HARMONI
https://jurnalharmoni.kemenag.go.id
P-ISSN: 1412-663X E-ISSN: 2502-8472

Vol. 24 No.1, January-June 2025 (p. 1-20)
Artikel received January 15, 2025
Selected February 10, 2025
Approved August 30, 2025
https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v24i1.845

CHINESE MUSLIM SUBCULTURE: CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS INTEGRATION IN SEMARANG'S MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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Abstract
Within the landscape of Indonesia's ethnic and religious diversity, the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang occupies a unique position as a "minority within a minority," navigating sociocultural pressures from the non-Muslim Chinese milieu and the predominantly Javanese Muslim majority. Located in a city shaped by centuries of Sino-Javanese interaction, the community's lived experience offers valuable insight into the harmonious coexistence of cultural heritage and Islamic values. This study examines how identity preservation and da'wah strategies are negotiated within this context, drawing on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Employing Dick Hebdige's subcultural theory, this study finds that the community actively incorporates Chinese cultural symbols such as language, rituals, and traditional festivals into inclusive da'wah practices. Through such integrative approaches, the community resists cultural erasure while simultaneously promoting social cohesion. This study highlights the potential of culturally embedded religious practices to strengthen interfaith dialogue, enhance public understanding of diversity, and inform policy frameworks for minority integration. By situating the lived experiences of Chinese Muslims within broader discourses on multiculturalism and interfaith harmony, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of hybrid identities as a foundation for inclusive and resilient societies in Indonesia and across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Cultural Integration, Chinese Muslims, Da'wah Strategies, Multicultural Identity.*

Abstrak
Dalam lanskap keberagaman etnis dan agama di Indonesia, komunitas Muslim Tionghoa di Semarang menempati posisi unik sebagai "minoritas dalam minoritas," yang harus menghadapi tekanan sosiokultural dari lingkungan Tionghoa non-Muslim sekaligus mayoritas Muslim Jawa. Berada di sebuah kota yang dibentuk oleh interaksi Tionghoa-Jawa selama berabad-abad,

pengalaman hidup komunitas ini memberikan wawasan berharga mengenai koeksistensi harmonis antara warisan budaya dan nilai-nilai Islam. Studi ini menelaah bagaimana strategi pelestarian identitas dan dakwah dinegosiasikan dalam konteks tersebut, dengan menggunakan wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan analisis dokumen. Dengan memanfaatkan teori subkultural Dick Hebdige, studi ini menemukan bahwa komunitas secara aktif mengintegrasikan simbol-simbol budaya Tionghoa—seperti bahasa, ritual, dan perayaan tradisional—ke dalam praktik dakwah yang inklusif. Melalui pendekatan integratif ini, komunitas mampu melawan penghapusan budaya sekaligus mendorong kohesi sosial. Studi ini menyoroti potensi praktik keagamaan yang berakar pada budaya untuk memperkuat dialog antaragama, meningkatkan pemahaman publik tentang keberagaman, dan memberikan kontribusi pada kerangka kebijakan integrasi minoritas. Dengan menempatkan pengalaman hidup Muslim Tionghoa dalam wacana yang lebih luas tentang multikulturalisme dan harmoni antaragama, studi ini memperkaya pemahaman tentang identitas hibrida sebagai fondasi bagi masyarakat yang lebih inklusif dan tangguh di Indonesia maupun Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: Integrasi Kultural, Muslim Tionghoa, Strategi Dakwah, Identitas Multikultural.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of ethnic and religious diversity in Indonesia has long attracted scholarly attention, particularly in relation to the dynamics between minority groups and dominant local cultures (Burhani, 2020; Sugianto, 2018). Within this landscape, the Chinese Muslim community presents a compelling case, embodying a dual identity: an ethnic minority within the predominantly non-Muslim Chinese milieu and a religious minority within the broader Muslim majority. This positioning, often described as a "minority within a minority" (Aripudin et al., 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2018), generates distinctive sociocultural dynamics that merit close examination. Of particular concern is how this community maintains its cultural heritage while engaging in *daʿwah* grounded in Islamic values within a pluralistic framework. Accordingly, this study is guided by two key research questions: (1) How does the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang sustain its cultural and religious identity amid pressures of assimilation from both the local Javanese context and the non-Muslim Chinese community? (2) How do the community's *daʿwah* strategies integrate Islamic values with Chinese cultural traditions to foster harmony within a multicultural society?

Existing literature has shed light on the articulation of Chinese Muslim identity through culturally embedded *daʿwah*, organizational mentoring, and media-mediated symbolism. Nurjanah (2024), for example, reconstructs Muhammadiyah's multicultural daʿwah among Chinese Indonesians in the 1960s–1970s, demonstrating how outreach efforts positioned Chinese Muslims as public role models rather than mere recipients of missionary activity, thereby foregrounding institutional frameworks of inclusion. Abidin (2022) highlights how Chinese-Muslim organizations "maintain faith from within" by scaffolding

converts' doctrinal understanding through mentoring, small-group learning, and pastoral care—showing that organizational pedagogy is as crucial as public preaching for sustaining minority resilience. Similarly, Zuhri, Wahyudi, and Hamid (2021) frame Chinese Muslims' "ways of being nationalist" as dialogic practices that combine Islamic cosmopolitanism, acculturation, and civic participation, thereby reimagining identity as co-produced rather than inherited.

Digital media has further complicated these negotiations. Mulyanto (2022) illustrates how preachers such as Felix Siauw and Koko Liem curate "Chinese-ness" alongside Islamic piety on Instagram through multimodal discourse, showing that symbolic negotiation now unfolds through visual style as much as sermon content. Comparative work sharpens these perspectives: Ho (2023) analyzes the intersection of Islam, Chineseness, and citizenship among China's Hui, revealing how state-driven sinicization policies recalibrate ethnic-religious boundaries. Mahfud et al. (2024) examine the institutional role of PITI in facilitating Chinese Muslims' engagement with Islamic jurisprudence, including halal certification, marriage consultation, and Mandarin Qurʾan translation—though without fully addressing how cultural interplay unfolds in specific local contexts such as Semarang.

Historical and regional perspectives further enrich this discussion. Tabroni et al. (2025) trace how New Order political structures shaped the negotiation of Chinese Muslim religious identities, underscoring the broader socio-political forces influencing minority integration. Beyond Indonesia, Tan et al. (2024) examine the hybrid identities of Chinese Muslim women in Malaysia and China, highlighting how cultural heritage and religious belief intertwine across national contexts, while Wang (2023) introduces the notion of "archipelagic Chineseness" to capture how Chinese Muslim identities are localized across Indonesia and Malaysia. Srimulyani et al. (2018), meanwhile, explore post-conflict interethnic relations in Banda Aceh, showing how Chinese communities strategically employed ethnic-based organizations to build rapport with local Muslims and promote social harmony.

Collectively, these studies reveal that Chinese Muslim identity is negotiated across institutions, pedagogy, media, and citizenship regimes. Yet they leave a notable gap in addressing how Chinese Muslim communities in Semarang operationalize culture-inflected *daʿwah* in a predominantly Javanese urban setting. This study addresses that gap by situating the Semarang case within broader debates on interfaith harmony and multiculturalism. It examines how Chinese Muslims integrate ethnic cultural symbols with Islamic values, thereby transforming cultural repertoires into shared *daʿwah* strategies that function simultaneously as communicative resistance (Hebdige, 1995a; Jensen, 2018) and as bridges of mutual recognition across religious boundaries.

Distinguishing itself from prior research, this study explicitly applies Hebdige's subcultural theory to analyze how identity, resistance, and symbolism

are articulated in practice. According to Hebdige, subcultural analysis revolves around three core dimensions: identity, resistance, and symbolism. First, the dimension of identity illuminates how subcultural groups construct and assert a distinct sense of self—markedly different from the dominant culture—through the strategic deployment of specific symbols (Blackman & Kempson, 2016). Second, the notion of resistance in Hebdige's framework is employed to explain how subcultures, either implicitly or explicitly, push back against prevailing social structures and dominant ideologies (Guerra, 2020). Such resistance does not necessarily manifest through overt physical confrontation; rather, it is often encoded in cultural symbolism or in the visual aesthetics that subvert normative social codes (Hebdige, 1995; Jensen, 2018). Third, symbolism itself constitutes a vital analytical entry point, as it reveals how subcultures communicate socio-political messages to broader society through culturally embedded signs and expressions (Kozlov et al., 2024).

Conceptually, this theoretical framework serves eight strategic functions within the present study. First, Hebdige's theory offers a novel lens through which to view the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang—not merely as a religious or ethnic minority, but as a subculture marked by dynamic and multidimensional identity formations. Second, it helps articulate the complex phenomenon of dual identity through culturally distinctive symbols and social practices specific to this community. Third, Hebdige's framework enables a critical reading of symbolic resistance against Indonesia's mainstream cultural hegemony. Fourth, it facilitates a sociological understanding of how the subcultural dynamics of the Chinese Muslim community unfold through symbolic interactions within public spaces. Fifth, the theory holds predictive potential, allowing for the anticipation of identity shifts within subcultural groups as a consequence of sustained engagement with dominant cultural norms. Sixth, it provides tools to reshape negative public perceptions and challenge lingering stigma toward minority groups such as Chinese Muslims. Seventh, the framework aids in evaluating the symbolic strategies embedded within culturally-grounded da'wah efforts. And eighth, it clarifies the nature and extent of social access afforded by the deployment of subcultural symbols and identity markers.

In operational terms, Hebdige's theory assists this research in translating its conceptual variables into actionable indicators. For example, the subcultural identity of Chinese Muslims may be measured through indicators such as the use of cultural symbols in religious rituals, the practice of culturally-inflected da'wah, and the celebration of Chinese New Year (Imlek) reinterpreted through an Islamic lens. Resistance, as a variable, may be observed in the form of visual and narrative expressions that deviate from mainstream cultural norms, as well as in implicit modes of socio-political communication disseminated through social media,

community-based activities, and other public forums. In sum, Hebdige's subcultural framework proves to be highly compatible with the demands of rigorous social research: it is relevant, logically structured, theoretically robust, and strategically useful in decoding the lived experience of Chinese Muslim identity within the multicultural landscape of Semarang.

The selection of Semarang as the research site is deliberate: as a historically multiethnic and multireligious hub shaped by centuries of Sino-Javanese interaction (Rukayah et al., 2021), it provides fertile ground for examining how Chinese Muslim identity is negotiated within enduring intercultural and interfaith dynamics. Demographic data underscore this relevance: while Indonesia's largest Chinese population is in Jakarta (632,372), followed by West Kalimantan (358,451), North Sumatra (340,320), East Java (244,393), and Central Java (139,878). Semarang, one of Central Java's major urban centers, offers a distinctive site for exploring how minority communities preserve identity while engaging constructively with a plural society (Mufrida, n.d.). The following diagram shows Semarang (Central Java) as one of the most diverse ethnic cities in Indonesia.

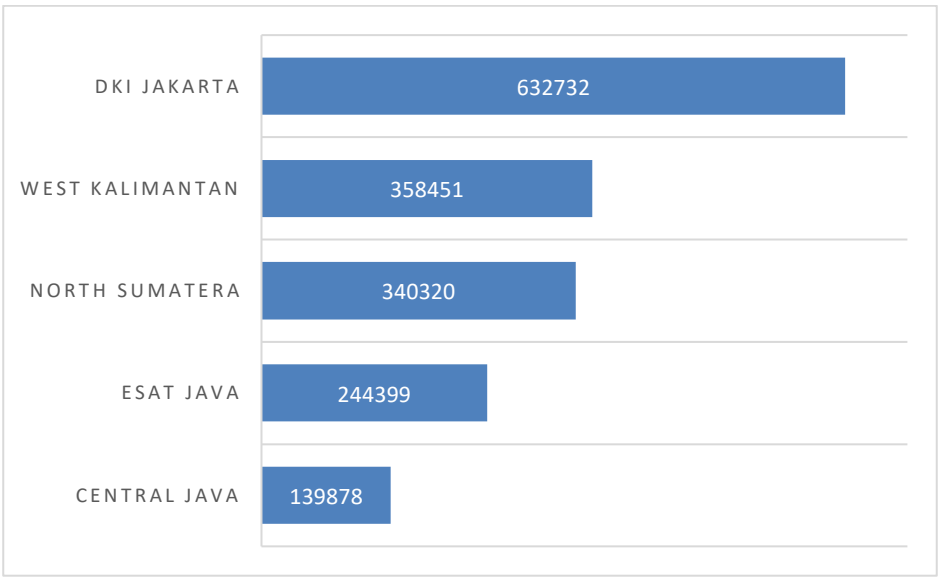

Figure 1: Top Five Provinces by Chinese Ethnic Population Distribution (BPS)

The Chinese population in Central Java is concentrated in several key areas, with Semarang standing out as both a cultural and historical hub (Kurniawan et al., 2023). Beyond Semarang, towns such as Lasem in Rembang Regency hold a prominent place in the long history of the Chinese diaspora in Java, with Lasem recognized as one of the island's oldest Chinese settlements, dating back to the fifteenth century (Bloembergen & Eickhoff, 2020). Semarang itself, marked by the iconic Sam Poo Kong temple (Nugroho & Abdullah, 2021), is home to a significant Chinese population and serves as a central site for socio-cultural observation

relevant to this study. As a historically layered city, it contains cultural landmarks, architectural forms, and hybrid traditions that testify to centuries of Sino-Javanese acculturation (Pradhana et al., 2021). These include the *Tuk Panjang* tradition, a ceremonial feast extending beyond the Chinese quarter, and culinary staples such as *lumpia*, introduced by early Chinese settlers (Chandra & Kepirianto, 2020). Within this culturally rich setting, the Chinese Muslim community enjoys a relatively expansive space to articulate its identity through distinctive forms of *da'wah* not commonly observable in other regions (Rahmawati et al., 2018). In this sense, Semarang provides an optimal locus for investigating how Chinese Muslim identity is transmitted and negotiated within an environment historically attuned to intercultural contact.

The focus of this research is to explore how the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang sustains its cultural and religious identity through the integration of Chinese cultural symbols with Islamic values in *da'wah* activities. More specifically, it aims to identify the inclusive strategies employed in response to both internal and external pressures—ranging from negative stereotyping to resistance within the broader Chinese and Muslim milieus. In pursuing these goals, the study seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of cultural adaptation within Islamic propagation among minority communities.

The study carries both academic and practical significance. Academically, it contributes to scholarship on cultural and religious interaction by situating Chinese Muslim experiences within Indonesia's plural context. It also engages subcultural theory, showing how cultural symbols are mobilized to preserve minority identity while communicating Islamic values in ways that are inclusive and adaptive (Blackman & Kempson, 2016; Guerra, 2020). Practically, the findings provide insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and civil society actors in formulating *da'wah* strategies that are culturally attuned and contextually effective. By highlighting integrative practices, the study aspires to reduce prejudice and foster greater social harmony within Indonesia's multicultural landscape.

By situating the analysis within Semarang's historically multicultural environment, the study offers new insights into how minority Muslim communities negotiate identity and promote interfaith harmony in contemporary Indonesia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to gain a nuanced understanding of identity formation and *da'wah* dynamics within the Chinese

Muslim community in Semarang. Such an approach is well-suited to exploring lived experiences and constructing rich, data-driven narratives. Qualitative inquiry enables deep engagement with complex social realities, such as the intersection of Chinese ethnic identity and Islamic teachings within a predominantly Javanese cultural environment, while illuminating the challenges faced by this community in sustaining its hybrid identity.

Adopting a sociological lens, the study examines how the Chinese Muslim community navigates the tensions inherent in maintaining both cultural and religious identities. Central to this analysis is Dick Hebdige's subcultural theory, which provides the framework for interpreting how marginalized groups interact with dominant cultures and articulate their identities in multicultural urban settings such as Semarang.

The data for this study consisted of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through in-depth interviews and direct field observations. Five key informants were interviewed, including the leader of PITI (the Indonesian Chinese Islamic Association), mosque congregation members and administrators, ethnic Chinese residents (both Muslim and non-Muslim), and participants actively engaged in PITI programs. These informants were selected purposively to capture diverse perspectives and roles, thereby offering a multi-dimensional understanding of identity negotiation and *da'wah* strategies. Fieldwork was conducted between July and November, with interviews carried out in November 2024. These observations provided a comprehensive snapshot of the community's socio-cultural interactions. Secondary data were drawn from relevant literature, scholarly articles, and organizational documents to contextualize the broader Chinese Indonesian experience and support the study's theoretical framing.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited to identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets (Naeem et al., 2023). The process began with verbatim transcription of all interviews, followed by repeated readings for familiarization. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and grouped into preliminary categories, which were subsequently refined into broader themes aligned with the study's focus on identity, resistance, and symbolism. The refinement process was iterative, ensuring coherence between emergent themes and the theoretical framework. To enhance reliability and trustworthiness, the study employed methodological triangulation (interviews, observations, and document analysis), member checking with selected informants to validate interpretations, and peer debriefing with academic colleagues to minimize interpretive bias.

The application of Hebdige's subcultural theory is particularly valuable for analyzing the symbolic practices and cultural styles that shape subcultural identity. Hebdige (1995) emphasizes that subcultures are not simply expressions of deviance but systems of visual and symbolic communication imbued with social and

political meaning. This perspective allows for a deeper examination of how Chinese Muslims in Semarang negotiate dual identities through distinctive cultural symbols and social practices, while simultaneously articulating forms of resistance and continuity in response to external pressures. Blackman (2014) further underscores the relevance of subcultural theory as an analytical tool in the social sciences, particularly for understanding how marginalized groups assert agency within broader societal structures.

As with most qualitative research, the findings of this study are context-bound and shaped by the interpretive engagement of both researcher and participants. While qualitative methods enable nuanced insights, they also limit generalizability beyond the immediate case of Semarang. Potential biases—including researcher positionality, selective recall by participants, and the interpretive nature of thematic analysis—were addressed through triangulation, member checking, and peer review. Nonetheless, the subjective dimensions of qualitative interpretation remain inherent to this approach, underscoring the importance of situating the findings within their socio-cultural and historical contexts.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Negotiating Identity and Preserving Cultural Heritage in a Multicultural Context

The history of the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang is deeply embedded in the city's long-standing role as a hub of maritime trade and cultural exchange. Historical records trace the arrival of Chinese traders to the northern coast of Java as early as the fifteenth century, though some accounts point to even earlier connections with the Tarumanegara kingdom in the fifth century and the Holing kingdom in the seventh century— the latter believed to have been located in the vicinity of present-day Semarang. (Knaap, 2015). These traders first came as part of extensive commercial networks linking China and Java, establishing themselves in key ports, including Semarang.(Willmott, 1960). Over time, many chose to settle permanently, drawn by economic opportunity and the city's strategic location. They concentrated in what became known as *Pecinan* (Chinatown), an enclave that would grow into a vital part of Semarang's economic and social life. (Claver, 2014). As their presence expanded, sustained interaction with the indigenous Javanese population produced a distinctive cultural hybridity that came to shape the city's historical identity. (Willmott, 1960).

This enduring presence eventually gave rise to a distinct Chinese Muslim community, shaped by both religious outreach and processes of cultural integration (Srimulyani et al., 2018; Zuhri et al., 2021b). The institutional framework

for this community was established with the founding of the Indonesian Chinese Islamic Association (*Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia*—PITI) on 14 April 1961. According to Mr. Agus, current chairman of PITI Semarang, the organization's origins can be traced to the efforts of three key figures—Haji Kho Goan Tjin from Bengkulu, Yap A. Siong from Medan, and Haji Karim Oei Tjeng Hien from Jakarta—who initially worked independently to promote Islam among Chinese communities. "*Although they began separately, the three eventually agreed to form a unified organization that would consolidate their da'wah efforts across the archipelago*," Mr. Agus recalled in an interview (Santoso, 2024). This unification not only provided a formal structure for religious outreach but also strengthened the community's ability to maintain its cultural identity while engaging in broader Islamic networks. The long-standing presence of Chinese Muslims underscores their dual commitment: to advancing the Islamic faith and preserving their ethnic identity. One particularly notable figure, Haji Karim Oei Tjeng Hien, not only contributed to religious outreach but also played a role in Indonesia's independence struggle. He briefly served in the first post-independence cabinet at the recommendation of K.H. Ibrahim, a Muhammadiyah leader with close ties to K.H. Ahmad Dahlan. "*It was K.H. Ibrahim's suggestion to unify the Chinese Muslim community that became a turning point in the establishment of PITI*," recalled Mr. Agus (Santoso, 2024).

The New Order era, however, brought fresh challenges. State assimilation policies of the 1970s and 1980s placed tight restrictions on public expressions of Chinese identity, forcing many community organizations to adapt in order to survive. PITI itself was compelled to change its name to Pembina Imam Tauhid, removing the politically sensitive word "Tionghoa" from its title. As Mr. Agus recounted, "*At the time, we had to change the organization's name to survive, but our mission and values never wavered*." (Santoso, 2024). This period reinforced the need for careful negotiation between cultural preservation and political realities, as Chinese Muslims navigated both ethnic stereotyping and the risk of cultural erasure. (Adam et al., 2019). These pressures have not been confined to state policy. Members of the community continue to face dual marginalization, both from within the non-Muslim Chinese milieu and from segments of the wider Muslim majority. Conversion to Islam is frequently perceived within the Chinese community as a rejection of ancestral traditions, leading to familial and social estrangement. "*The greatest challenge does not come from the mainstream Muslim community, but rather from our own*," Mr. Agus observed (Santoso, 2024). This pattern reflects broader findings in studies of religious conversion, which show that new adherents often experience alienation from their original networks alongside incomplete acceptance within their adopted religious community. (Ubaedillah, 2023).

From the perspective of the broader Muslim majority, prejudice has also persisted. Chinese Muslims are sometimes perceived as culturally distant or

religiously less devout, their sincerity quietly questioned. As Putra et al. (2023) note, these biases are sustained by limited exposure to the diverse cultural expressions of Islam (Putra et al., 2023). "*We are frequently seen as different—by both our original community and other Muslims*," Mr. Agus explained (Santoso, 2024). Such dynamics underscore the ongoing tension between theological principles that reject racial discrimination, as enshrined in Qur'an Surah al-Hujurat [49]:13, and the uneven social realities of acceptance. To address these challenges, the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang has developed a set of da'wah strategies grounded in cultural inclusivity. Central to this approach is the retention of Chinese traditions that do not conflict with Islamic principles (Hasanah et al., 2022; Mulyanto, 2022). The Imlek, for example, is celebrated with mosque-based prayer gatherings and community service initiatives, reframing a cultural festival as both a moment of heritage and a religious expression. "*We continue to preserve our traditions, but always with strong Islamic values*," Mr. Agus emphasized (Santoso, 2024). This approach not only affirms the community's ethnic heritage but also signals to non-Muslim Chinese that adopting Islam does not require abandoning one's cultural roots—a point consistent with Machali et al.'s (2023) findings in Yogyakarta and parallel to the strategies documented by Srimulyani et al. (2018) in Banda Aceh (Machali et al., 2023; Srimulyani et al., 2018).

These practices are further supported by two complementary strategies: education and media engagement. Educational outreach, often in the form of informal study circles, public lectures, and community discussions, offers new and prospective converts a safe space to learn about Islam in ways that honor their cultural background. (Tri, 2012; Nanda, 2023). "*Education is the key to introducing Islam in a peaceful and inclusive way*," Mr. Agus explained. (Santoso, 2024). In parallel, the use of digital platforms—particularly social media—allows the community to share narratives that highlight harmony between Chinese heritage and Islamic faith, effectively reaching younger audiences and countering entrenched stereotypes. (Hidayatulloh & Sahid, 2020). Taken together, these findings indicate that the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang sustains its dual identity through a deliberate synthesis of heritage preservation and inclusive religious practice. In doing so, they address both research questions posed in this study: they have found ways to maintain cultural and religious identity under the pressures of assimilation from the local Javanese and non-Muslim Chinese contexts, and they have developed da'wah strategies that integrate Islamic values with Chinese traditions to foster harmony in a multicultural society.

Cultural Integration as a Foundation for Multicultural Harmony

The findings of this study indicate that the Chinese Muslim community in Semarang sustains a composite identity by holding cultural continuity and Islamic

commitment in deliberate tension rather than treating them as mutually exclusive domains. The narratives show an ongoing negotiation shaped by two intersecting pressures—expectations from the non-Muslim Chinese milieu and skepticism from segments of the Muslim majority—while also revealing patterned ways the community reframes cultural symbols to anchor belonging. This aligns with the framework adopted in the Methodology, especially Hebdige's orientation to identity, resistance, and symbolism, where meaning is asserted through the strategic reworking of signs within a dominant order (Blackman, 2014; Blackman & Kempson, 2016; Guerra, 2020; Hebdige, 1995; Jensen, 2018; Kozlov et al., 2024). A first point of interpretation concerns how identity is sustained under assimilation pressures from both sides of the boundary.

Interview data converge on the experience of "dual marginality." From within the ethnic community, conversion is sometimes construed as a departure from ancestral continuity. As Mr. Agus put it, "The greatest challenge does not come from the mainstream Muslim community, but rather from our own." (Santoso, 2024). From the broader public, negative stereotypes about Chinese Indonesians persist despite religious commonality. "*Even today, most non-Chinese people still view Chinese Indonesians negatively, whether they are Muslim or not*," observed Ko Lim (Lim, 2024). Read together, these statements help explain why identity maintenance is not reducible to doctrinal alignment; it necessarily entails social navigation within stigmatized categories. The Methodology's emphasis on triangulation and member checking is important here: the same tensions surface across interviews, observation notes, and documentary sources, indicating that these are not idiosyncratic accounts but stable patterns in the field.

The second point is that identity maintenance is accomplished through patterned practices of symbolic adaptation rather than by withdrawing from public space. The Islamized celebration of Imlek, the retention of family surnames, and the recontextualization of etiquette and festive aesthetics function as communicative forms that signal "continuity-within-change." Mr. Agus explicitly articulates this logic: "*We continue to preserve our traditions, but always with strong Islamic values.*" (Santoso, 2024). Within Hebdige's terms, these are not decorative gestures but semiotic operations that re-encode cultural forms so that they carry Islamic ethical content while remaining legible to Chinese audiences. This is where identity and resistance intersect: the community resists erasure not through confrontation but by insisting that its signs mean otherwise. Such a strategy answers the first research question directly: cultural-religious identity is sustained by reframing rather than abandoning Chinese symbols, and by placing them in an Islamic moral horizon that community members recognize as authentic.

A related dynamic is the way da'wah is embedded in relationships, education, and visibility practices that lower the social cost of engagement. While the Result documents these strategies empirically, the Discussion clarifies how and why they matter. Personal engagement—household conversations, neighborly

assistance, and mosque-based hospitality—works because trust precedes persuasion. Educational initiatives extend trust into a structured space. "*Education is the key to introducing Islam in a peaceful and inclusive way*," said Mr. Agus (Santoso, 2024)(Santoso, 2024). Such programming aligns with the Methodology's justification for a descriptive qualitative approach: it captures how learning happens through narrativized experience, not merely through didactic content. When instruction references Chinese history, language, and exemplars alongside Islamic teachings, it reduces cultural dissonance, strengthens recognition, and helps respondents reconcile what might otherwise feel like competing loyalties.

Visibility is also cultivated through institutional spaces that welcome difference. Masjid Baiturrahim is described by Mr. Agus as "*a home for everyone—not only for Chinese Muslims*" (Santoso, 2024). Rudi, a caretaker, echoes the ethos of conduct that makes such openness credible: "*We see how they engage in da'wah with humility, build respectful relationships, and embody the teachings of Islam in their daily lives.*" (Rudi, 2024). In settings like this, hospitality is the medium through which interfaith and interethnic contact occurs, consistent with the study's aim to link micro-practices to broader multicultural integration. Ratna's statement—"*I have never felt that Chinese Muslims are a threat or that they cause any social distance. My extended family itself includes Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists*." (Ratna, 2024)—demonstrates that acceptance is not uniform but contextually emergent. Where families are habituated to religious plurality, hybrid expressions of belonging are normalized rather than problematized.

At the same time, identity work remains situational. Brigen's comment—"*There are times when some of us feel less confident in gatherings with the wider Chinese community. In such spaces, they tend to conceal their religious identity*" (Brigen, 2024)—points to selective self-presentation as a pragmatic response when symbols may be misread. From an analytical standpoint, this does not negate the integrative thrust documented elsewhere; rather, it shows that integration is a process with variable tempos across settings. Individuals calibrate how visible they are, when to emphasize common ground, and when to reduce possible friction. The Methodology's thematic analysis accommodates such nuance by allowing themes (identity, resistance, symbolism) to be traced across contrasting moments without forcing a single uniform script. The integration of Islamic values with Chinese traditions to foster harmony—at the core of the second research question—can now be reconsidered in light of these practices. The argument is not that cultural forms are instrumentalized for religious ends; such a framing would misread the testimony. Rather, community members articulate that culture is the first grammar of belonging through which faith can be spoken intelligibly. When Imlek at the mosque includes Qur'anic recitation, charity, and a sermon on unity, the event becomes an interpretive bridge: Chinese guests recognize familiar rhythms and

aesthetics; Muslim attendees recognize familiar devotions and ethics. The bridge holds because both sides find themselves in the same place without being asked to surrender who they are.

Intersections of Cultural Identity and Religious Practice in Minority Contexts

The findings of this study have direct implications for interfaith dialogue. Here, dialogue is not confined to formal panels or interreligious forums; it also emerges in patterned encounters through shared spaces, meals, and acts of service. The Semarang case demonstrates that when religious institutions assume civic functions—such as hosting cultural festivals, organizing social support, or welcoming neighbors—dialogue ceases to be an exceptional event and becomes a habitual practice. This resonates with scholarship on urban pluralism in Indonesia, which identifies cultural dialogue as a key vehicle for building harmonious intercommunal relations (Jati, 2021). What this study adds is a close-grained account of how such dialogue is anchored in *semiotic labor*—the careful selection of signs, foods, greetings, and stories that allow recognition across difference.

Theoretically, applying Hebdige's subcultural triad to a religious minority setting in Southeast Asia underscores the portability of this framework beyond its origins in Western youth culture. In this study, identity emerges not as a static label but as a set of practiced recognitions; resistance operates less as outright opposition than as a curatorial process of selecting and reordering symbols so that they "speak two languages" at once; symbolism functions not merely as expression but as a constitutive force, establishing the very conditions of mutual recognition. This reframing shifts the understanding of "subculture" from deviance to a disciplined craft of *living in-between*, where communities generate forms that secure both internal affirmation and external intelligibility. In doing so, the Semarang case expands theoretical debates on minority formation, hybridity, and localized religiosity in maritime Southeast Asia (Tabroni et al., 2025b; Tan et al., 2024b; Wai Weng, 2023b).

The analysis also yields several policy-facing insights. First, the data suggest the need to move beyond a tolerance paradigm toward an inclusion paradigm. Whereas tolerance marginalizes cultural symbols, inclusion brings them into shared calendars, curricula, and civic rituals. As one informant, Mr. Agus, noted, *"We want to be of benefit to everyone, regardless of their background"* (Santoso, 2024)—a statement that signals civic as much as religious ambition. Second, educational initiatives that acknowledge cultural grammars—such as Chinese Muslim historical figures, linguistic resources, and culinary practices—better reflect how learning occurs in practice: through identification rather than abstraction. Third, local religious authorities and interfaith platforms can strengthen the legitimacy of hybrid practices by inviting minority leaders into agenda-setting roles, rather than limiting them to tokenistic appearances. These initiatives are not external "add-ons" but recognitions of practices already contributing to civic cohesion.

Regionally, the Semarang case provides a template for plural societies facing analogous challenges. In Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, Chinese Muslim minorities negotiate cultural and religious boundaries under varying political regimes. The transferable principle lies not in replicating specific rituals but in adopting a method: begin where people actually live—the symbols they use, the foods they cook, the kinship they honor—and articulate religious commitments through those everyday media so that recognition grows in two directions at once. Such an approach resonates with calls for "archipelagic" thinking about identity in maritime Southeast Asia, where cultural forms travel, adapt, and return transformed (Wai Weng, 2023b), and aligns with comparative accounts of Chinese Muslim identity work across national contexts (Tan et al., 2024b). The contribution of this study is empirical: it shows how such abstractions are lived on the ground.

It is also important to acknowledge the interpretive limits of these findings. As noted in the methodology, qualitative insights are context-bound and mediated by both researcher and participant perspectives. To strengthen validity, the study employed triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Nevertheless, its findings are best understood as locally situated. The patterns observed—symbolic adaptation, relational daʿwah, civic hospitality, selective self-presentation—are robust in Semarang but require further testing across different demographic and political settings. Even so, convergent evidence supports the central inference: the Chinese Muslim community sustains a dual identity not by oscillating between competing loyalties but by creating a shared world in which cultural and religious forms coexist without negating one another.

In addressing the study's research questions, the discussion clarifies that Chinese Muslims in Semarang maintain cultural and religious identity amid assimilation pressures by reinterpreting symbols and practicing hospitality that fosters recognition. They integrate Islamic values with Chinese traditions through daʿwah that is personal, educational, and publicly visible, thereby cultivating interfaith trust and multicultural integration. Quotations from informants—including Ko Lim, Mr. Agus, Brigen, Ratna, and Rudi—anchor these claims in lived experience, while the theoretical lens situates them within broader debates on minority formation and symbolic labor in plural societies. The result is a textured account of how harmony is not merely proclaimed as an ideal but assembled, sign by sign, in the everyday life of a community that refuses to choose between being Chinese and being Muslim.

CONCLUSION

These study findings reaffirm that this Chinese Muslim community in Semarang navigates a complex and delicate equilibrium: maintaining Chinese cultural identity while embodying Islamic faith, amid tensions from both the non-

Muslim Chinese milieu and segments of the Muslim majority. Nevertheless, their adaptive strategies demonstrate that cultural preservation and religious commitment are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can coexist and mutually reinforce one another. Through inclusive da'wah practices, characterized by personal engagement, community-based education, and the integration of Chinese traditions into Islamic rituals, the community has cultivated a distinctive identity that affirms pluralism and fosters intercommunal respect. These findings directly address the study's core research questions, illustrating that identity sustainability is attainable when religious outreach is embedded within culturally familiar frameworks and grounded in mutual recognition.

The integrative practices observed in Semarang carry broader implications for promoting social cohesion and informing policy across Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Governmental institutions, particularly the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Culture, could incorporate case-based modules on culturally embedded religious practices into both formal and informal educational curricula. Such initiatives would expose learners to lived examples of religious tolerance, challenge prevailing stereotypes, and normalize the coexistence of ethnic and religious diversity. Similarly, religious organizations, including national Islamic councils and interfaith networks, could adopt inclusive da'wah models akin to PITI's approach, ensuring minority representation in dialogue platforms, leadership roles, and community development programs.

At the municipal level, local governments could provide logistical and financial support for cultural-religious events, such as Islamized Lunar New Year celebrations that function as public showcases of intercultural harmony. These events could be integrated into city-level cultural calendars, thereby enhancing public visibility and fostering a shared sense of ownership over multicultural heritage. In parallel, policy incentives could encourage collaborative initiatives between minority communities and mainstream religious organizations, focusing on joint social service projects, youth leadership programs, and community resilience planning. By institutionalizing these cooperative spaces, policymakers can move beyond symbolic gestures toward structural inclusivity.

Regionally, the Semarang case offers a valuable reference for Southeast Asian societies grappling with similar challenges of minority integration. The adaptability of culturally rooted da'wah practices suggests that policy frameworks for religious tolerance should extend beyond abstract legal protections to actively support the cultural expressions of minority faith communities. In multicultural nations such as Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, embedding local cultural heritage into religious practice may serve as a strategic pathway to reduce interfaith tensions and promote mutual recognition. This calls for regional platforms, such as the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), to facilitate the exchange of best practices in culturally embedded religious engagement, with Semarang serving as a compelling case study.

While this study offers meaningful contributions, its scope is limited by the specific socio-cultural context of Semarang and the qualitative nature of its methodology, which constrains generalizability. Future research could expand this inquiry through longitudinal studies, comparative multi-site analyses, and the integration of quantitative metrics to assess the long-term impact of culturally grounded da'wah on public perceptions. Such efforts would deepen understanding of how hybrid identities evolve in response to shifting socio-political landscapes and how inclusive religious practices can be scaled for broader societal benefit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the Research and Community Service Institute (LPPM) of UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta for its invaluable support and guidance throughout this research. The completion of this study would not have been possible without the institute's facilitation, resources, and institutional backing. We are particularly grateful for the intellectual and logistical assistance provided at every stage of the research process. It is our hope that this collaboration will continue to flourish and contribute to the advancement of academic discourse and community-based scholarship in Indonesia.

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