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NEGOTIATING HYBRID IDENTITY: THE MUHAMMAD CHENG HOO MOSQUE AND CHINESE MUSLIM COMMUNITY INTEGRATION IN BERASTAGI

Nabilah Aprilia Artanti*✉, Ismail Ismail**

*Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
E-mail: nabilah0604223051@uinsu.ac.id
**Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia
E-mail: ismailmarzuki@uinsu.ac.id

Abstract

This study examines how the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque in Berastagi symbolizes Chinese Muslim identity within a predominantly non-Muslim Karo society, addressing a gap in understanding hybrid identity formation among "double minority" groups in non-Muslim majority contexts. Employing a qualitative ethnographic approach grounded in Peter L. Berger's sociology of religion — specifically his social construction of reality framework — and interpretive symbolic anthropology, data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with ten key informants comprising a mosque founder and nine Chinese Muslim converts, and historical document analysis. Data were analyzed using Peirce's semiotic framework, operationalizing architectural elements as icons, indices, and symbols of hybrid cultural meaning. The findings reveal that the mosque's distinctive architecture — featuring red-gold color palettes and pagoda-style roofs integrated with Islamic spatial principles — functions as a visual manifestation of hybrid identity through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Beyond its ritual function, the mosque operates as a strategic public space enabling the Chinese Muslim minority to express dual identity, strengthen internal cohesion, and navigate their "double minority" status in a Karo-majority environment. The inclusive spatial design fosters inter-ethnic tolerance and religious harmony, receiving support from local authorities and cross-religious figures despite demographic asymmetry. This study contributes to Islamic Community Development scholarship in multicultural settings by demonstrating that culturally-adapted religious architecture can serve as a non-confrontational mechanism for minority resilience, social integration, and intergenerational transmission of hybrid identity, while maintaining full Islamic theological integrity.

Keywords: Chinese Muslims; Hybrid Identity; Religious Architecture; Social Integration; Minority Muslim Community; Multicultural Society.

✉Corresponding author:
Email Address: nabilah0604223051@uinsu.ac.id
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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana Masjid Muhammad Cheng Hoo di Berastagi mensimbolisasikan identitas Muslim Tionghoa di tengah masyarakat Karo yang mayoritas non-Muslim, mengisi kesenjangan pemahaman tentang pembentukan identitas hibrida di antara kelompok "minoritas ganda" dalam konteks mayoritas non-Muslim. Menggunakan pendekatan etnografi kualitatif yang berlandaskan sosiologi agama Peter L. Berger – khususnya teori konstruksi sosial realitas – dan antropologi simbolik interpretatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi partisipan, wawancara mendalam dengan sepuluh informan kunci yang terdiri dari pendiri masjid dan sembilan mualaf Tionghoa, serta analisis dokumen sejarah. Data dianalisis menggunakan kerangka semiotika Peirce dengan mengoperasionalkan elemen-elemen arsitektur sebagai ikon, indeks, dan simbol makna budaya hibrida. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa arsitektur unik masjid – yang menampilkan palet warna merah-emas dan atap bergaya pagoda yang terintegrasi dengan prinsip spasial Islam – berfungsi sebagai manifestasi visual identitas hibrida melalui proses eksternalisasi, objektivasi, dan internalisasi. Di luar fungsi ritual, masjid ini beroperasi sebagai ruang publik strategis yang memungkinkan minoritas Muslim Tionghoa mengekspresikan identitas ganda, memperkuat kohesi internal, dan menavigasi status "minoritas ganda" mereka dalam lingkungan mayoritas Karo. Desain spasial yang inklusif memupuk toleransi antar-etnis dan harmoni beragama, mendapat dukungan dari otoritas lokal dan tokoh lintas agama meskipun terdapat asimetri demografis. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada kajian Pengembangan Masyarakat Islam dalam setting multikultural dengan menunjukkan bahwa arsitektur keagamaan yang diadaptasi secara budaya dapat berfungsi sebagai mekanisme non-konfrontatif untuk ketahanan komunitas minoritas, integrasi sosial, dan transmisi antargenerasi identitas hibrida, sembari mempertahankan integritas teologis Islam sepenuhnya.

Kata Kunci: Muslim Tionghoa; Identitas Hibrida; Arsitektur Keagamaan; Integrasi Sosial; Komunitas Muslim Minoritas; Masyarakat Multikultural.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Muslims in Indonesia represent a unique demographic, navigating a "double minority" status as an ethnic minority within a Muslim-majority nation and a religious minority within the Chinese ethnic group. This dual identity necessitates continuous cultural and religious negotiation to maintain both ethnic heritage and Islamic faith.[1] Consequently, the intersection of Chinese cultural traditions and Islamic theology creates a complex social dynamic that requires constant validation within the broader Indonesian society.

Historically, Chinese Muslims have faced social marginalization and identity crises, often perceived as having abandoned their ethnic roots upon converting to Islam, while simultaneously facing skepticism from the broader Muslim community regarding their

[1]Esther Kuntjara and Chang-Yau Hoon, "Reassessing Chinese Indonesian Stereotypes: Two Decades after *Reformasi*," *South East Asia Research* 28, no. 2 (April 2, 2020): 199–216, https://doi.org/10.1080/0967828X.2020.1729664; Swambodo Murdariatmo Adi, "Mosque as a Model of Learning Principles of Sustainable Architecture," *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 4, no. 1 (June 21, 2016): 33, https://doi.org/10.18860/jia.v4i1.3090.

religious authenticity.[2] Because of these stigmas, finding a legitimate social space to express this hybrid identity remains a significant socio-religious challenge, often forcing them to choose between their ethnic visibility and their religious belonging.

In response to these challenges, religious architecture emerges as a vital medium for identity symbolization and social integration. Mosques are no longer merely ritualistic spaces but act as public arenas where cultural acculturation is visually and socially negotiated, allowing minority groups to assert their existence, foster inclusivity, and demonstrate that Islamic identity can be multicultural.[3] Through architectural symbolism, Chinese Muslims can visually communicate that embracing Islam does not require the erasure of their ethnic heritage.

Recent scholarship has explored the intersection of Chinese culture and Islamic architecture to understand minority identity formation. Hasanah et al. examined the social status of Chinese Muslims through the Cheng Ho Mosque in Surabaya, focusing on socio-cultural relations in a highly urbanized setting.[4] Similarly, Febriana & Sumardiyanto analyzed the architectural ornaments of the Surabaya mosque as symbols of cultural harmony,[5] while Saputra et al. investigated the acculturation of Islamic and Chinese values in Jember.[6] However, these studies predominantly focus on descriptive architectural analysis and cultural acculturation, treating the mosque merely as a static symbol of tolerance. They fail to adequately explain the underlying sociological mechanisms of *how* these spaces actively construct and negotiate minority identities. Furthermore, the novelty of existing literature is largely geographical, focusing on Muslim-majority or highly pluralistic urban centers. There remains a significant conceptual gap: current scholarship lacks a robust theoretical framework to explain how religious architecture functions as a dynamic mechanism for social construction and community development among "double minority" groups situated in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. This study addresses this gap by moving beyond mere architectural description to investigate the sociological processes of identity negotiation.

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[2]Eva Putriya Hasanah, Moh. Ali Aziz, Sokhi Huda, and Hepi Fauzi, "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status: A Study on the Existance of Chinese Muslim Within Sociocultural Relations in Surabaya, Indonesia," *Harmoni* 21, no. 2 (December 31, 2022): 201–16, https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v21i2.637; Muhamad Ulul Albab Musaffa, Taufiqurohman Taufiqurohman, Landy Trisna Abdurrahman, and Muhyidin Muhyidin, "Chinese Muslim Subculture: Culture and Religious Integration in Semarang's Multicultural Society," *Harmoni* 24, no. 1 (June 30, 2025): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.32488/harmoni.v24i1.845; Norhana Abdullah @ Siew Boey Ng, Azarudin Awang, and Azman Che Mat, "Chinese Muslims and Their Non-Muslim Families on *Muamalat Fiqh* Co-Existence (*Ta'ayush*)," *Global Journal Al-Thaqafah*, July 28, 2024, 49–66, https://doi.org/10.7187/GJATSI072024-4; Rusydi Sulaiman, Zulkifli Zulkifli, Mahbub Ghozali, and Gustin Gustin, "Religious Conversion and Conflict: The Struggles of Chinese Muslim Converts in Indonesia's Harmonious Society," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 20, no. 2 (December 24, 2025): 83–96, https://doi.org/10.22452/JAT.vol20no2.6.

[3]Doni Fireza, Azmal Sabil, and Nangkula Utaberta, "Symbolism in Contemporary Mosque Architecture Discourse: An Integrative Literature Review," *SINERGI* 29, no. 1 (January 3, 2025): 109–28, https://doi.org/10.22441/sinergi.2025.1.011; Nangkula Utaberta Amaliyah, Sayyidati Khalishah Azzahra, Rindah Febriana Suryawati, Upik Dyah Eka Noviyanti, Moh Darus Salam, Celya Intan Kharisma Putri, Arman Sarram, Doni Fireza, and Aji Sofanudin, "Redefining Vertical Urban Mosques as Community Hubs: Functional and Social Adaptations in the Compact City of Kuala Lumpur," *Buildings* 16, no. 11 (May 25, 2026): 2112, https://doi.org/10.3390/buildings16112112.

[4]Hasanah et al., "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status," 205.

[5]Sintia Kori Febriana and B. Sumardiyanto, "Simbol Harmonisasi: Akulturasi Budaya Islam Dan Cina Pada Ornamen Masjid Cheng Hoo Surabaya," *Jurnal Lingkungan Karya Arsitektur* 2, no. 2 (September 28, 2023): 87–98, https://doi.org/10.37477/LKR.V2I2.359.

[6]Erlangga Ihza Surya Saputra, Muhammad Azzami Sauqi, Arinta Marwah Nur Baiti, Berliana Wahyu Widiastuti, Linda Aprilliyan, Choir Ulfa 'Alimah, and Agus Arifandi, "Akulturasi Nilai Islam dengan Budaya Tiongkok dalam Arsitektur Masjid Muhammad Cheng Hoo di Kabupaten Jember," *CENDEKIA: Jurnal Penelitian dan Pengkajian Ilmiah* 1, no. 12 (2024): 876–84, https://doi.org/10.62335/s1yygh59.

To bridge this conceptual gap, this study employs Peter L. Berger's sociology of religion, specifically his theory of the social construction of reality.[7] Berger posits that society and reality are continuously constructed through a dialectical process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization.[8] In the context of this research, *externalization* refers to the Chinese Muslim community actively projecting their hybrid identity onto the physical environment through the mosque's unique architecture; *objectivation* occurs when this architectural symbolization is recognized and institutionalized as a tangible social reality by both the minority and the broader Karo society; and *internalization* is the process by which the community absorbs this spatial reality, reinforcing their dual identity as a core part of their daily social existence. By integrating Berger's framework, this research advances the sociology of religion and Islamic community development by demonstrating how physical spaces are not just passive backdrops, but active agents in the social construction of minority resilience and intercultural coexistence.[9]

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the symbolization of Chinese Muslim identity through the architecture and social functions of the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque in Berastagi. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Peter Berger's sociology of religion and interpretive symbolic anthropology, this research explores how the mosque's unique architectural elements—such as pagoda roofs and red-gold color schemes—facilitate the expression of a dual identity, foster social cohesion, and navigate inter-ethnic relations in a diverse society.

The urgency of this research is anchored in the growing need to understand how religious minorities navigate identity preservation and social integration in highly diverse, non-Muslim majority regions. By highlighting the mosque's role as an inclusive cultural bridge, this study provides critical insights for promoting religious tolerance, preventing social fragmentation, and formulating inclusive multicultural policies, proving that religious identity can be a unifying force rather than a source of division in pluralistic societies.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach utilizing ethnographic methods and interpretive symbolic anthropology to explore the symbolization of Chinese Muslim identity.[10] The research was conducted over a four-month period, from January to April 2026, at the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque located in Jaranguda Village, Merdeka District, Karo Regency, Sumatera Utara. This location was strategically selected due to its unique socio-cultural dynamics, specifically the challenges faced by the Chinese Muslim minority in expressing their hybrid identity within the predominantly non-Muslim Karo society. Field immersion was conducted through direct participant observation, where the researcher actively attended Friday prayers, daily congregational activities, and community gatherings to observe the lived experiences and social interactions of the congregants in their natural setting.

The study involved a total of 10 key informants selected through purposive sampling, comprising 1 mosque founder/administrator and 9 active Chinese Muslim congregants (as detailed in Table 1 and Table 2). The final number of participants was determined by the principle of data saturation, where data collection ceased when no new themes or insights emerged from subsequent interviews. Informants were chosen based on specific criteria,

[7]Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 45–61.

[8]Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 62–78.

[9]Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, 79–92.

[10]John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2018), 90–95.

including their ethnic background, religious conversion status, and a minimum of two to three years of active involvement in the mosque's activities.[11] Data collection was carried out through in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting between 45 to 90 minutes per session. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. Additionally, historical documents and architectural blueprints were analyzed to contextualize the mosque's physical and social development.

To ensure a transparent analytical workflow, the raw qualitative data were processed using thematic analysis. The transcripts and field notes were first subjected to open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by axial coding to group these concepts into broader categories, ultimately developing the core themes presented in the findings.[12] Furthermore, to decode the architectural and social representations of the mosque, Peirce's semiotics framework was explicitly operationalized in the data analysis.[13] The architectural elements were categorized into: (1) *Icons*, representing physical resemblance to Chinese culture (e.g., the pagoda-style roof); (2) *Indices*, representing factual or causal connections to Chinese heritage (e.g., the red-gold color palette intrinsically linked to prosperity); and (3) *Symbols*, representing conventional, culturally agreed-upon meanings (e.g., the name "Cheng Hoo" symbolizing historical Islamic-Chinese harmony).[14] Finally, the trustworthiness of the data was rigorously ensured by adhering to Lincoln and Guba's principles, encompassing credibility (via member checking and triangulation), transferability, dependability, and confirmability, thereby guaranteeing the reliability of the findings regarding the cultural integration of Islam and Chinese heritage.[15]

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

A. Historical Genesis and Community Institutionalization

The transformation of the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque from a private villa in 2009 into a public religious endowment represents a critical mechanism for the institutionalization of the Chinese Muslim community in Berastagi. Prior to this transformation, Chinese Muslim converts in the area lacked a formal physical space to consolidate their dual identity, often relying on informal, private gatherings. The founder, a native Karo man married to a Chinese Muslim woman, initiated this transformation to provide a tangible anchor for the community. As he explained:

> *"Building the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque aims to endow the land for the Muslim community, especially Chinese Muslims who are converts in Berastagi and surrounding areas, so they can gather, share knowledge, solve problems, and strengthen their faith while maintaining strong ties of kinship".* (Informant SP)

This historical transition illustrates how physical space is actively utilized to shift a minority group from informal social networks to a formalized community structure. The integration of an Islamic boarding school within the premises further institutionalizes this process, ensuring that the transmission of both religious knowledge and ethnic heritage

[11]Greg Guest, Arwen Bunce, and Laura Johnson, "How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability," *Field Methods* 18, no. 1 (February 2006): 59–82, https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903.

[12]Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 101–121.

[13]Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vols. 1–6, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–1935), 2.247–2.249.

[14]Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 36–45.

[15]Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 289–331.

occurs within a single, dedicated environment, thereby securing the community's continuity in a non-Muslim majority region.

Table 1. Profile of Key Informant and Mosque Founder.

No	Initial	Role	Description
1	SP	Mosque Endower/ Board Member	Native Karo man, medical doctor, endowed private villa to become the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque. Married to a Chinese Muslim woman from Singkawang.

The provided table outlines the primary profile of the mosque's founder, who serves as the central architectural and historical anchor for this research due to his foundational role in the site's transformation. His unique position as a local Karo man married to a Chinese Muslim woman provides an invaluable intersectional perspective on intercultural and interfaith dynamics within the region. Through his extensive involvement as the mosque's endower and board member, he offers critical insights into the strategic decisions regarding the building's unique Sino-Islamic design and its subsequent social functions. His testimonies are instrumental in understanding the underlying motivations and socio-cultural objectives that guided the mosque's physical and conceptual development from a private resting villa into a prominent religious landmark.

B. Demographic Profile and Identity Negotiation

The research involved 10 key informants, comprising the mosque founder and 9 active Chinese Muslim congregants who are predominantly merchants and traders in the Berastagi area (see Tables 1 and 2). The demographic data reveals a distinct pattern of religious engagement shaped by the community's socio-economic realities. The majority of informants are active primarily during Friday prayers, while only a small subset (two individuals) consistently performs daily prayers at the mosque.

This demographic characteristic is not merely a matter of scheduling; it reflects the continuous negotiation of their "double minority" status. As merchants operating in a predominantly non-Muslim Karo society, their daily economic interactions require high levels of social adaptation and time commitment. Consequently, the mosque functions as a crucial weekend hub where the community temporarily pauses their economic and social adaptation to the majority culture to reconnect with their religious and ethnic roots. The varying levels of attendance highlight how the mosque accommodates the practical constraints of minority life, serving as a flexible social anchor rather than a rigid daily obligation.

Table 2. Profile of Main Informants (Active Chinese Muslim Congregants).

No	Initial	Status	Activity	Description
1	A	Convert/Merchant	Active Friday prayer	Chinese ethnicity, trading around Berastagi.
2	B	Convert/Merchant	Active Friday prayer	Chinese ethnicity, managing a shop in the fruit market.
3	C	Convert/Merchant	Active Friday prayer	Chinese ethnicity, trading in the Pancur Batu area.

4	D	Convert/Merchant	Active Friday prayer	Chinese ethnicity, trading in Flamboyan / Pajak Melati.
5	E	Convert	Active daily prayer	Chinese ethnicity, one of 2 congregants routinely performing daily prayers.
6	F	Convert	Active daily prayer	Chinese ethnicity, one of 2 congregants routinely performing daily prayers.
7	G	Convert	Active	Chinese ethnicity, active in mosque activities.
8	H	Convert	Active	Chinese ethnicity, active in mosque activities.
9	I	Convert	Active	Chinese ethnicity, active in mosque activities.

The detailed table above illustrates the demographic composition of the main informants, highlighting the diverse occupational backgrounds and varying levels of religious engagement within the Chinese Muslim community. It is evident that the majority of the active congregants are merchants and traders who navigate the demanding schedules of local commerce while striving to fulfill their religious obligations. The data reveals a clear distinction between those who can commit to daily prayers and those who primarily attend the weekly Friday congregation, reflecting the practical realities of their economic livelihoods. This demographic distribution is crucial for understanding how the mosque accommodates different levels of participation while still functioning as a central unifying hub for the minority demographic.

C. Architectural Symbolization and Social Meaning-Making

The architectural design of the mosque serves as a primary medium through which the community actively constructs and negotiates its hybrid identity. The physical elements are not merely decorative; they are deliberately chosen and socially interpreted by the congregants to create a culturally resonant environment. Applying Peirce's semiotic framework, the architectural choices function on multiple levels of meaning-making.

The dominant use of red and gold color palettes serves as an *indexical sign*, intrinsically pointing to Chinese cultural values of prosperity, vitality, and protection. Informant ES articulated the social significance of this choice:

> *"These colors are present not only for their aesthetic beauty but also carry profound cultural meanings in Chinese tradition, where red is associated with spirit, enthusiasm, happiness, and good fortune, often believed to protect against negative energies and create an atmosphere full of hope"*. (Informant ES)

Similarly, the pagoda-style roof functions as an *iconic sign*, physically resembling traditional East Asian aesthetics while housing a strictly Islamic interior. The community actively interprets this structural synthesis not as a compromise of Islamic theology, but as a deliberate assertion that their ethnic heritage is compatible with their faith. By integrating these elements, the community collectively produces a spatial reality where the visual environment validates their dual identity, mitigating the cultural dissonance often experienced by converts in non-Muslim environments.

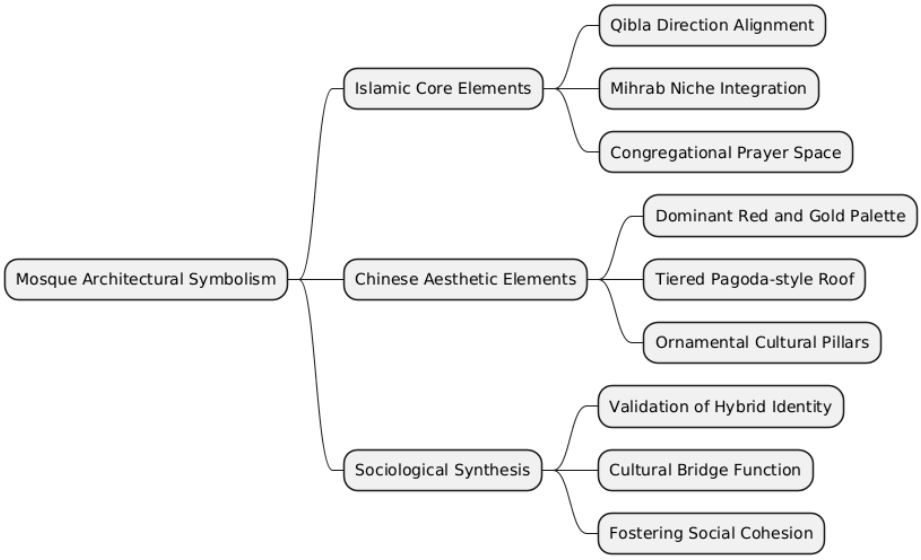


Figure 1. Harmonious Integration of Fundamental Islamic Principles and Distinctive Chinese Aesthetic Characteristics.

The provided conceptual diagram illustrates the intricate synthesis of the mosque's architectural elements, mapping the seamless integration of core Islamic requirements with distinct Chinese aesthetic features. This visual representation highlights how structural components are not merely decorative but serve specific sociological functions in validating the community's hybrid identity within a pluralistic society. The mapping demonstrates that the Islamic core ensures religious legitimacy and theological correctness, while the Chinese aesthetic elements provide cultural comfort, recognition, and a profound sense of belonging. By combining these aspects, the architecture facilitates a seamless blending of faith and heritage, proving that religious spaces can be profoundly multicultural without compromising their sacred purpose.

Another defining architectural element is the pagoda-style roof, which deliberately echoes traditional East Asian structural aesthetics while housing a fundamentally Islamic interior that strictly adheres to religious spatial requirements. This design choice draws historical parallels to ancient Chinese mosques, demonstrating that Islamic spatial requirements, such as the qibla direction and the mihrab, can harmoniously coexist with localized architectural forms without compromising theological integrity. The roof structure acts as a symbolic bridge, visually asserting that embracing the Islamic faith does not necessitate the erasure of one's ethnic heritage or the mandatory adoption of Arab cultural norms. This structural synthesis effectively challenges monolithic perceptions of Islamic architecture, proving that the pagoda roof stands as a towering declaration of cultural pride and religious adaptability.

D. Social Grouping and Community Consolidation Strategies

Within the mosque, congregants naturally cluster to form a cohesive in-group, driven by shared ethnic affinity and the common experience of navigating minority status. This internal consolidation acts as a psychological and social coping mechanism. A mosque official noted the intentionality behind this environment:

> *"The Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque was built to unite Chinese brothers who embrace Islam, especially those who wish to learn and understand Islam more deeply within a culturally familiar environment"*. (Informant IW)

While this in-group formation provides a vital safe haven for religious learning and mutual support, it also creates distinct social boundaries. The strong internal solidarity is a necessary strategy for preserving their unique identity and overcoming feelings of marginalization. However, this consolidation requires continuous effort to balance internal cohesion with external engagement. The community utilizes the mosque to build collective resilience, ensuring that their distinct identity remains intact even as they interact with the broader, non-Muslim Karo society in their daily economic lives.

E. The Mosque as a Public Space and Cross-Cultural Bridge

Beyond its internal functions, the mosque operates as a public space that facilitates cross-cultural interaction. The empirical evidence for this bridge-building role is most visible in the mosque's foundational leadership and its strategic naming. The fact that the mosque was endowed by a native Karo man (Informant SP) provides direct evidence of cross-ethnic support and acceptance at the local level.

Furthermore, the naming of the mosque after Admiral Cheng Hoo serves as a deliberate symbolic strategy to connect the community with a historical narrative that is widely recognized and respected across different ethnic and religious groups in Indonesia. Informant ZK explained:

> *"The selection of the name 'Muhammad Cheng Hoo' strengthens this cultural bridge, referring to the famous Muslim Chinese admiral who symbolizes the historical relationship between the Chinese world and Islam in Southeast Asia, connecting the current community with a glorious historical legacy".* (Informant ZK)

Observations of the mosque's physical layout indicate an open and inclusive spatial design that does not isolate the congregation from the surrounding environment. While the primary users are Chinese Muslims, the architectural presence and the involvement of local figures in its establishment demonstrate how the mosque functions as a localized mechanism for intercultural coexistence, allowing the minority community to assert their presence confidently while maintaining harmonious relations with the surrounding Karo society.

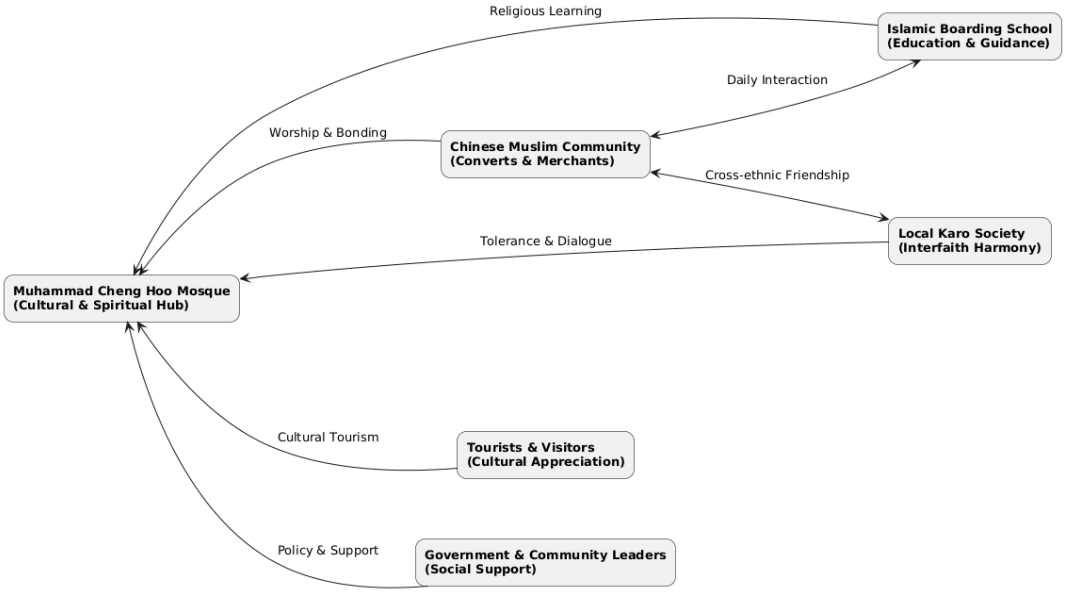


Figure 2. Social Interaction and Network Dynamics within the Mosque Community.

The visual mapping of social interactions illustrates the dense network of relationships formed among the Chinese Muslim congregants within the mosque environment, highlighting how shared religious practices facilitate strong interpersonal bonds. This diagram underscores the mosque's role as a central node for social cohesion, connecting individuals across various occupational and demographic lines to form a unified support system. By visualizing these connections, the figure demonstrates how the mosque transforms isolated individuals into a resilient community capable of navigating their dual minority status. This social infrastructure is critical for understanding how minority groups maintain their distinct identity while actively participating in the broader pluralistic context of the Karo society.

Ultimately, the mosque acts as a crucial cultural bridge that fosters inter-ethnic tolerance and demonstrates that religious and ethnic identities can harmoniously coexist in a highly diverse society. The seamless integration of Sino-Islamic elements creates a spatial environment that not only reinforces the internal cohesion of the Chinese Muslim community but also invites respect and understanding from the surrounding non-Muslim Karo population. This architectural and social acculturation serves as a continuous mechanism for identity reinforcement, allowing individuals to navigate their religious devotion without compromising their cultural authenticity. Consequently, the mosque stands as a silent yet powerful advocate for religious tolerance, proving that minority identities can thrive and contribute positively to the multicultural fabric of the nation.

Discussion

The findings regarding the architectural symbolization of hybrid identity in Berastagi extend current understandings of religious architecture beyond mere cultural acculturation, demonstrating how physical spaces function as active mechanisms of social construction in non-Muslim majority contexts. While previous studies in urban centers like Surabaya and Jember documented the presence of Sino-Islamic architectural synthesis,[16] this study reveals how these elements operate as deliberate spatial strategies to legitimize minority presence. The integration of red-gold palettes and pagoda roofs is not merely an aesthetic choice but a visual theology that challenges monolithic conceptions of Islamic architecture. By mapping these localized aesthetics onto fundamental Islamic spatial requirements, the community proves that theological integrity is maintained through functional adherence rather than stylistic conformity to Arab-centric models. This extends current sociological theories of religious space by showing that localized aesthetics serve as a non-confrontational tool for minority groups to assert their religious legitimacy and validate their dual identities without erasing their ethnic heritage.

In terms of social grouping and identity formation, the Berastagi community's strategy of clustering within a culturally familiar space reflects broader patterns of minority identity negotiation, yet it operates through a distinct sociological mechanism best understood through Peter L. Berger's social construction of reality. The mosque facilitates the *externalization* of the community's hybrid identity, projecting their dual heritage onto the physical environment. This externalization achieves *objectivation* when the architectural symbols are recognized not only by the in-group but also by the surrounding non-Muslim

[16]Eva Fauziyanti, "The Identity of the Hybridity of the Chinese Muslim Mosque in Sempusari, Jember (Charles Sanders Pierce Semiotic Analysis)," *Qaulan: Journal of Islamic Communication* 3, no. 1 (June 22, 2022): 13–25, https://doi.org/10.21154/QAULAN.V3I1.3464; Bastian Yunariono and Retno Andriati, "The Construction of Chinese Muslim Identities in Surabaya," *Walisongo: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 28, no. 1 (May 20, 2020): 65–86, https://doi.org/10.21580/WS.28.1.6264; Sintia Kori Febriana and B. Sumardiyanto, "Simbol Harmonisasi: Akulturasi Budaya Islam Dan Cina Pada Ornamen Masjid Cheng Hoo Surabaya," *Jurnal Lingkungan Karya Arsitektur* 2, no. 2 (September 28, 2023): 87–98, https://doi.org/10.37477/LKR.V2I2.359.

Karo society and local authorities, transforming subjective cultural preferences into an objectively recognized social fact. This spatial process resolves the existential identity crises highlighted by Tan et al., and Luqiu & Yang, who argue that Chinese Muslims constantly struggle with cultural and religious authenticity.[17] By providing a tangible, spatial anchor, the mosque allows congregants to *internalize* their dual identity as coherent and natural, thereby mitigating the marginalization often experienced by minority preachers and converts navigating a complex societal landscape.

Building upon these dynamics, this study proposes a conceptual understanding of how religious architecture mediates minority identity, social legitimacy, and community resilience within non-Muslim majority environments, extending comparable findings on how religious minorities elsewhere negotiate visibility, moderation, and social acceptance in majority-dominated settings.[18] The Berastagi mosque functions as a multi-tiered mediation mechanism. Initially, it acts as an identity legitimation tool, providing material proof that Islamic and Chinese cultural expressions are compatible, thereby reducing identity anxiety. Furthermore, it operates as a semi-permeable boundary structure; unlike ethnic enclaves that isolate, the inclusive design and cross-ethnic founding narrative—spearheaded by a native Karo man—create bridging social capital that connects the minority to the majority, consistent with scholarship describing inclusive Islamic architecture as a mechanism of self-inclusion and assurance in multicultural societies.[19] This challenges assimilationist theories that predict minorities must either fully integrate or segregate, demonstrating instead a model of "integrative differentiation" where distinct identity is maintained alongside positive intergroup relations. Finally, the integration of a boarding school within the mosque creates an institutional ecosystem that ensures the intergenerational transmission of this hybrid identity, securing long-term community resilience against demographic asymmetry.

The most significant theoretical contribution of this research lies in its demonstration that the sociological function of religious architecture is highly contingent upon demographic power structures, which substantially enhances its international significance. While studies by Mardotillah et al. in Bandung and Ikbal in Gowa show that Cheng Hoo mosques foster social cohesion in predominantly Muslim or highly pluralistic

[17]Rachel Sing Ee Tan, Miew Luan Ng, Wan Khairulhusna Wan Mokhtar, Peng Fei Deng, and Jinru Zhang, "Between Tradition and Faith: Navigating Identity Transformations of Chinese Muslim Women in Malaysia and China," in *Muslim Women's Lived Experiences and Intersectional Identities: A Global Perspective* (2025), 283–308, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-75729-7_15; Luwei Rose Luqiu and Fan Yang, "Anti-Muslim Sentiment on Social Media in China and Chinese Muslims' Reactions to Hatred and Misunderstanding," *Chinese Journal of Communication* 13, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 258–74, https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2019.1699841.

[18]Mohammad Rashidujjaman Rifat, Dipto Das, Arpon Podder, Mahiratul Jannat, Robert Soden, Bryan Semaan, and Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, "The Politics of Fear and the Experience of Bangladeshi Religious Minority Communities Using Social Media Platforms," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 8, no. CSCW2 (November 8, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1145/3686926; Dedi Supriadi, Anwar Sanusi, Reslawati Reslawati, Dede Burhanudin, and Masmedia Pinem, "Religious Traditions and Cultural Integration: Pathways to Harmonization and the Promotion of Moderation in Contemporary Muslim Societies," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 16, no. 1 (May 11, 2026): 110–26, https://doi.org/10.32350/JITC.161.07; Muhammad Roni, "Being a Muslim Minority in Samosir: Resilience, Identity, and Coexistence under Christian Majority Dominance," *At-Tafkir* 18, no. 1 (July 25, 2025): 37–52, https://doi.org/10.32505/AT.V18I1.10345; Respi Pradina Vika, Muhammad Ahalla Tsauro, and Hamdhan Djainudin, "Islamic Religious Education in a Minority Context: Identity Negotiation, Pedagogical Adaptation, and Religious Moderation Practices," *Dialogium: Journal of Islamic Studies* 1, no. 1 (February 25, 2026): 41–50, https://doi.org/10.21831/DJIS.V1I1.95967.

[19]Julie Rudner, Fatemeh Shahani, and Trevor Hogan, "Islamic Architectures of Self-Inclusion and Assurance in a Multicultural Society," *Fabrications* 30, no. 2 (May 3, 2020): 153–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/10331867.2020.1749220.

urban settings,[20] the Berastagi case reveals a reversal of functional priority. In Muslim-majority contexts, hybrid architecture serves as an expressive enhancement of an already legitimate Islamic identity. Conversely, in a non-Muslim majority context like Berastagi, the architecture must first establish the fundamental legitimacy and visibility of the Islamic presence before layering cultural distinction. This introduces "demographic asymmetry" as a critical variable in the sociology of religion, suggesting that spatial strategies for minority communities must be analyzed not just for their cultural symbolism, but for their role in negotiating survival and social acceptance in potentially indifferent environments.

Ultimately, the symbolization of identity at the Berastagi mosque serves as a strategic adaptation mechanism that transcends historical stigmas and redefines the social status of Chinese Muslims. Echoing the historical evolution of Cheng Hoo mosques documented in earlier studies,[21] this study confirms that physical spaces are instrumental in legitimizing minority religious expressions. However, by situating this phenomenon within a non-Muslim Karo society, the research highlights that inclusive religious spaces do more than preserve ethnic heritage; they actively dismantle socio-religious divides. The widespread support from local authorities and cross-religious figures underscores that architectural acculturation can effectively mitigate potential friction, proving that multicultural expressions of faith are essential for fostering social cohesion. Thus, the mosque transcends its role as a mere place of worship to become a powerful instrument of intercultural coexistence, offering a transferable model for minority Muslim communities globally navigating the complexities of dual identity in diverse societies.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the Muhammad Cheng Hoo Mosque in Berastagi functions as a strategic mechanism for constructing hybrid identity among Chinese Muslims navigating a "double minority" status within a predominantly non-Muslim Karo society. Through the deliberate integration of red-gold color palettes, pagoda-style roofs, and strategic naming, the mosque visually affirms that Islamic faith and Chinese ethnic heritage are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. Drawing on Peter L. Berger's theory of the social construction of reality, this spatial symbolization operates through three interrelated processes: *externalization*, as the community projects its hybrid identity onto the mosque's architecture; *objectivation*, as these architectural symbols gain recognition from both the minority community and the surrounding Karo society; and *internalization*, as congregants come to experience their dual identity as coherent and natural.

Beyond its symbolic function, the mosque enables the community to consolidate internal solidarity while simultaneously building bridges with the broader society, evidenced by the support it receives from local authorities and cross-religious figures despite significant demographic asymmetry. This finding extends existing scholarship on religious architecture by showing that its sociological function shifts according to demographic context: whereas Cheng Hoo mosques in Muslim-majority or highly pluralistic cities primarily reinforce an already legitimate Islamic identity, the Berastagi mosque must first establish that legitimacy before expressing cultural distinction. This positions demographic

[20]M. Mardotillah, A. Hendro, R. Soemarwoto, and A. Raksanagara, "Peran Masjid Lautze 2 Bandung Dalam Dakwah Dan Budaya," *Khazanah Theologia* 2, no. 1 (2020): 9–22, https://doi.org/10.15575/kt.v2i1.8188; M. Ikbal, "Peran Masjid Muhammad Cheng Hoo Dalam Pengembangan Islam Di Samata Gowa Bagi Masyarakat Urban" (2025), https://di2.pps.uin-alauddin.ac.id/berita-28412-masjid-muhammad-cheng-hoo-simbol-persatuan-islam-di-gowa-dikaji-lewat-tesis-mahasiswa-pascasarjana.

[21]Hasanah et al., "Cheng Ho Mosque and Social Status," 210; Fauziyanti, "The Identity of the Hybridity," 20.

asymmetry as a critical variable for understanding how minority religious spaces are negotiated.

These findings carry meaningful implications for Islamic Community Development policy and multicultural governance. They suggest that culturally-adapted mosque architecture can serve as a non-confrontational strategy for fostering social cohesion in pluralistic regions. They further indicate that integrating educational institutions with religious spaces is essential for transmitting hybrid identity across generations.

However, this study has several limitations. As a single-case qualitative study involving ten informants from one mosque in Berastagi, its findings are contextually bound and cannot be generalized to all Chinese Muslim communities or other religious minorities in Indonesia. The research also relies primarily on the perspectives of Chinese Muslim congregants, potentially overlooking divergent views from non-Muslim Karo residents or second-generation Chinese Muslims who may interpret the spatial symbolism differently.

Future research should address these limitations through comparative multi-site studies examining Cheng Hoo mosques across different demographic contexts—such as Buddhist-majority regions in Thailand, Christian-majority areas in the Philippines, or Hindu-majority contexts in India—to test whether the mediation model identified here holds across varying religious-demographic configurations. Longitudinal studies tracking how second- and third-generation Chinese Muslims engage with these architectural symbols would illuminate whether spatial strategies successfully transmit hybrid identity across generations, while research incorporating perspectives from non-Muslim neighbors and local government actors would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how minority religious spaces are negotiated in pluralistic societies.

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