

Chinese Indonesians' Thoughts About Indonesia's Government Handling the 1998 Tragedy

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ABSTRACT

Two decades passed by but the 1998 riot case is still remembered as a traumatic event for Chinese Indonesian people. Started from the economy crisis in July 1997 where Rupiah currency dropped and gave a huge damage to the Indonesia economy and politic section. This crisis made the poor non Chinese Indonesian envied the Chinese Indonesians. The riot reached its peak in May 1998 where Chinese Indonesians got harassed. Many Chinese Indonesians decided to leave Indonesia to live in other countries temporary or forever. Each generation keep reminding this incident made the young Chinese Indonesian generation aware of the Non Chinese Indonesian. This research aims to reveal the thoughts of Chinese Indonesian about the Indonesian government in handling the 1998 riot and examine the reason behind the Chinese Indonesian thoughts. The researcher also hoped that this research can be used as reference in other research related to this 1998 riot.

Keywords : 1998 riot, Chinese Indonesians, Indonesia's Government

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Indonesians are Chinese people who live in Indonesia. Chinese Indonesian (called Orang Keturunan Tionghoa in Bahasa Indonesia or 印度尼西亚华人 in Mandarin) were again divided into groups; some accepted Indonesian citizenship and some chose not to. This diversification expanded to what is referred to as superdiversity, i.e. the “*diversification of diversity*”, a concept introduced by Steven Vertovec, to describe phenomena of migration and multiculturalism within a community. This multi-faceted dimension of multiculturalism does not only refer to nationality and origin, but also to differences in social and economic characteristics. (Tanjung, 2020)

In August 1997, Indonesia's currency started to rise beyond normal. Rupiah's value went even worse than negative. *Bursa Efek Jakarta* (Now became : *Bursa Efek Indonesia*) was at its lowest point. Companies that borrowed dollars had to pay their debt in high price (news.detik.com, 22 May 2018). As a result, this economy crisis gave a devastating impact in Indonesia's economy and politics. This incident reached its peak in May 1998 before President Soeharto stepped down. In May 1998, during two deadly days of racially fueled mayhem, rioters killed 1,000 people and raped 87 women, most of Chinese descent. Others cowered in their homes as the rape squads, reportedly led by army thugs, roamed the streets of Jakarta, the Indonesian capital. (latimes.com, July 4, 2010). The first riot happened in Medan 5-7 May 1998 then in Jakarta, Solo, Palembang, and Surabaya in 14-16 May 1998 (merdeka.com, May 12, 2013).

The riot was about political issues where university students did a mass protest against the president but ended up into chaos right after a shooting happened at Trisakti University in Jakarta, five students killed during the protest. The riot ended up targeting violence against Chinese people. The Chinese people's properties were burned and robbed, Chinese people were

abused and Chinese women were sexually harassed. Chinese Indonesian often being assumed as rich people and the one who benefitted more from the economy. This assumption made the poor Non Chinese Indonesian jealous of Chinese Indonesian. At first, many people think that the riot is because of mere jealousy from the poor to the rich people. The truth about 1998 tragedy is revealed after TGPF (*Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta*) finished the riot investigation.

TGPF stated that this tragedy happened because of Indonesia's military operation, the Chinese Indonesian were targeted as a scapegoat (merdeka.com, May 15,2013). What triggered the Non Chinese Indonesian to attack the Chinese Indonesian during the riot was the government letter known as *Surat Edaran Presidium Kabinet Ampera No.6 Tahun 1967*. The content of the letter is "The state took a role in racial identification and identity segregation. The effort to unify the mention of 'Etnis Tionghoa' is considered to contain values that gave negative *psychopolitical* (brain wash) associations for the Indonesian people to become 'China' which are considered more desirable to be used by the Indonesian people."(tirto.id, September 1, 2016).

The researcher is curious to know what Chinese Indonesians think about the Indonesian government in handling the 1998 riot and why the Chinese Indonesians think that way. The researcher aims to reveal the thoughts of Chinese Indonesian about the Indonesian government in handling the 1998 riot and examine the reason behind the Chinese Indonesian thoughts. This research also can be used as reference in further research related to 1998 riot.

METHOD

The research will be done in five months. The researcher will use semi structured interview for the research method. Interviewers may prepare list of questions but does not have to ask all question in the list. The question list can be used to guide the conversation or spontaneously asked. Thus, the interviewer has to analyze and make a profile of the ideal informants. For this research, the target of the interview is Chinese Indonesian who experienced the 1998 tragedy. The interview will be held online via Google Meet, Zoom meeting, and via phone call. If the informants gave their consent, the interview will be recorded and as a backup for the research purpose. The researcher will find three Chinese Indonesians who experienced the 1998 riot at Jakarta, aged above 40 years old.

This research will be analyzed using ethnography research. Ethnography is a branch of anthropology which is a systematic study of distinct philosophies. Ethnography explores cultural phenomena from the point of view of the subject of the study. (Ethnography and Organizational Ethnography : Research Methodology, December 23, 2020) "Historically, doing ethnography involved living and talking with people, being participant observing, an attempt to understand how the people studied see and account for their world, which includes the anthropologist. Ethnography has also been commonly connected to the idea of holism; cultures are interconnected, not fragmented; they are whole systems, and therefore any description of them, to be complete, must tackle the whole. The reality of doing and writing ethnography has always been more complicated than simply assuming and even arguing the interrelatedness of cultural elements. Are we recording what people say they do, how we see them living, or how they want the anthropologist observer to know them? Ethnography, whatever it is, has never been mere description. It is also theoretical in its mode of description. Indeed, ethnography is a theory of description." (HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory 1, 2011)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the researcher will report the findings and the analysis. Since the researcher use ethnography research, background information about the informants will be reported in order to give a better understanding.

Background information

Before reporting the findings, the researcher will put background information about the informants who experienced the 1998 riot incident in this section. The first informant is a Chinese Indonesian man initial E(48) born in Surabaya, and the second informant is a Chinese Indonesian woman initial D(47) Born in West Jakarta.

The first informant was born in Surabaya but he moved to Jakarta in 1997 to work. When the 1998 riot happened he was 24 years old that time. He worked as electronic device seller around Glodok area. The time when the riot happened he said everybody do not know that a riot will be happened so people around that area were working as usual. At noon he and his friends heard noises and a group of protestors came and started to crash, burn, and loot the shops. Some of his friend got into a fight with the protestors but outnumbered so he and his friends went panic and ran away to hide. He found out that the streets were swarmed by protestors, full of burnt vehicles, shattered glass and very chaotic. When he and his co-workers came back to his workplace he found out that his workplace was already burned down and looted. He also check the neighbor workplaces which mostly are shop houses also looted and burnt down. He said it feels like a nightmare. But for him, this riot doesn't give him a trauma.

The second informant was born in West Jakarta, when the 1998 riot happened she was 24years old that time. She was a final year college student also a part time worker. When the riot happened she just came from her university and on her way to her workplace. On her way to her workplace she saw the streets were crowded of protestors and full of burnt vehicles but at first she didn't know that it will be a riot because she thought it was just a normal protest by university students. When she arrived at her workplace she got warned by her friend to be careful and not leaving her workplace for a while because of the riot. She stayed at her workplace and saw from her workplace window that some of the shops around her workplace were burnt down and looted. She waited until the next day at dawn and when the streets were not crowded by the protestors she finally can came home and safe with her families. Luckily for her this incident doesn't cause her trauma.

ANALYSIS

Even after 23 years passed, this 1998 riot event still vividly lingered in Chinese Indonesian's memory. This riot was remembered by the Chinese Indonesians as a horrible and traumatic history and leaving huge damage for the 1998 riot victims. The impact about this 1998 riot was not only in that time but it went to a long term effect. The disappointment feeling took place in Chinese Indonesian's heart because they had been through hard times during the 1998 riot.

Even after experiencing the 1998 riot, both E and D stated that they don't have any trauma. According to [verywellmind.com\(2020\)](https://www.verywellmind.com/2020/05/20/trauma-definition-symptoms-causes/), Trauma is any type of distressing event or experience that can have an impact on a person's ability to cope and function. [HelpGuide.org\(2020\)](https://www.helpguide.org/2020/05/trauma-symptoms/) stated that people who experience emotional and psychological traumatic events always went through symptoms such as shock, denial, or disbelief, confusion, difficulty concentrating, anger, irritability, mood swings, anxiety and fear, guilt, shame, self-blame, withdrawing from others, feeling sad or hopeless, feeling disconnected or numb. During the interview, both informants do not show any of these symptoms. Even both E and D said they don't have any trauma related to this incident, both informants implied they are a bit worry when they told their experience during the 1998 incident. During the interview, E said he got shivered a bit for telling his experience but D doesn't feel like that.

The disappointment feeling that Chinese People went through is political disappointment. This disappointment feeling is purposely directed or expressed by the Chinese Indonesian toward the Indonesia Government in handling this 1998 riot. Citizens come to expect certain outputs from politics, yet perceive that governments and politicians fall short of these standards, resulting in feelings of let-down or disappointment. Political disappointment can be defined in terms of thwarted expectations; the discrepancy between what someone expects from politics and what they perceive they actually get (Ben Seyd, 2015). In this 1998 riot case, Chinese Indonesians as citizens of Indonesia were expecting that the government will investigate this 1998 riot case thoroughly but this 1998 riot case was closed and the culprits are still not captured. With the 1998 riot case just ended like that, it made the Chinese Indonesians having trust issues toward the government when the government decided to discuss political event in Indonesia every year. This can be seen from the interview with both informants. Both informants stated that the government announcing the 1998 case being handled by making *TGPF (Tim Gabungan Pencari Fakta)* was only to make the citizens or the victim to calm down but the 1998 riot case were not thoroughly investigated. From the interviews, E and D expressed more disappointment because they knew the one who provoked the protestors to target Chinese Indonesians was the people of Indonesia's government who had the largest influence to provoke the protestors. E stated that as a race whose number is fewer than non Chinese Indonesian, opinions or ideas from the Chinese Indonesians will never be heard by the Indonesia's government. Another statement came from D she said as the group of minorities Chinese Indonesians will always treated unfairly by the government. Both informants stated that Chinese Indonesians are groups of minorities that don't have a huge power so they can't do anything about it.

Although both informants shows disappointment to the government, both informant do not hold any grudges against Indonesia's Government. During the whole interviews, E and D do not express any kind of hatred or giving bad judgement toward the government. The researcher analyzed that both informants try to cope with their disappointment. According to HarvardBusinessReview.Org(2018) How people respond to disappointment is often influenced by people's upbringing; some people seek to avoid disappointment by underachieving (setting their expectations permanently low) while others seek to avoid it by overachieving (setting their expectations unattainably high). Some people seek to avoid disappointment by turning into underachievers. They unconsciously set the bar low and avoid taking risks, to prevent themselves or others from being disappointed. Without realizing it, they have decided that the best strategy is not to have high expectations about anything. Such behavior turns into a form of self-preservation. However, it also leads to a mediocre and unfulfilled life. In this research, the researcher found out that both informants cope with their disappointment by not expecting too high about the Indonesia government anymore in the future Indonesia's political occasion. This could be seen through the interview, both E and D think that the government may have another important agenda during that time because not only the riot that made the nation's condition in chaos but the economy of the nation is really important to be saved to prevent another bad incident that could happen. At the same time both E and D still have the feeling of unfairness about this incident not thoroughly investigated but they also don't expect government to take action to finish this case thoroughly.

CONCLUSION

The 1998 riot incident is a traumatizing history for Chinese Indonesian. Further impact also happened after this incident. After this 1998 incident happened, Chinese Indonesians show their political disappointment toward the government after knowing that they don't get any help or protection during the riot. Furthermore, the disappointment grew even more after they knew that the one who control the protestors to target the Chinese Indonesians during the riot was the people of the government itself. Even after experiencing one of the horrific incident in Chinese Indonesian history, Chinese Indonesians still do not hold any grudges or hatred toward the

government by coping with their disappointment by not setting their expectation too high for Indonesia's political occasion in the future.

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