and national media outlets played a role in amplifying fear and anxiety surrounding the tragedy. Sensational headlines and graphic imagery heightened a sense of panic and insecurity among the population. Additionally, there was an empathetic and solidary response towards fellow ethnic communities in different regions, which further heightened the perception of trauma.<sup>30</sup> Reports of distressing incidents involving Chinese communities in other areas triggered a shared sense of vulnerability and concern. This empathy was a natural response, considering the broader context of ethnic Chinese communities facing adversity during that turbulent time. These experiences align with the interviews conducted with Mrs G, Mr B, and Mr L. While they faced immense challenges during their evacuation and return to Sarang, their responses were largely driven by rational considerations and a desire to ensure the safety and well-being of their families. The emotional impact, though present, was rooted in their pragmatic assessment of the situation rather than deep-seated psychological trauma. This nuanced perspective helps us better understand the complexities of the 1998 tragedy's aftermath and how individuals and communities responded to it.

In light of the interviews conducted with Mrs N, the wife of the late Mr W, a native Javanese from Sarang, a poignant narrative emerges that sheds light on their journey through the traumatic events of 1998 and the subsequent psycho-cultural restructure that followed. Mrs. N and her late husband, Mr. W, faced considerable challenges. It was a period marked by uncertainty, fear, and the need for survival. Amid this chaos, the couple made a pivotal decision—to seek refuge within the social fabric of the native Javanese community. This decision was not merely an act of physical relocation but a profound psychological and cultural shift. Mr. W and Mrs. N sought solace in embracing Mrs N's Javanese heritage and her family's roots in Sarang. They believed that by assimilating into the Javanese social structure, they could find healing and become beacons of security for their family. Their efforts to reintegrate into Sarang's native Javanese community were characterized by a deep commitment to rebuilding their lives and fostering reconciliation. They understood that healing the wounds of the past required personal resilience and a concerted effort to mend the social fabric of their community.

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<sup>29</sup> Roberts et al., "Race/Ethnic Differences," 78.

<sup>30</sup> Anas Ahmadi, "The Traces of Oppression and Trauma to Ethnic Minorities in Indonesia Who Experienced Rape on the 12 May 1998 Tragedy," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 8 no. 2, (May 2021): 130, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48710307>.

In doing so, Mr W and Mrs N became advocates for peace and unity. They recognized the importance of intercultural dialogue and fostering a sense of belonging for all residents of Sarang, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. Mr W, with his rich Javanese heritage, played a pivotal role in bridging the gap between the Chinese and Javanese communities. His deep respect for the local customs and traditions endeared him to the Javanese residents. At the same time, his empathy and understanding of the trauma experienced by the Chinese community allowed him to serve as a source of comfort and support. Their home became a symbol of reconciliation—a place where individuals from different backgrounds could come together to share their stories and heal the wounds of the past. It was within the walls of their home that cultural boundaries dissolved, and a shared sense of humanity emerged. The legacy of Mr W and Mrs N's journey extends beyond their lifetime. Their children and grandchildren continue to carry the message of unity and healing. The psycho-cultural restructure initiated by their courageous decision reverberates through Sarang to this day, reminding its residents of the enduring power of compassion and understanding.

In the context of Sarang's Chinese ethnicity, the experiences of individuals like Mrs. N and Mr. W reflect the ongoing dynamics of psycho-cultural narratives in Indonesia. Mrs N, as an indigenous Javanese from Sarang, sought safety and the unification of her family's spirit within the social structure. This journey was a healing process and a beacon of security for her family. Similarly, Mr. W, a native Javanese of Sarang, was deeply intertwined with the psycho-cultural narratives that shaped his identity. Their experiences and the broader narratives Post-Reformasi shed light on the evolving nature of identity conflicts, especially those related to Chinese ethnicity and other historical tragedies. Just like Prastiti said, understanding psycho-cultural narrative construction is crucial in comprehending the intricate dynamics of identity in Indonesia, as it influences the decisions and responses of individuals and communities during times of upheaval and transformation.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, we can assess the cultural assimilation of the Chinese ethnic population in Sarang by comparing their lifestyles with those of other communities, such as the native Javanese population and urban Indonesians. This approach can provide insights into the choices and lifestyles of these communities. The results may challenge traditional assimilation models, indicating that the lifestyle of the Chinese ethnic population in Sarang may not simply mirror that of the native Javanese or urban Indonesians. Instead, it may reveal the emergence of a unique cultural style, reflecting the interplay of various factors, including historical heritage, economic conditions, and social dynamics within the Sarang community. This emphasizes the complexity of their cultural identity and their ongoing and simultaneous adaptation processes to this day.<sup>32</sup>

Thinking about the future has always been something that every member of society

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31 Siti Aliyuna Pratisti, Deasy Silvyia Sari dan Taufik Hidayat, "Narasi Populer Indonesia Pasca Reformasi: Sebuah Kajian Psikokultural," *UMBARA Indonesian Journal of Anthropology* 4 no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.24198/umbara.v4i2.25356>.

32 Melanie Wallendorf and Michael D. Reilly, "Ethnic migration, assimilation, and consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 10 no. 3 (December 1983): 292-302.

should do. However, Sarang is very different in the cultural landscape. But by thinking about the future, we will have a plan so that the future can be faced with full readiness. Thus, thinking about the future becomes one of the driving factors for assimilation and acculturation. As good individuals, it is essential for us to respect and honor foreigners who bring their culture. By demonstrating such attitudes and behaviors, we are already encouraging cultural assimilation.<sup>33</sup>

### Present-Day Harmony

Nowadays, Sarang is a concrete example of harmonious coexistence amid significant cultural assimilation and transformation. The resilience and adaptability of its community have played a pivotal role in this transformation, which witnessed the conversion of Sarang's Chinese population into various community activities. The religious landscape of Sarang has also undergone profound changes over the years. The scars of the 1998 tragedy, though traumatic, propelled every member of the Chinese ethnic community in Sarang to seek stability and a sense of belonging through Islam. While all ethnic Chinese residents of Sarang have transformed, this discourse applies to everything to function well, and this transformation has been instrumental in promoting harmony and unity within the community.

The absence of religious discrimination is evident in how Sarang's current residents, regardless of their religious backgrounds, live alongside each other with respect and harmony. Religious holidays like Eid al-Fitr and cultural festivals such as the sea alms, Independence Day carnivals, and traditional competitions are celebrated with equal enthusiasm, reflecting the spirit of togetherness that defines Sarang today. The active involvement of the local government has reinforced this harmonious coexistence. Educational institutions in Sarang, such as Pondok Pesantren Al-Anwar, led by KH. Maimoen Zubair and many other Islamic boarding schools in Sarang emphasize the importance of multiculturalism, teaching the younger generation to appreciate the diversity that adorns the town. The government also encourages interaction and cooperation among various religious groups through community programs and events. Cultural exchanges, workshops, and other initiatives promote a deeper understanding of each other's beliefs and traditions. Kyai, or religious leaders/advisors, have various roles. Unfortunately, long-standing fears and sadness are still recorded. Some individuals never returned.

Sarang's local government and authorities have played a pivotal role in maintaining this harmony amid such transformation. They have implemented policies and initiatives that promote intercultural understanding and inclusivity, ensuring that the community remains welcoming to all residents, including the Chinese ethnic population, in line with what Kusno mentioned.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> "Respecting Cultural Differences Builds A More Unified Workplace," *The National Society of Leadership and Success* (blog), <https://www.nsls.org/blog/respecting-cultural-differences-builds-unified-workplace>.

<sup>34</sup> Abidin Kusno, "Remembering/Forgetting the May Riots: Architecture, Violence, and the Making of 'Chinese Cultures' in Post-1998 Jakarta." *Public Culture* 15 no. 1, (2003): 160, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-149>.

As Sarang looks towards the future, it stands as a symbol of resilience and transformation. The scars of the past have not determined its destiny but have shaped it into a community that values unity in diversity. While there may not be a significant presence of Christian Chinese today, the town continues to grow and offers hope for a harmonious coexistence. The town's journey towards healing and progress has been a collective effort. The absence of discrimination is not just a passive state but an active commitment by the residents to embrace one another's differences. Sarang and Rembang City, for sure, show that a community can emerge stronger after enduring significant challenges.<sup>35</sup> In the same case, an in-depth study on acculturation and assimilation is still needed, regardless of the impact of the 1998 tragedy, especially among the millennial generation in Sarang. Their integration into the culture and identity makes them less concerned about their ethnicity and origins.

Sarang's story is a testament to the human capacity for resilience and adaptation. It serves as a model for communities worldwide facing similar challenges. The town's transformation demonstrates that even in the aftermath of a tragedy, a community can emerge stronger, more inclusive, and more compassionate. Looking ahead, Sarang may continue to evolve. While there may not be a substantial presence of Christian Chinese, the town's commitment to unity and acceptance remains unwavering. Sarang has shown that diversity is not a source of division but an opportunity for growth and enrichment.

## Conclusion

The Chinese community in Sarang has shown a spirit of harmony and coexistence. They have embraced a unique cultural identity formed through complex interactions between historical heritage, economic conditions, and social dynamics. The absence of religious discrimination and the active involvement of the local government have contributed to this harmonious coexistence. This town becomes a symbol of hope and inclusivity. Although the town may not witness a significant return of the Christian Chinese population as it once existed, its commitment to unity and acceptance remains steadfast. Sarang has proven that diversity is not a source of division but an opportunity for growth and enrichment. This transformation is a collective effort, demonstrating that communities can emerge stronger, more inclusive, and more compassionate after facing significant challenges.

Sarang's journey serves as a model for communities in Indonesia and even worldwide, emphasizing the importance of resilience, adaptation, and celebrating diversity in achieving harmonious coexistence. As we reflect on Sarang's remarkable story, we are reminded of the enduring human capacity to overcome challenges and emerge stronger together. Sarang's story is a testament to the human capacity for resilience, adaptation, and unity in the face of significant challenges. Through the lens of the Chinese ethnic population in Sarang, we have witnessed an extraordinary transformation following the events of 1998.

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<sup>35</sup> RA Ginanjar Purnawibawa, *The Prau Maritime Project: Tradisi Maritim Rembang* (Jakarta: Fakultas Ilmu Pengetahuan Budaya, Universitas Indonesia, 2020), 41, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VOImhRL100OMSO3\\_Ilvj5L5-jq90SqKM/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VOImhRL100OMSO3_Ilvj5L5-jq90SqKM/view).



This transformation is not just about religious conversion but is driven by a deep desire for stability, togetherness, and economic security.

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