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EFFORTS OF TIONGHOA ETHNIC GROUPS TO STRENGTHEN GOOD CHARACTER THROUGH THE INCREMENTAL CHANGE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

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Tionghoa Ethnicity; Good Character; Incremental Change Strengthening character in a multicultural society is a challenge amidst the current era of globalization that has the potential to erode noble values. This study examines how the Tionghoa Ethnic community in Indonesia maintains and strengthens good character sustainably through an incremental change approach, namely changes in values, attitudes, and behaviour that occur gradually but consistently. Using descriptive qualitative methods and case study designs in three multicultural cities, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation studies of family practices and socio-religious organizations. The results show that character strengthening is carried out through two main strategies: (1) internalizing values such as hard work, responsibility, and integrity in everyday life; and (2) awareness, adaptation, and character application without losing cultural identity. The gradual character transformation produces a resilient, empathetic, and pro-social young Tionghoa generation. These findings prove that incremental change is effectively applied as a community culture-based character-building approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a multicultural country of various tribes, religions, races, and groups (Hakim et al., 2020). This diversity is both a wealth and a challenge in realizing social integration and inclusive nationalism. One ethnic group that has long been part of Indonesia's social construction is the Tionghoa community (Suhendra, 2022). The Tionghoa Ethnic group is widespread in various regions of Indonesia and has made significant contributions in the economic, social, educational, and cultural fields. However, even though they have long been integrated into national life, the Tionghoa community is still often viewed as "second citizens" due to the legacy of colonial history and social construction that limits their space for participation, especially in politics.

The contribution of the Tionghoa community in politics is significant because it not only increases the representation of minority groups but also strengthens a more inclusive democratic structure (Heriyawan et al., 2024). In this context, their role can be analyzed through an incremental change approach, namely gradual and sustainable changes that can produce long-term social transformation. (Joppke,2010) said that active involvement in crosscultural dialogue, participation in social activities, and the practice of good character values are small changes but significantly impact socio-political integration amidst the diversity of Indonesian society.

The stereotype that they are economically oriented and have "dual loyalties" is a serious barrier to their political involvement (Satzewich, 2008). It is inseparable from the colonial legacy, such as the Indische Staatsregeling policy, which placed ethnic Tionghoa as a separate group from the natives and was often considered not entirely loyal to the state. Furthermore, historical trauma such as the May 1998 riots still lingers in the collective memory of the Tionghoa community (Adji & Polain, 2022). This trauma not only leaves emotional wounds but also has an impact on how they view their role and position in Indonesian politics. In electoral politics, negative narratives are often used to reduce the representation of ethnic Tionghoa by building fears of economic domination and ties to foreign interests (Zhang, 2020). As a result, the Tionghoa community often has to fight harder to prove its nationalism and commitment to the Indonesian nation.

Given this complexity, it is essential to highlight how the Tionghoa community gradually builds and strengthens good character through an incremental change approach. This effort is not only to improve their image and increase their political involvement, but also to strengthen an inclusive and harmonious social order within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Martuli et al., 2024). Thus, it is essential to explore the strategies of the Tionghoa community to strengthen good character and make a real contribution to the sociopolitical integration of multi-ethnic Indonesia. In addition to facing social prejudice and historical trauma, the Tionghoa community in Indonesia also faces significant challenges in structural inequality in the political field (S. Turner, 2003).

A long history of discrimination, both formally through past regulations and informally through discriminatory social practices, has created systemic barriers that hinder Tionghoa people's access to strategic positions in the political realm (Hulley et al., 2023). Although there are no legal regulations that explicitly limit the representation of ethnic minorities, there are certain informal practices and social norms that limit their involvement in political power structures (Ramcilovic-Suominen et al., 2021).

This inequality is exacerbated by the lack of effective cross-cultural dialogue, which has led to the persistence of stereotypes of the Tionghoa community as an exclusive group (Yang et al., 2007). In the context of local politics, the challenges are further compounded when the Tionghoa community attempts to build cross-ethnic coalitions. As a minority group, they often face difficulties gaining political support from the majority group, which is still influenced by negative narratives. As a result, the Tionghoa community is more vulnerable to political marginalization, even though their economic and social contributions have been widely recognized by various parties (McCandless et al., 2022).

A strategy rooted in noble character is needed to address these challenges at the normative level and in real terms. Values such as tolerance, dialogue, collaboration, honesty, and integrity need to be used as a moral foundation and an effective social instrument in breaking down social barriers that hinder the creation of inclusive political participation. Applying these values aligns with the Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), which emphasizes the importance of mutually beneficial reciprocal relationships in creating harmony between groups. In a political context, this can be translated into cross-party cooperation, ethnic

collaboration in policy formulation, and strengthening public initiatives that prioritize common interests (Agarin & Jarrett, 2024).

Media campaigns highlighting positive contributions of Tionghoa society, such as job creation, philanthropy, and social participation, need to be intensified through mass media and social media (Huang et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024). These efforts are essential to build an inclusive narrative and eliminate persistent negative stereotypes. In political campaigns, character values such as honesty, hard work, tolerance, and commitment to national interests can be promoted by Tionghoa politicians to assert their identity as open and cooperative leaders across groups. This strategy can gradually increase trust from voters across ethnicities and strengthen their position in a democratic political system.

Studies on the political role of Tionghoa people in Indonesia have highlighted the issues of integration, discrimination, and political representation. Previous studies have revealed historical marginalization due to stereotypes and tensions between ethnic groups (Coppel, 2002; Suryadinata, 2008). Citizenship Theory (Turner, 1986) and Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958) serve as references in explaining how social participation and mutually beneficial relationships can shape cross-ethnic social trust. In addition, the Incremental Change approach (Joppke, 2010) is also used to understand the dynamics of gradual socio-political change in a multicultural society. However, the Civic Disposition-based approach and Good Character values have not been widely used as a conceptual basis in the strategies of the Tionghoa people.

Various previous studies found several essential gaps that need to be addressed. First, the political participation strategy of the Tionghoa community is still limited to a historical approach without strengthening social values such as tolerance and responsibility. Second, the theories used have not integrated Civic Disposition and Incremental Change into one action framework. Third, cross-cultural education has not been utilized as a practical political strategy to build inclusive representation. Fourth, minimal strategic programs still make character values the basis for creating harmonious and functional political relations.

This study offers novelty by proposing a new approach based on good character values as a strategy for Indonesia's socio-political transformation of the Tionghoa community. By integrating civic disposition and incremental change theories, this study develops a model allowing inclusive participation without social resistance. In addition, cross-cultural education and ethnic dialogue are used as concrete strategies to erode prejudice and build positive narratives between groups. Thus, the contribution of the Tionghoa community not only strengthens the multicultural national identity but also realizes socio-political stability through a strategic public morality approach.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method focusing on in-depth descriptions through words (Moleong, 1989). This method was chosen to better understand the Tionghoa Ethnic Efforts to Strengthen Good Character in the Incremental Change Study. Determining research subjects was done by purposive sampling, namely selecting subjects based on specific criteria capable of providing relevant and in-depth data. The research subjects were seven ethnic Tionghoa in Surabaya. They were selected using a purposive sampling technique based on the intensity of social media use and involvement with

influencer content. The chosen subjects are expected to be able to reveal social symptoms and provide perspectives related to the Tionghoa Ethnic Efforts to Strengthen Good Character in the Incremental Change Study. Data collection was carried out through three main techniques: (1) In-depth interviews, (2) Observation, and (3) Documentation. Data was collected from September to December 2024, considering various moments of Tionghoa Ethnic activities. To ensure the validity of the data, this study uses source triangulation techniques, namely comparing data from multiple data collection techniques (observation, interviews, documentation) and different sources of information to obtain valid and reliable data. The data analysis process follows the Miles and Huberman model, which includes three main stages: Data Reduction, Data Presentation, and Conclusion Drawing and Verification (Miles & Huberman, 1992). This approach allows the study to comprehensively understand the Tionghoa Ethnic Efforts in Strengthening Good Character in the Incremental Change Study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Tionghoa community still faces structural and cultural barriers to participating equally in the national political system. Social prejudice, negative stereotypes, and a lack of recognition of their contributions have led to ongoing marginalization. Although several affirmative policies and pluralist approaches have been implemented, strategies that integrate good character building and active civic disposition have yet to be comprehensively developed as an effort to strengthen sustainable national unity.

Good character traits of Tionghoa ethnicity, such as tolerance, hard work, and respect for diversity, align with the concept of incremental change in Citizenship (Joppke, 2010), which encourages gradual inclusivity through cross-cultural. Understanding. Their active involvement in social activities shows their contribution to social harmony and a more inclusive citizenship naturalization process. Despite facing stereotypes and discrimination (Harjatanaya & Hoon, 2020), Good Character values such as solidarity and responsibility have strengthened the political legitimacy of Tionghoa individuals, as reflected in their increasing presence at various levels of government.

Good Character Strengthening Strategy in the Incremental Change Framework

The involvement of Tionghoa people in politics often begins with their active role in local communities through economic collaboration, social activities, and business networks. This support base becomes the foundation for inclusive political influence. Values such as hard work and solidarity have helped to break down the old stereotype that Tionghoa people are only economically oriented and less involved in politics. Many Tionghoa politicians have succeeded in building an image as inclusive leaders caring about all societal levels. They use crosscultural dialogue and social initiatives as strategies to create social harmony. Character values such as tolerance, responsibility, and integrity are strengths in expanding political support and encouraging gradual social change according to the principle of Incremental Change, consistent small changes produce significant transformations in ethnic relations in Indonesia. The following is a table of interviews with various sources;

Table 1. Interview with Tionghoa sources regarding good character

Code	Main Theme	Subtheme	Respondent Quotes
K1	Personal	Hard work	Since childhood, we were taught not to
	Characteristics		give up easily, and to keep trying. (R1)
	of Tionghoa		
	Ethnicity		
K2	Personal	Responsibility	We feel we have to contribute to the
	Characteristics		environment, not just make a profit. (R2)
	of Tionghoa		
K3	Ethnicity Personal	Honesty and	In business and society, trust is
KS	Characteristics	integrity	everything. (R3)
	of Tionghoa	into Britis	everyuning. (KS)
	Ethnicity		
K4	Social Roles and	Cross-ethnic social	We often participate in the community
	Community	activities	service with other villagers. (R4)
	Activities		
K5	Social Roles and	Cross-cultural	We try to be active in cross-cultural
	Community	dialogue	celebrations, such as August 17 or the
	Activities		Prophet's Birthday. (R5)
K6	Response to	Efforts to overcome	Sometimes, there are still those who
	Stereotypes	prejudice	suspect, but we prove it with real
			actions. (R2)
K7	Response to	Persuasive approach	
	Stereotypes	through social	Respect will open many doors. (R3)
170	~	ethics	
K8	Character Values in	Political	Some of my friends are starting to get
	Politics	involvement based	into local politics; they are known for
		on character	their work ethic and caring. (R1)
		values	
K9	Incremental Change	Gradual change in	Now we are more accepted, maybe
77.10	1.01	social acceptance	because people see that we care too. (R4)
K10	Incremental Change	Change in	Through regular cooperation, people began
		perception through	to understand that we are also part
		routine	of this nation. (R5)
		interaction	

Source: processed by researchers (2024)

The personal character of the Tionghoa ethnic group is strongly reflected in the values of hard work, responsibility, and honesty and integrity. Since an early age, they were formed in a culture of never giving up and a spirit to keep trying, as expressed by R1, who said they were taught not to give up easily. The value of responsibility is also seen in the view of R2, who emphasized that seeking profit is not the only goal, but also a contribution to the social environment. In addition, integrity is the foundation for living life, both in business and social activities, because trust is seen as the main capital in building relationships, as conveyed by R3.

The social life of the Tionghoa community shows openness and active contribution in creating cross-cultural harmony (Wan et al., 2022). They are often involved in social activities

with residents from different backgrounds, such as community service and celebration of national and religious holidays, as conveyed by R4 and R5. This involvement is a means of solidarity and real participation in national life. However, challenges remain in the form of prejudice and stereotypes attached to the Tionghoa ethnic group. For this reason, respondents such as R2 and R3 emphasized the importance of real action and a polite and ethical approach to build public trust and erode existing prejudice.

Efforts to strengthen good character positively impact politics and broader social relations. As conveyed by R1, involvement in local politics has begun to show positive results, because character values such as work ethic and concern are the main capital in building a leadership image. From an incremental change perspective, social transformation towards accepting ethnic Tionghoa is slow but consistent. R4 and R5 stated that routine social interactions and ongoing contributions have changed the perspective of the majority community, from prejudice to acceptance. Thus, good character that is consistently instilled and displayed is key to driving social change and strengthening national cohesion amidst diversity (Oktafiana et al., 2024).

Their political contributions also offer strategic opportunities, such as strengthening international cooperation and local development (De Vries et al., 2021). Amidst the challenges of social prejudice, a character-based approach has been an effective way to improve image and build public trust across ethnicities (Shakir, 2024). This finding aligns with the Josephson Institute's six pillars of character — respect, responsibility, and caring- reflected in respect for local culture, social responsibility through philanthropy, and concern for the wider community. It shows that good character is not just a personal identity, but a real contribution to civic disposition and social harmony. Active participation in social activities, such as community service and cross-cultural celebrations, also strengthens social capital and implements Contact Theory, which emphasizes the importance of positive interactions in eliminating prejudice (Orazani et al., 2023). Small actions like these form the foundation of unity through tolerance and cooperation.

Although the challenges of negative stereotypes still exist, character-strengthening strategies through cross-cultural education and social inclusion programs are essential. Steps. These programs must encourage active cross-ethnic interaction in education, work, and community life to strengthen the values of diversity and mutual respect. By consistently promoting good character values, the Tionghoa community contributes to developing a more inclusive, civilized, and united society, aligning with the vision of Incremental Change in shaping sustainable social transformation.

Awareness and application of good character among ethnic Tionghoa communities

Awareness and application of good character values, such as the ability to blend in with other communities and adapt, are key elements in maintaining unity among Tionghoa communities. This theme is relevant in the social context. It has substantial implications in the political field, especially regarding the role of Tionghoa communities in strengthening crossgroup relations and contributing to national stability. Contribution in Politics as an Approach to Strengthening Unity, the ability of Tionghoa communities to blend in and adapt to other communities reflects Civic Disposition, namely attitudes and behaviours that support active

involvement in social and political life. This Civic Disposition includes hard work, responsibility, and tolerance (Mazid et al., 2023, 2025). Building good relations between the Tionghoa and the majority communities is essential. As explained in the Citizenship theory by (B. S. Turner, 1986), Citizenship is not only a legal status but also a social practice that involves the active participation of individuals in society. In this context, the involvement of Tionghoa communities strengthens their position as equal citizens and promotes social harmony through their real contributions in the political and social fields. The participation of the Tionghoa community in social activities, such as cooperation and cross-cultural dialogue, demonstrates an inclusive political strategy and aims to reduce social prejudice.

One manifestation of this Civic Disposition is the involvement of the Tionghoa community in social activities that reflect their social responsibility as citizens. Cooperation is a symbol of their real contribution to the life of the local community, which cares about their own group's interests and the wider community's needs. In addition, cross-cultural dialogue is another crucial strategy in building cross-group relationships. Harjatanaya and Hoon (2020) explain that Tionghoa politicians often use cultural dialogue to overcome social prejudice and expand political support. Values such as tolerance and respect for diversity are the basis for creating inclusive relationships. With this approach, the Tionghoa community can bridge social and political gaps, thereby encouraging the formation of closer unity in Indonesia's multi-ethnic society.

Electoral politics, values such as hard work, responsibility, and tolerance are essential foundations for Tionghoa people to build cross-ethnic trust. These good characters help create a positive image in the eyes of voters, making Tionghoa politicians inclusive and commoninterest-oriented leaders. As explained in the literature review, individual political strategies of Tionghoa people often rely on integrating their cultural values with local political needs. For example, in the context of elections in non-Tionghoa In most areas, Tionghoa politicians often highlight values such as honesty, hard work, and tolerance to gain cross-ethnic support (Zhou, 2021). This approach strengthens their political position and reduces resistance from the majority group, who may have negative stereotypes about them.

The study of the types of change also supports the view that the manifestation of Good Character of the Tionghoa Ethnic group endorses the process of slow and systematic smooth Incremental Change, as well as bumpy Incremental Change colored by social and political challenges (Wood & Zeffane, 2001). Their perseverance in the face of historical discrimination reflects their ability to adapt progressively, contributing to social harmony through philanthropy, economic collaboration, and cross-cultural celebrations as explained by (Deutsch, 1973) in the Theory of Nationalism as Social Mobilization, social communication through education, mass media, and social mobility plays an essential role in building national solidarity. The contribution of the Tionghoa Ethnic group through cross-cultural interaction reflects an effort to strengthen social communication that supports national cohesion.

Good Character values contained in the six pillars of character, according to the Josephson Institute, such as honesty, respect, responsibility, and caring (Josephson & Hanson, 2004), strengthen the contribution of ethnic Tionghoa in maintaining unity through cross-group solidarity and respect for diversity. This approach supports Gellner's argument that nationalism is an effective tool in creating a stable social order amidst the dynamics of modernization. In

addition, Social Capital Theory from (Putnam, 2001) and Contact Theory from (Allport et al., 1954) support the idea that unity can be formed through cross-group interaction and the development of strong social networks.

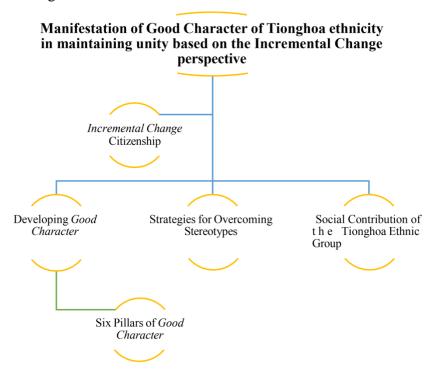


Figure 1. Flowchart - manifestation of the Good Character of the Tionghoa ethnicity.

The flowchart image above illustrates that the Incremental Change perspective in the literature review supports the view that the values of Good Character of the Tionghoa. Ethnic groups strengthen their adaptation in an inclusive social environment and create sustainable harmony amidst the diversity of Indonesian society. This gradual change process is an essential pillar in creating unity and eliminating barriers of discrimination through education, policy, and active participation in society.

These values help build harmonious relationships with other groups and gradually create sustainable social harmony amidst the diversity of Indonesian society (Mazid & Suharno, 2019). Through small but consistent changes, this approach becomes a strong foundation in creating unity, eroding discrimination, and strengthening social interaction through education, fair public policies, and active participation in various community activities. Good Character values such as hard work, tolerance, honesty, and responsibility applied by the Tionghoa Ethnic community become a moral force that played a role in building intercultural bridges. In practice, these values encourage positive interactions with other communities through social activities, economic collaboration, and participation in cross-cultural celebrations (Zalli, 2024). Over time, these interactions trigger changes in public perception of the Tionghoa Ethnic group, from a closed group to an integral part of the nation's social life. It is the essence of the Incremental Change approach, which states that social transformation does not occur instantly but through a series of small, continuous steps based on good character values. This approach is relevant as a strategy to create strong and harmonious unity in a multicultural society like Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that the Tionghoa Ethnic community in Indonesia has succeeded in strengthening good character sustainably through an incremental change approach, namely gradual but consistent changes in values, attitudes, and behaviour. This approach effectively forms a strong individual character and an adaptive and inclusive collective culture. The values of hard work, responsibility, honesty, and integrity are internalized in everyday life through family education, socio-religious organizations, and cross-ethnic interactions. Active adaptation to a multicultural environment is carried out without sacrificing cultural identity, becoming a bridge to building broader social harmony. This transformation has given birth to a generation of young Tionghoa who are professional, socially sensitive, and collaborative, demonstrating personal integrity in social contribution. In a pluralistic society that is prone to disintegration due to stereotypes and prejudice, this approach has succeeded in eroding social boundaries and creating a space for equal and mutually respectful interaction. Therefore, the strategy of strengthening character based on the Tionghoa Ethnic community can be used as an alternative character-building model in the era of globalization, relevant to other multicultural contexts that seek social integration without eliminating cultural diversity. This study also contributes to character studies, multicultural education, and social inclusion policies based on local values and community wisdom.

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