

The Dynamics of Islamic Education for The Chinese Muslim Minority in West Sumatra

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Abstract. Islamic education for the Chinese Muslim minority in West Sumatra is a process fraught with challenges while offering significant opportunities in a multicultural society. This study aims to explore the supporting and inhibiting factors influencing the implementation of Islamic education in this community and to formulate strategies for optimizing its potential. Utilizing a qualitative approach, the research employed in-depth interviews, direct observation, and literature analysis. The participants consisted of 15 Chinese Muslims (8 males and 7 females), aged between 25 and 60 years, including community leaders, educators, parents, and youth actively involved in Islamic educational settings in Padang and Payakumbuh. The findings reveal that social support from the local community, the presence of inclusive educational institutions, the role of organizations like PITI, and family economic stability are key supporting elements. However, the community faces significant challenges, including social discrimination, lack of support from formal institutions, difficulties in cultural integration, and limited awareness of the importance of religious education. This study recommends a collaborative approach between the government, educational institutions, and society to create a more inclusive educational ecosystem. Such efforts are expected to strengthen the Islamic identity of Chinese Muslims and encourage their active participation in a pluralistic society.

Keyword: Ethnic Chinese; Islamic Education; Minority; West Sumatra

INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental foundation in the development of individuals and society. It not only serves as a means of conveying knowledge but also plays a crucial role in shaping social character. In Indonesia, education is regulated by Law Number 20 of 2003, which divides it into three categories: formal, nonformal, and informal education. Formal education takes place in official institutions such as schools and universities, which have standardized structures and curricula. On the other hand, nonformal and informal education offer greater flexibility, allowing integration with social and cultural life through courses, training, as well as education carried out within families and communities (Bolotio et al., 2021; Ramadhani et al., 2021).

In Islamic education, the responsibility for education lies with the government, parents, and the community. This situation presents unique challenges, especially in the context of minority communities with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. One such community of interest is the Chinese Muslim community in West Sumatra. Although they have a long history of blending

with the Minangkabau society, they face unique dynamics as a minority within the predominantly non-Muslim Chinese ethnic group. Research on how this community accesses Islamic education—whether formal, nonformal, or informal—is still limited. Therefore, it is essential to understand the challenges they face and the strategies they use to overcome these obstacles (Fathurrohman & Rizqi, 2021; Gusti et al., 2021; Tungkagi, 2022; Valentania, 2022).

Islamic education in Indonesia, particularly in the context of minorities, requires adaptive and inclusive approaches. Globalization creates both opportunities and new challenges, prompting Islamic education to innovate continuously. These changes require Islamic educational institutions to adjust, such as by utilizing social media in learning and strengthening the formation of students' character (Lundeto, 2023; Prasetia & Fahmi, 2020). Islamic education is not only a means of transferring knowledge but also plays a role in building morals and social values relevant to the changing times.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of Islamic education as it relates to ethnic minority groups, a topic that remains underexplored in academic discourse. The Chinese Muslim community represents a unique intersection of ethnic identity, religious conversion, and cultural adaptation, all of which shape their access to and participation in Islamic education. By focusing on their experiences, this study not only fills a critical research gap but also contributes to broader discussions on inclusive education, religious moderation, and multicultural citizenship in Indonesia. The findings can serve as a valuable reference for policymakers, educators, and community leaders in designing educational models that are both inclusive and responsive to the sociocultural realities of minority groups. Furthermore, this research aligns with national educational goals that emphasize equality, tolerance, and social cohesion within diverse communities.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of Islamic education as it relates to ethnic minority groups, a topic that remains underexplored in academic discourse. The Chinese Muslim community represents a unique intersection of ethnic identity, religious conversion, and cultural adaptation, all of which shape their access to and participation in Islamic education. This community has historically existed within a complex socio-political environment in Indonesia, ranging from colonial-era segregation policies such as the *Wijkenstelsel* to the assimilation policies of the New Order regime, which curtailed Chinese cultural expression, religious practice, and public representation. These historical legacies have produced lasting effects such as social stereotyping, marginalization, and identity struggles (Putri, 2022; Rizdki et al., 2017; Kusuma & Sholihah, 2018). Despite post-Reform era improvements emphasizing multiculturalism and religious freedom (Salwadila, 2021), Chinese Muslims still face subtle barriers in educational, religious, and socio-political participation. These structural challenges intersect with their engagement in Islamic education, making their religious participation not only an issue of faith but also of cultural negotiation and socio-political resilience (Pangestu, 2023; Halim, 2023). By focusing on their experiences, this study not only fills a critical research gap but also contributes to broader discussions on inclusive education, religious moderation, and multicultural citizenship in Indonesia. The findings can serve as a valuable reference for policymakers, educators, and community leaders in designing educational models that are both inclusive and responsive to the sociocultural realities of minority groups. Furthermore, this research aligns with national educational goals that emphasize equality, tolerance, and social cohesion within diverse communities.

Through a comprehensive literature review, this research built a theoretical framework related to Islamic education and inter-ethnic interactions. Understanding the evolution of Islamic education policies in Indonesia, particularly post-reform, was highly relevant. These policies included the increase in the number of Islamic educational institutions and the development of educator competencies, which together supported the strengthening of the quality of Islamic education in Indonesia (Salwadila, 2021; Sari, 2023). This study also highlighted the role of nonformal education in expanding access to Islamic education for minority communities through more flexible approaches (Adawiyah & Z, 2016; Bolotio et al., 2021).

The results of this study analyzed the Chinese Muslim community's access to Islamic education and how they adapted to the existing education system. This study also identified challenges faced by the community, including social stigma, limited access, and a lack of support from both the government and society. The recommendations provided were expected to assist in the development of more inclusive educational policies that meet the needs of minority communities (Agustin et al., 2022; Prasetya & Fahmi, 2020).

In conclusion, it is important to promote adaptive and inclusive education, especially in the context of ethnic and religious diversity in Indonesia. By understanding the challenges and strategies used by the Chinese Muslim community, more relevant educational policies can be formulated. These policies should not only cover formal education but also support nonformal and informal education that aligns with their social and cultural needs. This is crucial for creating a more tolerant society that respects diversity and promotes religious moderation (Alfiansyah & Fajriyah, 2023; Fathurrohman & Rizqi, 2021).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, which was considered the most suitable method for capturing the in-depth experiences, perceptions, and socio-cultural dynamics of the Chinese Muslim minority community in accessing Islamic education in West Sumatra. This approach allows researchers to understand complex realities that are not easily quantifiable and to explore interactions between ethnic identity and religious practice in a specific cultural context (Ernik et al., 2021; Supriadin, 2014).

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling, involving participants who met the following criteria: (1) identified as ethnically Chinese and practicing Islam; (2) residing in West Sumatra for at least five years; (3) actively involved in Islamic education through formal, nonformal, or informal institutions; and (4) willing to provide in-depth information. Based on these criteria, 15 participants were selected, consisting of 3 community leaders, 4 educators in madrasahs and suraus, 5 parents of school-aged children, and 3 youths actively participating in religious education, spread across Padang and Payakumbuh.

Data collection methods included semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis. Interviews were guided by open-ended questions to elicit detailed personal narratives about Islamic educational access, integration experiences, and challenges encountered. Observations were conducted in educational environments such as madrasahs, suraus, and community gatherings to observe learning interactions and social participation. Additionally, a literature review was carried out to contextualize findings within national Islamic education policy and Chinese minority history (Supriadin, 2014; Sutarno & Al Jumadi, 2022).

The data analysis technique used was thematic analysis, which involved coding qualitative data, identifying emerging patterns, and organizing findings into key themes such as: (1) supportive factors of access, (2) structural and cultural barriers, and (3) identity negotiation in religious education. The findings were then interpreted in relation to previous literature and sociocultural theory, with attention to triangulation across data sources to ensure credibility. This methodological design provided a comprehensive understanding of how Islamic education is accessed and experienced by a minority community negotiating both ethnic and religious identities in a pluralistic society.

FINDINGS

Field data revealed that the Chinese Muslim community in West Sumatra actively participates in various Islamic educational settings, including madrasahs, suraus, and informal religious gatherings. Respondents emphasized that their involvement in Islamic education is motivated by a strong

desire to strengthen their religious identity and gain social acceptance. Many participants reported positive experiences of inclusion and support from Minangkabau-majority communities, especially in Payakumbuh and Padang, where interethnic religious cooperation has been well established. However, some also highlighted subtle social boundaries that occasionally emerged during educational or community activities, indicating ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging.

The Chinese community first arrived in West Sumatra during the 17th century and gradually adapted to local traditions through continuous engagement with the Minangkabau people. Known for their strong family bonds and tradition of migration, the Minangkabau provided a conducive environment for cultural blending. Over time, some members of the Chinese community converted to Islam, fostering harmonious relationships and unique social integration. This acculturation process brought both advantages and hurdles. On the one hand, factors like robust social ties, financial autonomy, and adaptability supported the advancement of Islamic education among Muslim Chinese. On the other hand, challenges such as social prejudice and limited institutional assistance posed significant barriers.

The table below highlights essential aspects of the Muslim Chinese community's experiences, contributions, and challenges in West Sumatra, particularly in the areas of education and religious practice. The content of this table was constructed based on thematic coding of in-depth interview transcripts, supported by field observations in madrasahs, suraus, and religious events, as well as a review of relevant historical and educational documents. This triangulation of data sources ensures that each aspect presented in the table reflects both lived experiences and contextual background obtained during the research process.

Tabel 1. Aspects of the Life of the Muslim Chinese Ethnic Group in West Sumatra

No.	Aspect	Explanation	Example or Detail
1.	Arrival of the Chinese	The Chinese came to West Sumatra in the 17th century for trade	Settled along the coast, interacting with the Minangkabau
2.	Cultural Integration	The Chinese adapted through intermarriage and cultural exchange.	Intermarriage and conversion to Islam. Influence of Minangkabau values.
3.	Colonial Policies	Colonial policies influenced Chinese settlement.	Formation of Kampung Pondok, preservation of identity
4	Islamic Education	Madrasahs and organizations helped build the religious identity	PITT's role in education and strengthening Islamic values
5	Supporting Factors	Factors that aid Islamic education for Chinese Muslims.	Strong social ties, economic independence, and cultural flexibility.
6	Obstacles	Challenges in implementing Islamic education.	Social discrimination, lack of institutional support.
7	Cultural Blending	Chinese and Minangkabau cultures are combined in daily life.	Minang Pondok language and Peranakan food.
8	Globalization Challenges	New challenges in Islamic education today.	Changing curriculum and teaching methods.

Source: Field data compiled from interviews, observations, and document analysis, 2020-2024

The data in the table not only trace the chronological presence of the Chinese ethnic group in West Sumatra but also reveal how historical, socio-cultural, and political contexts have profoundly shaped their trajectory of integration. Their early arrival in the 17th century as traders under VOC influence illustrates that their presence was not incidental, but part of a larger economic and colonial dynamic that positioned them as both outsiders and contributors to regional development. The process of acculturation with the Minangkabau community was not merely about coexistence, but involved mutual accommodation, primarily through shared values such as entrepreneurship, migration practices, and community cohesion.

Notably, the implementation of colonial policies like the *Wijkenstelsel*, while intended to isolate the Chinese, paradoxically fostered the emergence of *ethnic enclaves* like Kampung Pondok that became cultural strongholds. These enclaves functioned as both spaces of resilience and cultural reproduction, allowing the community to maintain elements of Chinese identity while simultaneously adapting to Islamic and Minangkabau norms. This dynamic is reflected in hybrid cultural forms, such as the Minang Pondok dialect and Peranakan cuisine, which symbolize more than just culinary or linguistic adaptation—they indicate a strategic negotiation of identity that enables survival and social acceptance in a pluralistic society.

Thus, rather than being passive recipients of integration, the Chinese Muslim community in West Sumatra actively constructs a hybrid identity that challenges binary notions of assimilation. Their journey highlights how religious conversion, cultural adaptation, and historical marginalization intersect in shaping their place within Indonesia's Islamic education landscape.

In terms of education, Chinese Muslim ethnic groups played an active role in utilizing Islamic educational institutions such as madrasahs and religious organizations like PITI (Persatuan Islam Tionghoa Indonesia). Factors such as harmonious social relations, economic independence, and cultural flexibility enabled this community to access relevant religious education. However, they also faced challenges such as social discrimination, lack of institutional support, and the complex dilemma of cultural identity. In the era of globalization, Islamic education must continue to innovate to remain relevant. Overall, this table demonstrates that the presence and journey of the Chinese ethnic group in West Sumatra not only reflect social and cultural integration but also significant contributions to the development of education and diversity in the region.

DISCUSSION

The History of the Chinese Ethnic Group's Arrival and Spread in West Sumatra

The arrival and spread of the Chinese ethnic group in West Sumatra must be understood as a process embedded in historical, economic, and socio-political dynamics that continue to influence their current position within Islamic education. Rather than simply recounting their early migration and settlement patterns, it is crucial to interpret how these historical trajectories have shaped their collective identity and integration into the local Muslim majority culture (Agustin et al., 2022).

The early arrival of Chinese migrants, many of whom engaged in trade and craftsmanship, was not a neutral process but one that occurred within colonial frameworks that both enabled and constrained their movement. Policies such as the *Wijkenstelsel*, which restricted ethnic Chinese to specific urban quarters, institutionalized social boundaries that have had lasting consequences on how this community accesses public services, including education (Prasetia & Fahmi, 2020). These colonial legacies not only contributed to physical segregation but also reinforced cultural othering, limiting opportunities for social and religious integration.

However, the community's resilience is evident in how it navigated these constraints. Over time, many Chinese migrants embraced Islam—either through marriage, social interaction, or spiritual conviction—and began to participate more fully in the religious and educational life of the region. This conversion was not only a matter of faith but also a strategic means of overcoming exclusion and seeking acceptance within the Minangkabau-majority society (Adawiyah & Z, 2016). This indicates that religious identity for the Chinese in West Sumatra has historically been intertwined with cultural negotiation and social mobility. Thus, interpreting the history of Chinese Muslim integration requires moving beyond dates and events to consider the deeper processes of adaptation and identity reconfiguration. This community's historical presence laid the groundwork for current efforts to access and contribute to Islamic education, but it also left behind structural challenges that continue to shape their educational experiences. This long historical arc underscores the importance of understanding past patterns of marginalization and inclusion to inform more equitable educational policies today (Bolotio et al., 2021; Salwadila, 2021).

Islamic Educational Institutions for Chinese Muslim Ethnic Groups in West Sumatra

The engagement of Chinese Muslim communities with Islamic educational institutions in West Sumatra illustrates a dynamic interplay between cultural identity, religious integration, and institutional openness. Rather than viewing this engagement as a straightforward process, the findings should be interpreted as evidence of how religious institutions—both formal and nonformal—function as mediators of inclusion and boundary-making in a plural society (Adawiyah & Z, 2016).

In interviews, many participants expressed appreciation for the accessibility of Islamic education, primarily through nonformal institutions such as surau and pesantren. These settings were often perceived as more flexible and accommodating compared to formal schools. The choice of nonformal education by some members of the Chinese Muslim community was not merely pragmatic but deeply connected to their experiences of partial acceptance within mainstream institutions. While Islamic education was generally open to all, subtle barriers such as language use, curriculum homogeneity, and cultural unfamiliarity persisted, reinforcing a sense of marginality (Bolotio et al., 2021).

Moreover, the data suggest that Islamic educational institutions go beyond religious instruction—they also serve as sites where identity, trust, and social belonging are negotiated. In this regard, the relatively inclusive approach of surau-based learning enabled Chinese Muslims to engage with Islam in a way that affirmed both their faith and cultural heritage. These institutions provided safe spaces where dual identities could coexist, thereby fostering meaningful participation without demanding complete cultural assimilation (Salwadila, 2021). This interpretation aligns with multicultural educational theory, which advocates for learning environments that recognize and adapt to the cultural backgrounds of all learners. The historical and sociocultural context of Chinese Muslims in West Sumatra demands an educational model that is not only religiously inclusive but also culturally sensitive. Therefore, Islamic educational institutions must move beyond access and consider pedagogical reforms that promote cultural dialogue and equity within their learning environments (Sari, 2023).

Supporting Factors for the Implementation of Islamic Education for Chinese Muslim Minorities in West Sumatra

The successful implementation of Islamic education among Chinese Muslim minorities in West Sumatra is supported by a confluence of social, cultural, and institutional factors that reflect both community agency and local acceptance. Rather than perceiving these factors as static enablers, they must be interpreted as dynamic outcomes of interethnic negotiation and religious inclusion over time (Bolotio et al., 2021). One of the most prominent supporting factors identified through field data is the openness of Minangkabau culture, which embraces Islamic values while also recognizing diversity within its social fabric. This cultural openness has facilitated mutual respect and acceptance, particularly in community-based religious institutions like surau. Such spaces not only provide religious education but also serve as platforms for social bonding and intercultural exchange (Adawiyah & Z, 2016). As respondents noted, the ability to participate without the pressure to conform fully to Minangkabau customs or erase one's Chinese heritage made these settings especially conducive to learning and belonging.

Religious leaders (ulama) and educators also emerged as significant enablers in this process. Their role in mediating cultural differences and promoting inclusive religious narratives helped reduce social tension and fostered trust. Several participants acknowledged the importance of educators who demonstrated cultural sensitivity and avoided essentialist notions of Islamic identity. This finding aligns with multicultural pedagogy, which emphasizes the role of teachers as cultural mediators who can bridge differences through empathy and inclusive curriculum design (Sari, 2023).

Additionally, the growing awareness at the policy level about the importance of inclusive education, particularly after reformasi, has encouraged more accommodating practices within some

Islamic educational institutions. While these policies are still unevenly implemented, they provide a structural foundation that supports community-level initiatives. The synergy between national policy discourse and local practice appears to be a key factor enabling the ongoing participation of Chinese Muslims in Islamic educational spaces (Salwadila, 2021). Therefore, these supporting factors should not be viewed in isolation, but as interconnected mechanisms that operate across levels—from individual educators and community leaders to institutional structures and cultural norms. Understanding these mechanisms helps clarify how inclusion is not merely permitted but actively cultivated through intentional efforts by both the majority and minority groups.

Barriers to the Implementation of Islamic Education for Chinese Muslim Minorities in West Sumatra

While various enabling factors have supported the participation of Chinese Muslims in Islamic education, several enduring barriers continue to limit their full integration. These obstacles are not only structural but also sociocultural, reflecting the complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, and institutional practice. Rather than viewing these barriers as isolated incidents, they should be interpreted as manifestations of deeper historical and social exclusions (Agustin et al., 2022).

A key barrier identified in the field is the persistence of social stigma and stereotypes associated with Chinese identity. Despite conversion to Islam and active participation in religious life, many members of the community still experience subtle forms of exclusion, particularly in formal educational environments. As highlighted in interview responses, these stigmas often surface in the form of distrust, cultural misrecognition, or limited participation in leadership roles within religious institutions (Prasetia & Fahmi, 2020). This indicates that religious inclusion alone does not automatically lead to social inclusion.

Another significant barrier relates to access and affordability. Some participants described difficulties in enrolling their children in Islamic schools due to economic constraints and a lack of targeted support. This issue is compounded by the fact that many Islamic schools do not yet implement inclusive policies that take into account the specific needs of minority communities. The lack of scholarship schemes or culturally adaptive programs reduces the appeal and feasibility of Islamic education for some Chinese Muslim families (Salwadila, 2021).

Institutional rigidity and monocultural curricula also contribute to the challenges. Educational content that emphasizes a singular ethnic or religious interpretation may inadvertently alienate learners from minority backgrounds. Respondents noted that classroom materials and teacher attitudes sometimes failed to reflect the diversity of Muslim experiences in Indonesia, reinforcing feelings of otherness. This aligns with broader critiques in educational literature that warn against “hidden curricula,” which marginalize minority voices even in ostensibly inclusive settings (Sari, 2023). These findings suggest that to overcome these barriers, Islamic education must be reimagined not just as a matter of access, but as a site for equitable representation, cultural responsiveness, and anti-discriminatory practice. The experiences of Chinese Muslim minorities underscore the need for a shift from formal inclusion toward substantive inclusion—one that recognizes and accommodates the diverse realities of the Muslim ummah.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the participation of Chinese Muslim minorities in Islamic education in West Sumatra is a product of complex historical processes, cultural negotiations, and institutional dynamics. The findings indicate that while supportive factors such as inclusive community practices, the flexibility of surau-based learning, and the openness of Minangkabau culture have facilitated access, significant barriers remain. These include social stigma, economic limitations, and monocultural tendencies within formal Islamic education. Interpreting these experiences through a historical and socio-cultural lens shows that inclusion is not merely about access, but also about recognition and representation. Therefore, Islamic educational institutions must adopt culturally

responsive approaches that not only accommodate religious diversity but also affirm the ethnic and cultural identities of minority communities. The case of the Chinese Muslim community in West Sumatra underscores the importance of moving beyond formal inclusion toward genuine engagement, where education becomes a means of building mutual respect, equity, and pluralistic understanding within the broader Muslim ummah.

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