

# Socio-Cultural Dynamics and Interethnic Relations: The Chinese-Malay Interface on Rupert Island in the Post-1998 Indonesian Reformation Context

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## Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of relations between ethnic Chinese and Malays on Rupert Island, Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, in the post-1998 Reformation context and its position as an Indonesia-Malaysia border region. In contrast to major cities such as Jakarta and Medan, which experienced ethnic violence in 1998, Rupert Island demonstrated social stability and intergroup harmony. This study aims to explain the socio-historical factors that support social resilience, identify the cross-cultural adaptation strategies developed, and interpret identity formation and social integration in this multi-ethnic border region. Using a border anthropology approach and descriptive-analytical qualitative methods, this study collected data through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and a review of historical documents and local archives. The analysis was conducted by combining Abner Cohen's (1969) theory of ethnic instrumentalization, Gudykunst and Kim's (2003) cross-cultural adaptation, and Homi Bhabha's (2012) theory of cultural hybridity. The research findings demonstrate that social resilience on Rupert Island does not arise from the absence of conflict, but from an active process of cultural adaptation, ongoing identity negotiation, and the role of local elites in maintaining social balance. The Chinese community's historical adaptation to coastal Malay values, the inclusive local wisdom of the Malay community, and the geographic character of the border, which is open to socio-economic exchange, are key factors in shaping harmony. These findings enrich the study of ethnic relations in Indonesia by demonstrating that economics and identity can serve as vehicles for social integration in border regions.

## Article History

Received: 29-08-2025

Revised: 11-11-2025

Accepted: 15-11-2025

## Keywords:

Chinese Ethnicities;  
Indonesia-Malaysia Border;  
Malay Ethnicities;  
Reformation;  
Rupert Island.



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## INTRODUCTION

The fall of President Suharto on May 21, 1998, marked a significant turning point in Indonesia's social and political history. The reform era (*Reformasi 1998*) had two conflicting consequences. On the one hand, the opening of democratic space provided opportunities for ethnic groups, including the Chinese-Indonesian community, to express their cultural and religious identities, which had been suppressed during the New Order regime (Chen, 2022). However, on the other hand, the reforms were also accompanied by outbreaks of social violence and anti-Chinese sentiment in major cities such as Jakarta, Solo, and Medan (Tanasaldy, 2022). These events exposed the fragility of the nation's social cohesion after more than three decades of homogenizing national identity through forced assimilation policies (Hoon, 2006; Davidson, 2009; Panggabean & Smith, 2011).

During the New Order era (1966–1998), the Chinese community was placed in an ambivalent position: economically considered crucial for national development, yet socially and politically constructed as “foreigners in their own country” (Sidjaya, 2014). Discriminatory policies such as Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 and the requirement to have a Certificate of Proof of Indonesian Citizenship (*Surat Bukti Kewarganegaraan Republik Indonesia*; abbreviated SBKRI) restricted their space for cultural expression, while economic patronage practices created a new oligarchy that deepened social inequality (Wu-Ling, 2015; Fikri & Hasudungan, 2022; Stuparitz,

2022). As a result, a stereotype emerged that simplified the Chinese ethnic group as “economically strong but nationally weak” (Turner & Allen, 2007; Susanto, 2011), which later became ammunition for the politicization of ethnic identity during the 1998 economic crisis (Suryadinata, 2001; Chua, 2004).

Most research on ethnic Chinese in Indonesia focuses on urban contexts such as Jakarta, Medan, or Pontianak—regions that harbor strong political and economic dynamics, but are also prone to conflict. These studies often emphasize aspects of discrimination, collective trauma, and violence as the main focus of analysis (Ling, 2016; Winarnita et al., 2020; Ahmadi, 2021; Himawan et al., 2022). However, border and island regions—which have a long history of cross-cultural interaction and mobility—remain relatively neglected in studies of ethnic relations. Areas like Rupert Island in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, harbor a different social dynamic: here, ethnic identity is not a source of conflict, but an arena for adaptation, negotiation, and cooperation in everyday life.

To date, few studies have examined how Chinese and Malay communities in border areas build social resilience amidst a long history of national conflict and discrimination. Yet, border contexts like Rupert, which faces Malaysia across the Strait of Malacca, are characterized by fluid and adaptive social conditions—people accustomed to cross-border mobility, cultural exchange, and economic solidarity. In such situations, the ethnic conflicts common in large cities find little scope. This research utilizes borderland anthropology and the sociology of ethnic relations to interpret these dynamics. From a borderland anthropology perspective, national borders are not merely geopolitical lines, but also social spaces filled with exchange, ambiguity, and identity negotiation (Wadley & Horstmann, 2006; Wilson & Donnan, 2012). Rupert Island, as Indonesia's outermost island, is a concrete example of a borderland society where economic, social, and spiritual interactions transcend national boundaries (Asmit et al., 2020; Muslim et al., 2024; Wirman et al., 2025). The island's Chinese and Malay communities interact within networks across the Strait of Malacca, share economic values, and form a dual identity that is neither fully national nor fully transnational.

This approach also allows for the application of Cohen (1969) theory of ethnic instrumentalization, which views ethnic identity as a socio-political tool that can be used to gain specific advantages. In the national context, the politicization of Chinese ethnicity often succeeds in triggering conflict; however, in Rupert, similar efforts failed due to its open and interdependent social structure. In this case, Cohen's theory is extended in a new direction—from the instrumentalization of conflict to the instrumentalization of integration, where ethnicity is used to strengthen social solidarity. Furthermore, the process of social and cultural adaptation in this region can be explained through Gudykunst & Kim (2003) theory of cross-cultural adaptation. The Chinese community in Rupert developed a dynamic form of adaptation that encompasses psychological dimensions (adjustment to social pressures), communicative (use of Malay and participation in local rituals), and cultural (negotiation of values and traditions). This adaptation was selective, not total: the Chinese community adapted to local values without losing elements of its own identity.

This adaptation process produces a hybrid form of identity, as Bhabha (2012) explains in the concept of third space. In social spaces like Rupert, the boundaries between “indigenous” and “non-indigenous” become fluid, creating new, inclusive identity areas. Practices such as the use of Malay by the Chinese community, involvement in cooperation, or Chinese New Year celebrations attended by Malay neighbors demonstrate the formation of a third space where cultures merge and create new social cohesion. Historically, these dynamics did not emerge in a vacuum. Relations between ethnic Chinese and Malays in coastal Riau have repeatedly been marked by conflict, such as the 1946 Flag Incident in Bagansiapiapi (Mahyudin, 2006), which led to a mass migration of the Chinese community to surrounding areas, including Rupert Island. New Order policy pressures, such as Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, which prohibited Chinese cultural expression, further deepened social segregation (Hwang & Sadiq, 2010; Pols & Suci, 2021; Meyer & Waskitho, 2021).

However, in remote border areas with minimal state control, communities developed unique forms of adaptation—relying on local solidarity and cross-ethnic social networks for survival.

Thus, this research begins with the argument that social resilience in border areas does not arise from the absence of conflict, but rather from a continuous process of adaptation, negotiation, and hybridization of identities. The relationship between ethnic Chinese and Malays on Rupert Island is the result of a long history of pressure, geographic isolation, and the structural necessity of living together in a region with limited resources. The interethnic harmony seen after the 1998 Reformation is not a natural state, but rather the result of a long and complex social process. Based on this framework, this study aims to: (1) analyze the socio-historical factors that support social resilience between ethnic Chinese and Malays on Rupert Island after the 1998 reforms; (2) identify social and cultural adaptation strategies that enable the Chinese community to maintain harmonious relations with the Malay community in the border region; and (3) explain how cross-cultural interactions in Rupert create a new social identity that is hybrid and integrative.

By combining the perspectives of border anthropology, cross-cultural adaptation theory, cultural hybridity theory, and ethnic instrumentalization theory, this research seeks to broaden the understanding of ethnic relations in Indonesia. Rupert Island serves not only as a local case study but also as a micro-model of how social cohesion and national integration can grow from the periphery—through cultural adaptation, economic solidarity, and identity negotiation in borderlands.

## **METHODS**

This study uses a qualitative descriptive-analytical method to deeply understand the social and cultural dynamics that shape the relationship between ethnic Chinese and Malays on Rupert Island, Riau Province, post-1998 Reformation. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers not only to describe social facts in detail but also to analyze the meaning behind the actions, symbols, and adaptation strategies developed by the community amidst historical and political pressures. In line with the views of Creswell & Miller (2000), the descriptive-analytical approach aims to explore rich social narratives (thick descriptions) and then link them to relevant theories, to interpret the phenomenon completely and contextually. The choice of a qualitative approach is also based on the nature of the research problem, which is closely related to historical experiences, power relations, and complex cultural adaptation processes (Urcia, 2021). The researcher seeks to understand how the Chinese community in Rupert negotiates with a social environment dominated by the Malay community, especially after experiencing social pressure due to national events such as the 30 September Movement of 1965 and the 1998 riots. In this context, qualitative methods provide space to listen to individual and collective experiences that are often not recorded in official documents (Frasso et al., 2018). This research places social experience as the primary source of knowledge. Therefore, data was collected through in-depth interviews with community leaders, temple administrators, mosque imams, hamlet heads, traders, fishermen, and ordinary citizens of both Chinese and Malay ethnicities. The interviews were conducted to explore how both groups interpret identity, adaptation, and interethnic relations amidst national political changes. In addition to interviews, researchers also conducted participant observation by directly engaging in social activities such as religious ceremonies, village feasts, and economic activities at markets and ports. These observations helped capture the dynamics of daily interactions and patterns of cross-ethnic communication, which are often implicit. To enrich the field findings, this study also utilized historical documents such as the archives of the Cin Bu Kiong temple, local government records, and local and national media reports from 1946 to 1998. These sources provide insight into the socio-political context and allow for a chronological reconstruction of key events that shaped ethnic relations on Rupert Island. The use of these diverse sources is crucial for data triangulation, which involves comparing information from different sources to enhance the credibility of the findings.

The analysis process is carried out in stages and in layers (Covert & Koro-Ljungberg, 2015). The first stage is the construction of a timeline to understand the cause-and-effect relationships

between events. Researchers mapped the sequence of conflict and adaptation events, starting from the 1946 Flag incident, the New Order assimilation policy, to the 1998 Reformation. This chronological reconstruction is the basis for understanding social change as a continuous process. The next stage is transcription and data organization, where the results of interviews, observation notes, and archival documents are classified to describe patterns of social interaction and forms of cultural adaptation. The collected data were analyzed using open and selective coding techniques to find main themes related to the adaptation process, identity negotiation, and the role of local elites in maintaining social balance. Coding was conducted in two directions: deductively and inductively. Deductive coding refers to categories drawn from theoretical frameworks, such as Gudykunst & Kim's (2003) concept of cross-cultural adaptation, Bhabha's (2012) cultural hybridity, and Parsons's theory of social integration. Meanwhile, inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the field data without theoretical constraints. For example, interviews revealed local terms such as "guarding the village" or "not burning your own house," reflecting the values of solidarity and social strategies typical of coastal communities. These two approaches were used simultaneously to maintain a balance between sensitivity to the empirical data and adherence to the theoretical framework. The third stage of analysis is the formation of themes and social mechanisms. All codes and categories discovered are then connected to discover social mechanisms that explain how historical conflict actually drives social adaptation and resilience. From this stage, a series of processes emerge explaining how historical pressures such as discrimination and geographic isolation trigger cultural adaptation, which then results in identity hybridity and strengthens the role of local elites as social mediators. These findings are then tested through cross-source and cross-temporal triangulation, namely by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and historical documents from different periods to ensure narrative consistency.

The analysis in this study is also abductive, meaning it moves dynamically between empirical data and theory (Charmaz & Bryant, 2019). This step allows researchers to discover social patterns that are not always apparent at the outset of the study, while simultaneously avoiding the dominance of theory over the data (van Hulst & Visser, 2025). In this way, the social meanings that emerge from community experiences are not reduced to mere theoretical categories, but are understood as the result of living, changing social negotiations according to context. Abductive analysis is also important because Rupert Island, as a border area and a 3T (*Tertinggal, Terdepan, dan Terluar*, Underdeveloped Region), has social characteristics that are not entirely consistent with urban areas in Indonesia. Furthermore, this study employed the principle of reflexivity, recognizing the researcher's position as part of the social interactions in the field. Each interpretation of interview results was reconfirmed with key informants through a member-checking process to ensure that the interpreted meaning aligns with the participants' understanding. Data were also validated through cross-checking between sources (documents, interviews, and observations) and systematic recording in a field diary as part of a traceable audit trail.

This series of stages is designed so that the descriptive-analytical analysis does not stop at describing events, but can explain the social and cultural mechanisms behind the formation of harmonious relations between ethnic Chinese and Malays on Rupert Island. The choice of this method also takes into account the complexity of the border context, where social resilience cannot be measured through quantitative variables but must be understood through the network of meanings, history, and interactions that exist within the community. Thus, the qualitative descriptive-analytical method is the most appropriate approach to understanding how the people of Rupert Island build social harmony in the face of experiences with conflict, political pressure, and challenging geographic conditions.

The conceptual framework of this research is built from a synthesis of three major theories—Abner Cohen's (1969b; 1969a) Ethnic Instrumentalization theory, Homi K. Bhabha's (2012) Hybridity and Third Space theory, and Gudykunst and Kim's (2003) Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory, integrated within a Borderland Anthropology approach. These three theories complement each other in explaining the dynamics of ethnic Chinese and Malay relations on Rupert Island,

Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, particularly in the post-anti-Chinese sentiment context of 1998 and Rupert's position as an Indonesia-Malaysia border region characterized by openness, plurality, and cross-border mobility. First, Ethnicity as a Socio-Political Instrument. Abner Cohen's (1969) theory positions ethnicity as a social instrument that can be mobilized by groups and individuals to achieve specific political, economic, or social goals. In this context, ethnic identity is flexible, not always reflecting pure cultural awareness, but can be used strategically according to the situation. In institutionally weak societies—such as postcolonial or border regions—political elites often utilize ethnic identity to strengthen their legitimacy or control resources. However, findings on Rupert Island reveal a different dynamic. Although political elites attempted to exploit the 1998 anti-Chinese sentiment to garner support, this strategy failed to resonate with the local community. The interdependent socio-economic relationship between ethnic Chinese and Malays rendered the politicization of identity unfounded. Here, Cohen's theory finds its limits, as ethnicity in Rupert functions not as a tool for vertical mobilization (between elites and the masses), but as a tool for horizontal integration between groups. In a border context, ethnic identity operates as shared social capital—a bridge to survival, not a tool for conflict.

Second, Cross-Cultural Adaptation and Social Negotiation. Meanwhile, the Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory developed by Gudykunst and Kim (2003) provides a framework for understanding the process of adjustment and social transformation undertaken by the Chinese community amidst political pressure and changing state policies. Cross-cultural adaptation is not linear, but rather a dynamic process encompassing three main dimensions: psychological, communicative, and cultural. In the post-1998 situation, the Chinese community in Rupert demonstrated its adaptability through functional and symbolic forms of adjustment. Psychological adjustment is evident in their tendency to restrain cultural expression in public spaces and minimize potential friction. At the same time, communicative adaptation occurs through the use of Malay in daily interactions and the adjustment of religious rituals to align with local values. Cultural adaptation then develops into cultural negotiation, where both ethnic groups establish new interaction patterns based on mutual understanding. Thus, adaptation in Rupert is not only a survival mechanism but also an active process to create social balance and interethnic harmony. Third, Hybrid Identities and the Third Space. Homi K. Bhabha's (2012) concept of hybridity broadens the understanding of identity and cultural adaptation by emphasizing that identity is never singular or final. In the social space Bhabha calls the third space, a constant negotiation occurs between local values and external influences. The outcome of this negotiation is not unilateral assimilation, but the formation of a new, hybrid identity—a blend of distinct yet complementary cultural elements. In the context of Rupert Island, this third space is reflected in the daily social life of the Chinese and Malay communities. Both groups use Malay as a common medium of communication; Chinese New Year celebrations are timed to avoid conflicts with Friday prayers, and halal food is provided at Chinese events out of respect for Muslim neighbors. These practices reflect the formation of a hybrid identity that does not negate differences but instead serves as a foundation for social cohesion. In this third space, ethnic differences are not a source of conflict but rather a source of social creativity that strengthens the resilience of local cultures.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Social Adaptation and Ethnic Resilience after the 1998 Anti-Chinese Sentiment

Rupert Island is a strategic coastal area in Bengkalis Regency, Riau Province, which, since pre-colonial times, has been known as a meeting point for various ethnic groups, especially Malay, Akit, and Chinese. Tomé Pires's account in *The Suma Oriental* (1511) mentions the existence of the Rupert Kingdom (*Reino de Rupert*), which had political and economic ties with Malacca (Dion, 1970). Its location directly facing the Strait of Malacca made the island part of an important trade route connecting Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula, and China. This geographical condition strengthens the character of Rupert Island as a cross-border social space, where various ethnicities lived side by side, adapted, and built economic and cultural networks. Studies by Rosaliza (2018), Suroyo et al.

(2022), and Rasudin (2022) emphasize that before Indonesian independence, this region already displayed a strong multicultural character, marked by the presence of a Chinese community actively involved in fishing activities, trade, and social life among the Malay and Akit communities.

However, the history of relations between ethnic Chinese and Malays in Riau has not been free from occasional tensions. Two important events that have become part of the community's collective memory are the Flag Incident or Bagansiapiapi I and II in 1946, and the social conflict in Bagansiapiapi in 1998 (Syahrul, 2001; Mahyudin, 2006). The 1946 incident began with a symbolic misunderstanding when the Chinese community raised the Kuomintang flag without being accompanied by the red and white flag, which was considered by the Malay community as an insult to the symbol of the newly independent Indonesia. This incident led to a bloody conflict that spread to coastal areas such as Panipahan and Kubu, and even triggered revenge actions from the armed group Poh An Tui. Contemporary accounts from the newspapers *Nieuwe Courant* (September 27, 1946), *Merdeka* (October 2 and 19, 1946), and *Mimbar Merdeka* (October 26 and 30, 1946) illustrate how this conflict was rooted in broken communications, intergroup suspicion, and economic inequality. However, what is interesting about the Rupert context is not the recurrence of the conflict, but rather the community's ability to transform this historical experience into the foundation for social resilience after the 1998 Reformation.

The reforms that rocked Indonesia in 1998 brought a wave of political and social change, but also a wave of inter-ethnic violence in major cities like Jakarta and Medan (Giblin, 2007; Yotes, 2024; Suryani et al., 2025). However, on Rupert Island, which forms part of the Indonesia-Malaysia border, the situation took a different turn. As news of the riots and looting spread, the Chinese-Indonesian community in Rupert felt tremendous tension. Some families prepared small boats as a precaution to cross to Malaysia if the situation worsened, while economic activity drastically reduced due to fears of potential escalating violence. However, these concerns did not escalate into open violence. Local Malay figures, including religious leaders, village heads, and community leaders, immediately intervened to calm residents and emphasize the importance of maintaining collective security. They spread a simple but powerful message: "Don't bring the city's fire into your own village."

These social reactions demonstrate that the 1998 anti-Chinese sentiment in Rupert did have significant psychological and social impacts, but did not result in physical clashes. On the one hand, the Chinese community experienced latent trauma in the form of anxiety, hypervigilance, and changes in behavior in public spaces. They reduced social activities, restricted religious symbols in open spaces, and preferred to express their cultural identity privately. On the other hand, the Malay community demonstrated an empathetic reaction that grew out of historical experiences of living side by side. They recognized that social stability in border areas cannot be maintained by eliminating other groups, but must be built through mutual protection. In the context of Gudykunst & Kim's (2003) theory of cross-cultural adaptation, this situation demonstrates a form of collective adaptation: the Chinese community adjusted to social pressures by controlling cultural expression, while the Malay community made cultural adjustments by affirming cross-ethnic solidarity as part of their local identity.

This adaptation process occurs not only at the behavioral level, but also at the cultural and symbolic level. The Chinese community in Rupert practices flexible forms of cultural adaptation, such as using Malay in daily communication, modifying religious rituals to align with local values, and actively participating in social activities alongside the Malay community. For example, during Chinese New Year celebrations, Chinese residents in Rupert often arrange the celebration time to avoid clashing with Friday prayers and share halal food with their Malay neighbors. On the other hand, the Malay community also attends and assists in these cultural celebrations, demonstrating mutual recognition of each other's cultural symbols. Through such practices, Chinese and Malay identities are no longer rigidly opposed, but form a new, hybrid cultural space, as Homi Bhabha (2012) describes in the concept of third space—a social space where differences become a source of social creativity, not a threat.

In border areas like Rupert, social adaptation cannot be separated from its transnational context. Many residents on the island have kinship and economic ties with Malaysia or Singapore. In interviews, several informants mentioned that they still communicate with relatives or business associates in Port Dickson and Malacca, whether to trade fish, building materials, or agricultural products. These cross-border relationships create a dual identity: on the one hand, they are Indonesian citizens, but on the other, they are also part of a social and economic network that transcends national borders. In the context of border theory, this type of identity is referred to as a liminal identity, an identity that exists between two worlds. This identity, instead of weakening national loyalty, actually strengthens social resilience because it opens up space for cultural flexibility and the ability to negotiate with various parties.

The border context also explains why political provocations containing anti-Chinese sentiments have not found resonance in Rupert. Communities in this region are accustomed to living in a diverse and interdependent economic environment. Under these conditions, ethnic differences are understood not as a threat but as a source of mutual benefit. Within the framework of Abner Cohen's theory of ethnic instrumentality, ethnic identity in Rupert functions pragmatically—used to strengthen internal solidarity or expand economic networks, rather than to emphasize differences. Therefore, when national political elites use ethnic issues to mobilize power, local communities reject the reproduction of conflict because it contradicts their own socio-economic logic of mutual need.

The most interesting form of adaptation is seen in the role of local elites as social balancers. Community leaders from both ethnic groups actively maintain communication, especially in situations that have the potential to cause misunderstandings. Village heads, mosque imams, and administrators of the Cin Bu Kiong temple act as informal mediators who keep social dynamics under control. They often facilitate cross-ethnic activities such as mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*), village feasts, or community service activities prior to religious holidays. In Parsons (1975) structural-functional perspective, their role can be described as integrative—maintaining the balance of the social system amidst internal and external pressures. In the context of Rupert Island, the existence of such local elites is one of the main keys to preventing ethnic sentiment from escalating into open violence.

Social resilience on Rupert Island post-1998 is not the result of an absence of conflict, but rather the fruit of a long and multi-layered process of social adaptation. Traumatic experiences in the past have actually shaped a collective awareness that avoids violence and builds mutually beneficial relationships. This resilience stems from a combination of historical memory, cultural adaptation, the role of local elites, and openness to cross-border influences that broaden the community's horizons. Broadly speaking, Rupert Island can be considered a social model for multi-ethnic border regions in Indonesia, demonstrating that ethnic harmony is not solely the result of state policy but grows from the ground up through daily interactions, cultural adjustments, and historically established social trust.

The 1998 anti-Chinese sentiment in Rupert did have a significant social and psychological impact, but it also gave rise to a process of adaptation and cross-ethnic solidarity that strengthened social integration in the border region. Hybrid identities, cultural openness, and inclusive local leadership are the main foundations that maintain the social cohesion of the Rupert community to this day. More broadly, the Rupert case demonstrates that the border region is not simply a dividing line between countries, but rather a dynamic social space where identity negotiation, cultural adaptation, and human solidarity continue to develop beyond ethnic and political boundaries.

### Chinese–Malay Relations on Rupas Island after the Reformation of 1998

Rupas Island is the foremost island that borders directly on one of the busiest and most historic straits in the world, namely the Strait of Malacca. This island also borders the State of Malaysia, a related country that has strong historical and emotional ties with Indonesia, and of course, Rupas itself is called the Malaysia of Riau. Tomé Pires calls Rupas Island a large island just opposite Malacca. In addition, Malaysia and Rupas are known as areas that have long been known and are identical to the Malay ethnic group. Then, Rupas and Malaysia also have similarities, namely, areas inhabited by ethnic Chinese who migrated hundreds of years ago from China. In Dutch colonial legal records and archives, Rupas Island was one of the Chinese villages on the East Coast of Sumatra.



Figure 1. Rupas as a *Tjina* (Chinese) Village in *Oostkust Van Sumatra*  
Source: *Hoekoem Hindia*, (1899)

The issuance of *Staatsblad 1884 No. 61* was because the Dutch colonial government considered it necessary to further complete the regulation dated October 9, 1871 (*Staatsblad No. 146*), as supplemented by the regulation dated April 15, 1874 (*Staatsblad No. 112*), in the following sense; Considering articles 20, 29, 31 and 33 of the regulation on the policies of the Dutch East Indies Government; Have agreed and understood: To stipulate: First: In the settlement area of the East Coast of Sumatra, a place of residence will also be provided for Chinese citizens, one of which is Rupas Island (Albrecht, 1894). Thus, the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups have a pattern of relations that has been formed due to the historical process that has taken place for hundreds of years, both in Malaysia and Rupas itself.

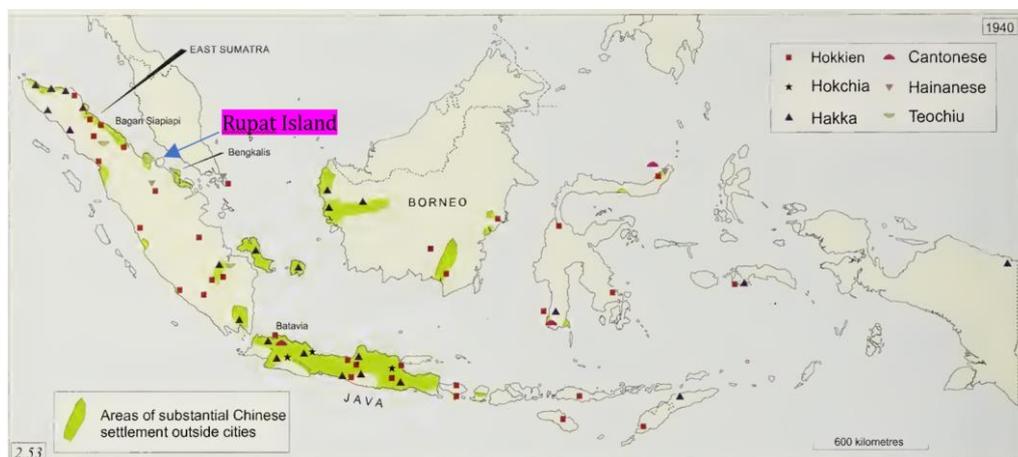


Figure 2. Distribution of Chinese in urban and rural areas of Indonesia, around 1940  
Source: *Cribb*, (2000)

Rupat Island is one of the most important islands off the coast of Sumatra, including: Rupat, Bengkalis, Padang, Merbau, Tebing Tinggi, Serapong, Mendol, and Rangsang, as well as the Riau-Lingga Islands, which comprise approximately 1,000 large and small islands (Husaini et al., 2021; Rifardi et al., 2021; Syahril et al., 2025). It appears that the map drawn by Robert Cribb above does not indicate Rupat Island as a distribution area for the Chinese community around 1940. However, as the author mentioned earlier, through *Staatsblad 1884 No. 61*, Rupat Island is clearly a Chinese settlement. Furthermore, empirically, to this day, Chinese settlements and all activities are very clearly visible in Rupat. The author suspects that Rupat Island is less popular than Bagansiapiapi and Bengkalis, or that Robert Cribb was unaware of it, due to Rupat Island's status as a 3T area and the very slow development of national borders. Rupat Island is also an area inhabited by the Akit tribe (an indigenous tribe known to live on rafts). This tribe also married and had descendants with Chinese people in Rupat and gave rise to a new identity of 'Black Chinese'. However, marriage between the Akit people and the Chinese seems to be limited to families with equally weak economic levels. According to Hidayah (1998), Chinese migrants in Rupat married Akit people so they could live in the Rupat island area.



Figure 3. Ceramic Fragments Found on Rupat Island  
Source: Susilowati (2008)

The influence of Chinese culture on Rupat Island is evident not only in ceramics, but also in relics reflecting Chinese ethnic culture and Buddhism, namely Chinese tombs, or bongs. These tombs can be found in Batu Panjang, behind Chinese houses in *Kampung Tengah* sub-district, *Simpang Makmur* hamlet (Makeruh village), and in Titi Akar and Kador villages. Interestingly, there are differences in the shape of the bongs in Batu Panjang and Titi Akar. However, considering the context of the discovery of the above fragments, which were also accompanied by ceramics from China, Vietnam, Burma, and Europe from the 17th to 20th centuries, it is possible that these old ceramics were part of the trade commodities brought to this region during that period.

To trace the relationship between these two ethnic groups in Rupat, it must begin by examining the process of the arrival of the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups in Rupat and the dynamics that have been experienced until now (historical events influence). In the interview process conducted by the author, it was found that the arrival of the Malays to Rupat was influenced by the existence of the Old Malay kingdom, the Malacca Sultanate, and also the Siak Sultanate. Meanwhile, the arrival of the Chinese ethnic group on Rupat Island was influenced by migration. The migration factor caused by colonial policies was not the cause of the arrival of the Chinese ethnic group in Rupat. This is because Rupat does not have traces of industrial plantations and mines. Rupat's appeal is more influenced by its strategic location. According to residents, the Chinese ethnic group on Rupat Island has existed since ancient times. In the collective memory of

the Rupert community, it is said that the Chinese are one of the descendants of the Akit Tribe, who first inhabited Rupert Island. One of the characteristics of this Chinese ethnic group is their harmonious life and togetherness with their families and the surrounding environment. So that there is cultural acculturation in the surrounding environment.



Figure 4. Rupert Island is between the Strait of Malacca and the island of Sumatra  
*Source: Topografische Dienst, (1930)*

*"Its history is more than 500 years, following the history of the Old Malay Kingdom, and its history covers the islands of Sumatra and Malaysia. How Rupert and Malaysia have unique traditions, also exist in Malaysia because the culture is the same,"* said the former Secretary of the North Rupert Sub-district, Ahmad Tarmizi. Similarities between Rupert and Malaysian Culture. Referring to history, Rupert is part of the Old Malay Kingdom, whose area used to cover Malaysia and Rupert. Therefore, because of the close distance, not a few Rupert people have relatives in Malaysia. Most commonly, we often find residents speaking Malay. Another interesting fact, Ringgit money used to circulate on Rupert Island after the barter system faded. That is part of the past that is slowly disappearing. An informant said, *"In the past, it was like there were no borders. In the past, we brought coconuts to the border at sea and bartered sugar, other foods, and basic necessities. At that time, two currencies were valid: the ringgit and the rupiah"*.

Regarding the Malay kingdom, the main historical source containing evidence of the existence of this kingdom comes from China. According to I-Tsing's records (in Wolters, 1961), the Malay Kingdom was located in the middle of the voyage between the Srivijaya Kingdom and Kedah. Historians agree that the center of this kingdom was in the upper reaches of the Batang Hari River, Jambi. The word Malay itself comes from the word Malaya, which in Sanskrit means hill. Therefore, some experts argue that the Malay port was located in Jambi City, but the palace was in the hilly interior. Moreover, the Tanjore Inscription issued by Rajendra Chola I states that the capital of the Malay Kingdom was protected by forts and was located on a hill. Meanwhile, a Persian geographer named Abu Raihan Muhammad, who visited Southeast Asia in 1030, mentioned that he stopped at the island of gold. The newcomers often referred to Sumatra as the island that produced gold. In the context of the Siak and Malacca sultanates, the dual role of the port of Siak with Bengkalis Island as a sub-chain of international trade was not shifted at all by the capture of the port of Malacca by the Portuguese colonialists in 1511 (Lopes, 2025). With the fall of Malacca, traders moved their activities to other ports in the archipelago such as Aceh, Johor, Banten, Demak, Gresik, and the west coast of Sumatra, including Pasai, Pedir, Pariaman, Tiku and Barus, all of which grew as new port/port centers that were increasingly busy and increasingly important for the world of shipping and trade because this area was rich in produce and gold.

Although the port of Malacca has become a dead city and Aceh has replaced the role of Malacca by overseeing Siak and most of Sumatra and the Peninsula (Hasudungan & Sunarti, 2024).

However, the port of Siak still plays a role as a supplier of all of Aceh's needs as an international trading port. And with its natural wealth and strategic geographical conditions, anyone who dominates the western part of Indonesia does not turn their back on looking at Siak. Although it is only a fishing village, there is a busy shipping consisting of Malays, Javanese, and Arabs who gather to buy goods from the Java Coast, Palembang, Jambi, Indragiri, Aceh, Kedah, Perak, Kelang, Johor, Pahang, Patani, Siam, Cambodia, and Kocin China. While the needs of the people of Siak and its surroundings are obtained from traders who come to the port of Bengkalis, such as Arab traders, Chinese, Cambodians, Johor, Farmers, Perak, and so on.

Research findings show that the relationship between the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups in Rupert has been established since at least 1883, marked by the establishment of the *Cin Bu Kiong* Temple, a place of worship for Confucianists. According to the administrator of *Cin Bu Kiong*, Mr. AP, this temple was established because of the desire of the Chinese community living in Rupert to be able to worship and connect with their ancestors in Mainland China. The establishment of *Cin Bu Kiong* was sponsored by a charcoal entrepreneur who traded as far as Singapore and Malaysia. *Cin Bu Kiong* was established with the philosophy of hard work, which is expected to be emulated by the people of Rupert. According to Mr. KM, "It is true that the *Cin Bu Kiong* Temple is the oldest temple on Rupert Island, proof of the existence of the Chinese ethnic community". Regarding where the Chinese ethnic group came from, according to Mrs. ALT and IW, "They are currently the third nation in Rupert, their grandfathers came directly from mainland China to seek a decent life in a foreign country".

However, this cannot be considered a general conclusion; there are several cases where ethnic Chinese came because of conflicts either in mainland China or also in the Riau Province, as the author mentioned at the beginning of this article, and also those who came to Rupert because of economic factors. For example, making shrimp ponds, buying palm oil land, building hotels, and there are also those who invest in sea transportation. Then, not all of them came in the 19th century, but there were also those who came earlier, precisely during the Siak Sultanate, and also in the early 20th century, and after Indonesia's independence.



Figure 5. Cin Bu Kiong Temple is the oldest on Rupert Island

*Source: Personal Documents*

The Malay ethnic group in Rupert is closely related to the existence and hegemony of the Malay kingdom, the Malacca Sultanate, and the Siak Sultanate. Rupert's strategic geographical position is between the island of Sumatra (*Suwarnadwipa*) and the Malay Peninsula, then also between the Strait of Malacca and the East Coast of Sumatra. So, it can be concluded that the existence of the Chinese and Malay ethnic groups in Rupert is not because of the presence of coal mines or others, and there are no plantations based on export commodities that can attract colonialists or other kingdoms. Rather, Rupert's geographical position is very strategic. According to

Rupat art and culture activist SY, “*Rupat has been documented clearly and clearly in Tomé Pires' notes entitled Suma Oriental, and interestingly, Rupert is referred to as Reino de Rupert or the Kingdom of Rupert.*” SY also added that “*The Malay ethnic group in Rupert is emotionally closer to the Malacca Sultanate than the Siak Sultanate. It's just that due to the political factors of the modern state, this is not possible, but culturally, traditionally, and also in historical records, the closeness of the Malays in Rupert cannot be separated from the hegemony of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15th and 16th centuries*”.

According to Mr. ZM, as the principal, chairman of the mosque, and also a Malay figure in Rupert, “*There is one mosque that is considered the oldest mosque in Rupert, namely the Al-Mujahidin Mosque located in Kampung Tengah, Batu Panjang Village, Rupert District. This mosque is shaped like a stage, like the typical Malay ethnic architecture.*” “*This mosque in the oral tradition of the Rupert community was once visited by the Sultan of Siak, namely the last Sultan, Syarif Qasim II, and his high-ranking officials to perform prayers,*” he added. According to the elder of Rupert, Mr. SM, “*In this middle village, the location of this mosque, the influence of the Siak Sultanate is very pronounced; there are many descendants of the Siak nobility in this village, such as the naming of Syarifah and Syarif.*” So, this also cannot eliminate the influence of the Siak Sultanate in Rupert, even though the Siak Sultanate was later present in Rupert compared to Malacca.



Figure 6. Malay Women Shopping at a Chinese Ethnic Store  
*Source: Personal Documents*

Based on these findings, at least the Malay and Chinese ethnic groups have been in contact for two centuries on Rupert Island. So that the two largest ethnic groups on this island have been very dynamic and have clashed several times, a social system is formed that is able to anticipate negative influences from outside. According to Mr. MN, who is also the administrator of the *Tilawatil Qur'an* Development Institute (LPTQ), “*The Chinese ethnic community has long been mixed with the Malay community in North Rupert, even in Tanjung Medang, where the majority of the population is ethnic Malay and Muslim, but the village head is from the Chinese ethnic group. Chinese businessmen also sponsor funds for Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an activities and also provide free transportation using ships for Malay ethnic groups who are sick and must be referred to Dumai city*”.



Figure 7. Chinese-Rupat Entrepreneurs Donate Land for Rupert's First Hospital  
Source: (*Bappeda Kabupaten Bengkalis, 2021*)

The figure 7 proves that ethnic Chinese are not only enthusiastic in gaining profit from economic activities in Rupert, but also contribute to social and charity activities for the progress of Rupert, as the foremost, underdeveloped, and outermost region of Indonesia. Economic jealousy and social disparity between ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese have become the cause of rejection, expulsion, and even violent conflict against ethnic Chinese (Sodiq & Santoso, 2022). In addition to these facts, this condition is also often exploited by political elites and brokers in various regions in Indonesia by exploiting primordial issues to secure their economic and business interests. There is a fear among them that ethnic Chinese will become competitors, rulers, and take over the economy in their area. So that businessmen, brokers, and political elites sometimes work together to play primordial issues to create chaotic conditions, negative prejudices, and end in social unrest targeting ethnic Chinese.

In terms of politics, it can be said that Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, the former governor of DKI Jakarta who was sentenced to prison for blasphemy in 2017, was a victim of this conspiracy (Hui, 2020; Butt, 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2022; Yilmaz et al., 2023; Hermawan, 2024). In addition to the verdict having legal force, many parties, including intellectuals and political experts, say that Ahok (the popular name of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) is a victim of collusion between national and local political elites, as well as economic brokers who were harmed during Ahok's leadership (Cochrane, 2016; Hatherell & Welsh, 2017; Tyson, 2021). Therefore, to avoid such incidents and also the Bagansiapiapi 1 and 2 conflicts, the Chinese ethnic group in Rupert learned and practiced an inclusive way of life, enabling them to balance their economic and socio-cultural activities. That their existence for hundreds of years in Rupert is not a mere coincidence, but has become a home for tens of thousands of Chinese ethnic groups and their migrants, both in Indonesia and Malaysia and Singapore.

The Chinese ethnic group in Rupert seems different from the Chinese ethnic group in the cities of Medan, Jakarta, and Surabaya, who apparently have never experienced the difficult life in the border areas like that experienced by the Chinese-Rupat. So far, Indonesian citizens of Chinese ethnicity are considered to always live in wealth, luxury, and exclusivity. In fact, not all ethnic Chinese have such a life; the Chinese ethnic group in Rupert lives the same as the Malay community and others. In Rupert, as an island that is the boundary between Malaysia and Indonesia, the conditions are not the same as cities in Indonesia. They have only felt the 24-hour electricity and modern sea transportation (called *roro* ships) that can carry dozens of vehicles, both cars, trucks, and motorbikes, in the last 10 years. They work as fishermen, charcoal makers from mangrove wood, contract workers, factory and company workers, and traditional sea transportation services (called *pompong* ships). So that the Chinese ethnic group in Rupert does not feel exclusive and superior, even if they succeed in business and economic activities, they do not forget their origins

and how they lived in the past. So that the mentality of the Rupert Chinese ethnic group that is built is more inclusive, this is what distinguishes the Chinese ethnic group from other Chinese ethnic groups in Indonesia.

The social unrest targeting the Chinese ethnic group in 1998 did not occur in Rupert. There was no looting of Chinese shops, no rape of Chinese women, and no expulsion like other areas in Indonesia, namely, Jakarta city, Bandung, Surakarta, Medan, and others. This is because the Malay and Chinese ethnic communities have long been in contact and interacted socially. Past events have provided valuable experiences for mutual tolerance and wisdom in a diverse social life. Malay nature and mentality are also important factors in the acceptance of the ethnic Chinese community in Rupert. In addition, the Chinese ethnic group in Rupert has become a mixed, social, inclusive, and well-participated society not only in terms of economy, but also in social, cultural, religious, and health. This is what distinguishes it from other Chinese ethnic groups in Indonesia.

The Chinese ethnic group can balance their social and economic life; besides, they feel like they are part of the Rupert community. Even some Chinese ethnic migrants in Pekanbaru City named their shops *Rupat Dingin Lestari* (Household Appliance Spare Parts Supplier), *Sinar Rupert Mandiri*, and *Rupat Jasa* (Iron and Building Materials). Meanwhile, the Malay ethnic community in Rupert has formed as a dynamic, open, and conflict-avoiding society; they also learn not to be provoked by primordial symbols that are often used by certain parties for political and economic interests. This is also supported by Rupert's geographical location on the Indonesia-Malaysia border island, making the influence of the New Order not too strong or perhaps not too important, considering the centralistic government system implemented by Suharto, which prioritized the island of Java in all matters.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that Rupert Island has kept social stability, unlike major Indonesian cities that faced ethnic violence during the 1998 economic and political crisis. The lack of open conflict in Rupert does not mean there is no tension; rather, the community has built social systems to turn differences into cooperation. This stability relies on three main pillars: the historical adaptation of the Chinese community, the use of coastal Malay wisdom, and the geographical context that encourages solidarity between different ethnic groups. First, the Chinese community on Rupert has faced discrimination and political isolation, which has made them resilient. They have adapted to the Malay social order while keeping their cultural identity. This reflects the ability to adapt across cultures, as described by Gudykunst and Kim (2003). Second, coastal Malay wisdom helps maintain peace between ethnic groups. Shared values like politeness and cooperation discourage violence and promote unity. According to Durkheim, these common values create strong community bonds. During the anti-Chinese sentiment in 1998, people in Rupert supported their Chinese neighbors, showing harmony that outlasted outside political pressures. Third, the location of Rupert fosters cultural interactions. As a border area, it serves as a place where people negotiate their identities and economic relationships. This supports Putnam's idea that social connections—based on trust and mutual help—can stabilize communities made up of different ethnic groups. In summary, this study enhances traditional theories on ethnic relations by showing that economic factors do not always lead to conflict. On Rupert, economic ties build social bonds that cross ethnic and religious lines. These findings also enrich Abner Cohen's (1969) theory on the instrumentalization of ethnicity by demonstrating that ethnic identity is not always mobilized for conflict but can instead be used strategically to create integration and solidarity in border regions. The interactions between the Chinese and Malay communities illustrate Homi Bhabha's (2012) idea of cultural hybridity, where identities mix and are shared through joint celebrations and ceremonies. Rupert Island serves as a model for social resilience, demonstrating that local initiatives and shared experiences create harmony, rather than reliance on government policies or economic systems. This research suggests a new way to view ethnic relations in Indonesia, focusing on cooperation and inclusion instead of conflict and division. This study has limitations that need to be considered to

ensure a comprehensive understanding of its results. As a qualitative case study focused on Rupert Island, its findings are contextual and cannot be generalized to all Indonesian border regions with their varying historical backgrounds and social structures. Therefore, further research is recommended to employ a mixed methods approach, highlighting the role of women and Chinese-Malay diaspora networks.

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