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Revisiting the May 1998 Riots in Indonesia: Civilians and Their Untold Memories

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Abstract

This paper examines the recollections of civilians about the May 1998 riots in Indonesia, as told in an anonymous online survey. These riots caused the deaths of an estimated 1000 people and saw targeted attacks on Indonesia's ethnic Chinese community, including state-led mass sexual violence against Chinese-Indonesian women and girls. Despite their scale, there has never been any official redress for these riots and they remain a taboo topic in Indonesia, rarely discussed publicly. Little is known about how Indonesians remember these events, with research into the personal or collective memories about the riots challenging, given the public silencing by the government. Here, we present findings from an anonymous survey completed by 235 Indonesians in which they revealed sometimes deeply personal memories about the riots. Examined thematically, these memories both confirm general understandings of the riots and reveal novel information about how communities coped during the violence.

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Keywords

May 1998 riots, Indonesia, Chinese Indonesians, memory

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In this article, we examine Indonesian civilians' memories of the May 1998 riots, as recounted in an anonymous online survey. These riots were a critical and violent turning point in Indonesia's modern history, occurring just days before the resignation of President Suharto, ending his long-lasting "New Order" military regime (1966–1998). The May 1998 riots remain a sensitive issue nationally and involved mass violence directed primarily against the Chinese-Indonesian ethnic minority, their businesses and property. The riots also involved targeted sexual assaults on a mass scale against Chinese-Indonesian women and girls (Pattiradjawane, 2000; Tan, 2008). An early investigation by a coalition of civil society groups revealed the systematic and organised nature of much of the anti-Chinese violence, pointing to the involvement of the security apparatus (Tim Relawan Untuk Kemanusiaan, [1998]1999). To date, however, there has been no criminal investigation into the May 1998 riots, no prosecutions of perpetrators, and no redress for victims.[1] Rather, the riots remain a taboo topic in Indonesia and are rarely discussed publicly (Strassler, 2004; Winarnita and Setiawan, 2020).

Our focus in this article is the results of an anonymous online survey administered in 2020 to Indonesian civilians over the age of 30. This age was specified so that participants were at least 8 years old in 1998, and thus were more likely to have at least some memory of the riots. Somewhat unexpectedly, some respondents revealed deeply personal and sensitive memories about these events. These personal recollections, although anonymous, stand in contrast to the general absence of shared memories about the riots, as both the state and civilians remain silent about these events. Drawing on insights from research into politically repressed social memories (Ben-Ze'ev et al., 2010; Russell, 2019a; Winichakul, 2020), this article offers a thematic analysis of some of the stories and memories shared anonymously by Indonesian civilians about these riots that are rarely discussed.

The original purpose of the psychological survey had been to collect data from Indonesian civilians about their personal views regarding what had happened during the riots and what had caused the riots. Anonymous respondents were asked to identify their ethnicity. Responses were compared between Chinese Indonesians and all other ethnicities, grouped together as *Pribumi* (those said to be indigenous to the archipelago, see Setijadi, 2019). Although describing their personal views on these topics, many respondents also chose to share stories and memories of the riots. Many respondents also discussed the feelings they remembered experiencing at the time.

In order to contextualise these results from the anonymous survey, we first give a brief background on the May 1998 riots, their sensitive and contentious position within contemporary Indonesian political discourse, as well as some of the history of anti-Chinese racism and violence. We then describe respondents' memories in a context where the topic is taboo, and where "regimes of silence" limit not just what can be said openly but what is possible to discuss even privately within communities and families (Russell, 2019b). To that end, we outline some of the responses received in the survey, taken from open-text boxes with unlimited characters. Given the sensitivity of the May 1998 riots, potential respondents were asked to read the study's information sheet prior to completing the survey, which outlined the purpose of the study, the risks

associated with the project and how to manage them, and explained that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could withdraw without penalty at any time, and that all data provided would be anonymous. Respondents were asked about what they thought happened during the riots, whether there were any impacts on their family and neighbourhoods, how they felt at the time, and what they thought were the causes of the riots.[2] We discuss the memories of the riots recounted by respondents, focusing on the four most prominent themes that emerged: the unexpected chaos of the riots; attacks on Chinese Indonesians; sexual violence; and the actions they took to protect themselves and others. Given the lack of public discussion about these events, we also discuss the responses to another question from the survey, which was where they learned about the riots, such as from direct personal experience, families and friends, or media sources.

Few studies have investigated personal memories of the May 1998 riots, and this previous research has focused mostly on members of the Chinese-Indonesian diaspora exile community who fled Indonesia in the aftermath (Winarnita et al., 2020; Winarnita and Setiawan, 2020). The riots have, however, been explored in other forms, particularly through fictionalised story-telling. Recent examples that have focused on Chinese-Indonesian women's experiences of sexualised violence during the riots, and how the discussion of these experiences has been silenced, include the film *27 Steps of May* (2019, directed by Ravi L. Bharwani) and Rani Pramesti's digital graphic novel, *Chinese Whispers* (2018). Although these events occurred more than two decades ago, there is much still to learn about both personal and collective memories of Indonesian civilians. The memories discussed in this study can shed light on how Indonesian people perceive these events today, particularly given the pervasive silence and how little is known about the collective memories of affected communities (see Kusno, 2010). This study also enhances understanding of these events more broadly, particularly from civilians' perspectives who were witnesses and actors in the riots.

Background to the Anti-Chinese Violence in the May 1998 Riots

The May riots occurred at a time of great political and economic unrest, as the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 brought mass unemployment and inflation which caused the cost of basic staples to skyrocket (Chua, 2008; Delhaise, 1998). Amid growing political tensions, student-led mass demonstrations called for an end to the military's New Order regime, with public dissatisfaction mounting against the long-standing reign of President Suharto (Aspinall et al., 1999). From around December 1997 to mid-February 1998, student protests occurred, predominantly outside the capital city of Jakarta, such as in Yogyakarta, Surabaya, and Bandung (Eklöf, 1999). However, from the end of February, the protests intensified in Jakarta and surrounding areas (Panggabean and Smith, 2011). The military government attempted to deflect popular anger by scapegoated Indonesia's ethnic Chinese community, accusing them of playing a role in the collapse of the economy, which then triggered popular anger (Coppel, 1983; Purdey, 2006). Although there was prior unrest in other cities, such as in Medan, the main riots were triggered in Jakarta by the military shooting of four

student demonstrators on 12 May. Over the following two days, more than 1000 people were killed, an estimated 400 ethnic Chinese women and girls raped, and shops and homes belonging predominantly to Chinese Indonesians were looted and destroyed (Heryanto, 2000; Purdey, 2006). Within a week, Suharto had stepped down and the military government fell.

Research to date on the May 1998 riots has investigated mainly: how state and security actors had a role in inciting and perpetrating the violence (Panggabean and Smith, 2011; Thufail, 2007); how the media portrayed the violence (Strassler, 2004; Winarnita, 2011); how perpetrators may justify their actions (Himawan et al., 2021b); as well as survivor testimonies, and the chronology of events in general (Hikmawati, 2017; Panggabean and Smith, 2011; Winarnita, 2011; Thufail, 2007). These studies conclude that although the mass demonstrations were economically and politically driven at bringing down the New Order military regime, prejudice towards Chinese Indonesians also played a key role.

The most extensive academic study on these events was conducted by Purdey (2006), who argues that the May 1998 mass violence should be regarded as a systematic attack towards Chinese Indonesians. The brutality and large scale of the violence towards Chinese Indonesians during the riots, Purdey explains, should be seen as the climax of a much longer history of violence towards this ethnic minority. The New Order government's policies discriminated against Chinese Indonesians from the beginning of the regime, which strengthened historic anti-Chinese stigmatisation, and framed Chinese Indonesians as political scapegoats, contributing to the violence (Purdey, 2006; Cribb and Coppel, 2009).

A range of arguments have been made to try to explain ongoing friction between Chinese and *Pribumi* Indonesians (Coppel, 1983; Purdey, 2006). First, some analyses have focused on the perceived economic superiority of Chinese Indonesians, and accompanying racialised stereotypes that characterise them as greedy and exploitative (Reid, 1997; McVey, 1992). Second, some scholars have examined the various policies of assimilation forced upon Chinese Indonesians since the 1950s (Purdey, 2006; Tan, 2008). Third, other research has focused on assumptions held by *Pribumi* communities that Chinese Indonesians are still devoted to China, and therefore tend to be exclusive (Tan, 2008).

The position of Chinese Indonesians as frequent targets for violence can also be understood based on their exclusion from political power and a lack of government protection. In the case of the May 1998 riots, Purdey (2006) further insists the killings and other abuses were not possible without military support. Indeed, the involvement of army officers in these events has hindered a comprehensive investigation into the May 1998 riots (BBC News Indonesia, 2019). The evidence collected by human rights and other bodies in their investigations into the violence shortly afterwards (Heryanto, 2000; Tim Relawan Untuk Kemanusiaan, [1998]1999) has never been followed up, and not one of Indonesia's subsequent administrations has pursued criminal investigations. This political torpor is shown in: the lack of official data on the number of victims and other losses due to the riots; the absence of in-depth investigations into the main actors or trials of the

perpetrators; and the absence of rehabilitation or compensation from the government for the victims and their families (Hartono, 2016; Heryanto, 2000; Purdey, 2006).

The May 1998 Riots: Collective Memory, Silencing, and Taboo

Psychology-based studies of intergroup violence or conflict often take little account of the history of each group, or their collective memories, which include their shared subjectivities, values, ideology, and rhetoric regarding the group's past (Halbwachs, [1953] 2020). The process of forming collective memory is influenced by cultural, social, and historical repertoires; as Brockmeier (2002: 23) explains, peoples' memories are formed "according to the memory frames and practices of the groups of which they are members." Collective memory is therefore tied strongly to the narrative, identity, and culture of particular groups (Wertsch and Roediger III, 2008).

Public discussion of the May 1998 riots is rare in Indonesia. These riots are one incident in a long series of state-led atrocities committed under the New Order, all of which are politically sensitive topics rarely discussed openly in current-day Indonesia (see Heryanto, 2000; Roosa, 2020). The New Order may have ended more than two decades ago, but the silencing of open discussion about the regime's atrocities endures. The lack of official investigation or acknowledgement of these atrocities means that those involved (perpetrators and victims), motives, causes and effects, all remain clouded (Winarnita and Setiawan, 2020; Hartono, 2016). As Winichakul (2020) has argued, the silencing or suppression of a tragedy in the past can disturb a society when left unaddressed, affecting both victims and perpetrators. When a society chooses to remain silent, it does not mean that they forget, but rather that they are unable to forget or remember. Silence, instead, becomes a strategy for not dealing with undesirable memories about dark chapters of the past which cannot be publicly acknowledged.

As a result, collective memory in Indonesia about past state violence, such as the May 1998 riots, as Nils Bubandt (2008) points out, is obscured by deliberate and strategic "political murkiness," a discourse "characterized by an abiding sense of uncertainty in which rumors of conspiracies and possibly real conspiracies mingle. […Where] rumor and reality – the authentic and the fake – coproduce each other. At those junctures in Indonesia where political certainty is up for grabs, Indonesian politics achieves a kind of hyper reality, a social facticity made up of rumor and fiction as much as of historically undeniable truths" (2008: 812). This murkiness is more than simply the persistence of rumor and secrecy, it enables and sustains the blanket impunity for atrocities committed by Indonesia's security services, even decades on (Linton, 2007; Meijer, 2006).

The May 1998 violence is an especially sensitive topic not just because of the targeted, racialised violence but because of the suspected involvement of the security apparatus (Winarnita and Setiawan, 2020). The murkiness that mires knowledge and discourse about the May 1998 violence began with the initial media reporting. Early media coverage alluded to "rumors" with many within the government and military denying outright much of the violence had even taken place; in particular, they initially denied that the

mass rapes of Chinese-Indonesian women and girls had occurred (see Klute, 2001; Strassler, 2004). In the weeks that followed, rumors, counter-rumors and anonymous accounts of anti-Chinese attacks circulated in the media and online. It was months, however, before a small Fact Finding Team was established by the government; the report they finally issued was based on very limited research and, despite outlining evidence of "provocation" of civilian perpetrators, fell short of naming the security services for their role in the violence (Logsdon, 2004; Strassler, 2004). No government administration in the last two decades has investigated the riots since.

As a consequence, the collective memory of the May 1998 riots has been distorted by processes of taboos and silencing by the government, prompting Indonesians to keep silent or else to find ways of speaking around the topic. As Andajani-Sutjahjo, Bennett and Davies argue, "While the Indonesian government and the military continue to use silence as a strategy to ensure that the perpetrators of the May 1998 [riots] remain unpunished, Chinese Indonesians use silence to keep themselves safe" (2018: para. 18). Chinese Indonesians have learned that they must be quiet, because many see seeking justice for the violence as impossible. Many also feel vulnerable and so have chosen strategies of silence, especially Chinese women who experienced sexual violence and trauma, in order to preserve their sanity and well-being (Andajani-Sutjahjo et al., 2018). Other explanations for why the May 1998 sexual violence is not openly discussed relate to the generally poor outcomes for those who report sexual violence; many rape victims experience stigma and social pressure, and Indonesia's legal system has rarely served the interests of women victims (Rosana, 2018; Soepadmo, 2020).

An Anonymous Survey About a Taboo Topic

The political murk surrounding the May 1998 riots endures to this day, and few Indonesians are willing to discuss these events, let alone any personal involvement they may have had in them. This reluctance was shown in some of the comments sent to us during the process of distributing the survey questionnaire. As an online survey, we recruited potential participants by sharing a link via Indonesia's most popular social messaging service, WhatsApp. The networks that we approached were via the authors' social contacts (most of whom were Jakarta-based), who were then asked to forward the survey onto others. Although we sought a random sample because we wanted to hear from everyday people, we targeted those who were above the age of 30. After sharing the link, a few people messaged the first author, saying that they were reluctant to discuss the May 1998 riots, even via an anonymous online survey. One message stated, "You should really be careful, you shouldn't share things about May 1998." Another replied, "Don't spread things around about the May 1998 event, it's a closed issue," while another simply said, "This is too frightening, [I] don't want to fill it in." Of these replies, most were from older people aged in their 50s and 60s; younger people tended to be more willing to participate. Indeed, 73 per cent of responses were provided by those aged 45 and below (although this also may relate to the ages of the social networks of the authors, through which snowball sampling took place).

Despite the clear reservations of some participants, 235 Indonesian people chose to respond to the questions in the anonymous online survey, of whom 43 per cent (101) were Chinese Indonesian, and 57 per cent (134) were *Pribumi*. As mentioned, although the questions asked respondents to try to remember and reflect on the causes for the riots, what happened, and how they felt about it, we did not anticipate the level of detail provided by some participants, or the depth of personal memories about the riots recounted by others. In the following sections, we outline just some of these responses, regarding the memories of the riots that some chose to share.

This discussion is indicative rather than exhaustive of the responses recorded, and we have chosen to highlight only some of the memories expressed by the survey respondents. All data were collected anonymously, but respondents' gender and ethnicity are noted. We attempt to present the responses from *Pribumi* and Chinese Indonesian proportionately to understand the memories revealed from both communities.

We refer to Braun and Clarke's method for thematic analysis (2008) in identifying the key themes from survey respondents. The survey that was conducted in Indonesian was first coded by the first author, which involved category responses based on semantic similarities. Then similar responses were analysed to develop categorical codes, and these were reviewed by the second author. After the categorical codes, key themes were then identified, and all authors reviewed the codes and themes to ensure accuracy.

Remembering the Riots: Fear, Chaos, and Reactions to Violence

As we examine here, there were four themes that emerged in respondents' accounts of their experiences. The first three themes were consistent with media narratives from the time, which were stories about the unexpected chaos, targeted attacks on Chinese Indonesians, and the sexual violence used against Chinese-Indonesian women and girls. The responses provided in the survey offered, however, far more detail about these events than previously provided in media reporting as well as allowed for witnesses to reflect on their recollections two decades on. The last theme, however, was novel, which focused on the reactions that participants had to the riots, including efforts they made to protect themselves and others.

The Unanticipated Chaos

In the earlier student-led demonstrations in late 1997 and early 1998, there had been some low-level clashes with security forces who blocked their way, but none of these incidents had escalated. So when mass violence broke out on 12 May 1998, ending the lives of over a thousand people and destroying sections of Jakarta and other cities, many Indonesian civilians were astounded by and unprepared for the intensity of the violence or how rapidly it spread (Eklöf, 1999).

The chaos of the riots created tense and frightening situations, which some respondents chose to describe in their responses. In these accounts, most described how their daily routines, such as study and work, were suddenly disrupted by the riots. For

example, some respondents commented on how businesses had still been operating like usual on the first day of the riots but were then forced to close as the violence intensified. On the afternoon of 13 May 1998 in Jakarta, the security forces had begun to block some roads as clashes between the security forces and rioters escalated (Shalihah, 2020). Others wrote of how they had had no warning about how bad the roads would become, the roadblocks and riots creating enormous traffic jams, as hundreds of thousands of people tried to flee areas of rioting. This led to chaos in many streets and people being trapped, unable to get home or flee. One Chinese-Indonesian woman who was in junior high school at the time recounted; "We could hear the sound of shots being fired outside the school while we were taking our exams inside, some of my friends and teachers started crying, I was taken home by some *Pribumi* friends, and on the street, there were many *Pribumi* men carrying machetes and clubs, we ended up spending a week hiding at home, but my brother couldn't get home because he was studying in another part of the city" (36, female, Chinese). As the rioting spread across Jakarta, those working or studying in the central part of the city tried to return home. Many were impeded by the congestion on the roads and the numerous roadblocks set up by security service and civilian mobs: "Things were very scary for a while and, anxious, my father had to wait a day before trying to come home because of the conditions on the roads. My younger brother who was staying on campus tried to drive home with a friend but they were stopped, and then stopped again, on the road" (44, female, *Pribumi*).

The memories recounted in the survey tended to focus on the widespread property destruction and looting in the larger cities, such as in Jakarta, Solo, and Medan. In these descriptions, many respondents focused on the tense situation and the looting. One woman who had been 16 years old at the time, for example, recalled, "I could hear people coming home from looting in the middle of the night, my parents told me not to leave the house and school had been cancelled. Jakarta was like a dead city, everything was very stressful" (38, female, *Pribumi*).

For some participants, they attempted to explain the prevalence of looting in terms of the dire financial situation of many Indonesians during the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 in which the price of most basic goods had climbed sharply (see Aspinall et al., 1999; Tarmidi, 2003). As one *Pribumi* man who was still young, just 9 years old at the time of the riots, shared, "The main reason for the riots was the monetary crisis and the massive number of layoffs. That's what I remember the most If I remember correctly, my dad was one of those who got laid off. Our family's finances then went downhill […] Some riots took place very close to my house. Our neighbours even looted some things. I remember seeing them very happy about it, and I saw people feeling free to act terribly and brutally. Like they had no reins, so they were free. [Free from] the restraints of rules or norms" (31, male, *Pribumi*).

Attacks on Chinese Indonesians

In recounting their memories of the riots, participants highlighted how Chinese Indonesian-owned businesses and properties had been made targets for looting and

destruction. For example, one *Pribumi* man, who had been only 9 years old at the time, recalled, "I saw a shopping centre looted by people, broken glass and plywood everywhere, shop fronts that read '*Pribumi* owned'/ 'Muslim *Pribumi* owned.' Me and my family didn't go anywhere, we stayed at home watching it all on TV, and I [remember] wondering why *Pribumi* were seen as our brothers, but the non-*Pribumi* weren't" (31, male, *Pribumi*).

That the ethnic Chinese population had been targeted during the riots was acknowledged by all respondents who raised this issue, though few wrote about the potential causes or motives. This clear understanding by the survey participants, that Chinese Indonesians were the target of the violence, was further reflected in the expressed belief that non-Chinese Indonesians were therefore "safe," or at least not likely to be attacked. For example, one young *Pribumi* man wrote: "I also watched the news about students who were shot during the protests in Jakarta. We only monitored the situation on television. Because we are Minang (*Pribumi*) and Muslim, we were not physically affected" (31, male, *Pribumi*). Another woman explained, "My father's shop very nearly became the target of vandalism. My father immediately instructed his subordinates to put up a sign saying '*Pribumi*'" (31, female, *Pribumi*).

For Chinese-Indonesian respondents, they consistently reported that they had been well aware that they were the targets for violence during the riots. They reported experiencing harassment, and how this was very frightening and worrying for them. One Chinese-Indonesian woman who was very young at that time recalled, "My family were all worried, just wanted to evacuate, just leave the country (but we couldn't, because all the roads were blocked), harassment on the street because of our skin colour, couldn't take public transport, had to sleep holding a knife for a month, suitcases packed full of clothes in the car for three months (so if anything else happened, we could flee straight to the airport)" (33, female, Chinese).

Another Chinese woman, who was 12 at the time, recounted a harrowing experience of her Chinese-Indonesian female neighbours:

> Several of [my] female neighbours who were studying at Tarumanegara University (across from the Trisakti bridge [near where the students had been shot]) were trapped in the middle of the demonstrations when everything heated up. When the rioting began, my neighbours tried to get home to the Kalideres area [in west Jakarta], and she was assisted by her personal driver. They had to wear a headscarf and memorise the verses that are required to convert to Islam. Their car was stopped several times on the way home. The driver said that they were his nieces, and Muslims, and underage (so that they didn't have [to show their] identity cards) (34, female, Chinese).

This account refers to the numerous roadblocks established by militias across Jakarta at the time, whereby vehicles were frequently stopped, and the passengers questioned as to whether they were Chinese (Eklöf, 1999). Although their belongings were often stolen, regardless of ethnicity, further violence was meted out against Chinese Indonesians at these roadblocks. As this respondent made clear, her neighbours' driver who, from this

description, was likely a *Pribumi* man, helped the girls to conceal their identities and to pretend that they were *Pribumi* Muslims, in order to protect them from violence.

This same respondent also wrote about the mockery that she and her fellow Chinese-Indonesian friends later received from peers, as well as the divisions caused by the riots amongst her school friends:

> A few days after the riots, we returned to school. All our *Pribumi* friends had new clothes, new bags, new shoes (the result of looting the shops), and they started joking around, saying that our ethnic Chinese blood was blood that was *halal* [permitted] to be killed. Our friends broke into three camps. The *Pribumi* camp, the neutral camp, and the Chinese camp. After the events of May 98, our relationships with friends and outsiders who were Muslim were split. They openly showed hostility towards us. But after when my brother and I went on to High School (in 2000), we started to make friends again with Muslims (34, female, Chinese).

Sexual Violence

Respondents in our survey, while anonymous, rarely wrote directly about the widespread sexual violence perpetrated against Chinese-Indonesian women and girls. Both Chinese and *Pribumi* respondents, where they did mention this topic, gave few details of their memories of this violence. An example of such generalised descriptions was the response by one Chinese woman who recalled her experiences, "On 13 May 1998 at around 10 am, the burning of vehicles and tires started on the road, shops belonging to Chinese people were looted, Chinese people on the street were stopped and yelled at, 'You must be Chinese?,' money and belongings were taken, Chinese women were raped brutally" (53, female, Chinese).

Some *Pribumi* individuals showed their empathy and expressed both sadness and anger for the sexual violence perpetrated against Chinese-Indonesian women and girls. Although not being part of the victim group, one *Pribumi* woman pointed out, for example, that "I was in the middle of a crowd of demonstrators and people, I witnessed people beating up the police, and when I got on the train, there was a newspaper boy shouting out the headline, 'Chinese girls raped,' and all the passengers were silent. I was angry and hated the mastermind behind the violence experienced by Chinese families, especially women, who have experienced this inhuman treatment" (52, female, *Pribumi*). Another *Pribumi* woman expressed her empathy for the victims and recalled how "A few weeks after the riots, I lost some good friends. They were ethnic Chinese women and they moved abroad. My prayer group and I held a service and I witnessed the deep inner wounds that some of my ethnic Chinese female friends had received. They weren't able to say much, but their anxiety was clearly visible on their faces" (45, female, *Pribumi*).

In a handful of responses, participants recalled their attempts to help Chinese-Indonesian women. One *Pribumi* man, for example, wrote about his attempt to help a young woman; "My family were in NTT [Eastern Indonesia] and weren't

really affected. However, I myself witnessed a young woman of Chinese descent being attacked by two motorbike riders for no reason. We tried to help as much as we could. I felt sympathy for her" (44, male, *Pribumi*). A *Pribumi* woman also recalled the attempts her family made to assist victims after the riots: "My mother and sister took care of some of the victims of the rapes in 1998, and after the riots, then the media started to expose some of these rape cases. I heard about the rioting from my family because they were directly involved in taking care of the victims. Many people just panicked because it was such a frightening situation. There was looting everywhere, and shops were being burned down" (46, female, *Pribumi*). One Chinese-Indonesian woman who had been involved in a foundation that gave assistance to victims stated, "After this incidence I met many people suffering from prolonged stress. [These included] even rape victims who had gotten pregnant and who were helped/restored by the foundation (I have forgotten their names now), both the victims and their babies in their wombs" (53, female, Chinese).

The responses by a small number of survey participants revealed some of their trauma and anger about their experiences during the riots, including from being witness to sexual violence. One *Pribumi* man stated, for example, "back then [we were] still doing our Junior High School exams, and all of my friends were forced to come home by their parents. But some of us, my friends and their parents, experienced trauma. Some of my friends saw women being gang-raped but couldn't do anything about it" (38, male, *Pribumi*). The other respondent wrote about how he had learned about the widespread nature of sexual violence, explaining, "I myself only learned about it and realised how cruel and extreme the violence had been when I heard firsthand testimony from volunteers who were supporting victims of rape and violence. This happened a few months after May 1998, in a forum where humanitarian activists gathered to discuss how we could all help riot victims. I was there to represent my campus" (46, male, Chinese).

Protecting Self and Others

Here, some respondents wrote about what they did to respond to the violence and focused on their individual and collective efforts to protect themselves and others. Amongst those who identified as Chinese Indonesian, there was a man and a woman who both recalled equipping themselves with weapons in order to protect themselves from mass attacks. As the Chinese-Indonesian man wrote:

> At that time, I was about 11 years old. The incident in Kelapa Gading [a suburb in Jakarta] at that time was very, very terrible. Kelapa Gading, which was known for its Chinese inhabitants, was a primary target. So the people there gathered together in patrols, taking it in turns day and night, they even hired young men from Eastern [Indonesia] (such as from Papua and Ambon) to help guard the area. As little as I was, I had to hold a rifle and a sharp weapon (a machete). I [was given] the message, anyone who tries to enter this house and you don't know them, just shoot, kill. [I was] afraid, terrified, I couldn't sleep or rest, and ready to kill or be killed, even now it's difficult for me to accept *pribumi* Muslims (33, male, Chinese).

Some respondents wrote about how they joined together with other civilians to set up barricades against mobs, amongst other teamwork efforts. One *Pribumi* young man, for example, explained how those in his community had attempted to repel rioters in their area, "I was getting updates via a phone call from my father saying that he was going to come home, along with a number of our relatives. Government employees were also being targeted by the masses. People in my neighbourhood set up barricades at the entrances to our residential area to stop any rioters from entering. My family warned us all not to travel anywhere" (35, male, *Pribumi*). The chaotic and brutal situation frightened many people, yet they had to work together to protect one another from attacks and looting.

As Chinese Indonesians were known targets of the violence, there were some accounts whereby *Pribumi* Indonesians had tried to protect their Chinese friends and neighbours. One woman explained, for example, "There were people passing in front of my house with trolleys laden with looted goods, but my father and grandfather took care of our Chinese neighbors" (34, female, *Pribumi*). In a handful of cases, *Pribumi* helped in guarding and patrolling to protect the residential neighbourhood so that all members were secured from mass attacks. For example, one young Chinese man recalled how "Grandpa's shop was looted by their regular customers, but some *Pribumi* helped me (bus drivers), and I saw some *Pribumi* people taking it in turns to do patrolling" (31, male, Chinese). As another young Chinese woman also recounted, "I lived among *Pribumi* who were kind and were protecting us. A team was formed to guard every night to stop the masses from entering the neighborhood" (33, female, Chinese). Although there were only a handful of examples given by respondents in the survey, these responses highlighted acts of solidarity between neighbours in some areas. As another young Chinese man explained, "None of my family was directly affected by the riots because we lived in an area with many tolerant *Pribumi* people who protected us" (35, male, Chinese). These acts of solidarity and protection, however, must be read alongside the many other recollections by civilians in the survey of cases where neighbours and bystanders did not intervene.

Learning About the Riots: Sources of Social Memory

Twenty-two years after the May 1998 riots, civilians' memories of these events recalled in the survey confirmed the findings of the few researchers who have studied these riots: specifically, they recalled the looting, burning, building destruction, shootings, and rapes especially towards Chinese-Indonesian women and girls (see Heryanto, 2000; Purdey, 2006; Eklöf, 1999; Panggabean and Smith, 2011). None of the survey participants self-identified as a direct participant in the riots. Rather, the memories shared were all told from the perspective of witnesses to the riots, either directly or indirectly, such as by recounting stories they had heard from others. As there has been no thorough investigation into or official account of these events (see Logsdon, 2004; Strassler, 2004; Tim Relawan Untuk Kemanusiaan, [1998]1999), and few Indonesian civilians will speak openly about the May 1998 riots, our survey also asked participants to state their

sources of information. As demonstrated by many of the responses quoted in this paper, it was clear that many participants were giving personal recollections about their own experiences but we also wanted to know how respondents had learned about the riots in general.

Interestingly, respondents identified that their understanding of the riots had been mostly shaped by the information they acquired from television and newspaper sources rather than from friends, family, or even direct experience (see also Himawan et al., 2021a). These sources of participants' memories could indicate that the media has played a significant role in shaping the collective memories of Indonesian society about mass violence in the past. Further research is needed, however, into whether participants based their understandings on media coverage they may have consumed at the time of the riots themselves, or whether they were relying on any media coverage in the years since 1998. In media, rumors and counter-rumors might be circulated related to political and/or social interests. As research into media reporting on the May rapes over time has shown, there have been few investigative journalistic accounts which attempt to uncover the facts of these events (see Klute, 2001; Strassler, 2004; Winarnita and Setiawan, 2020). For participants to name media sources as their primary source of information (beyond their own recollections of these events) may also indicate hesitancy to discuss the May riots, even amongst social and familial groups. Another interpretation is that there may be a degree of deniability that can be claimed by mentioning television as the source; some people may be keen to recount their personal stories and experiences but at the same time may wish to distance themselves from these events.

Conclusion

In the context of the May 1998 riots, where the topic remains taboo and collective memory has been silenced publicly, it is important to seek personal stories from Indonesian civilians. The quotes given in this paper are drawn from only some of the respondents who recalled their personal experiences and disclosed them within the survey. Consistent with past research and media reporting on the riots, these personal narratives revealed stories of the unexpected chaos, targeted attacks on Chinese Indonesians, and sexual violence used against Chinese-Indonesian women and girls (see Heryanto, 2000; Purdey, 2006; Tan, 2008). The unexpected chaos during the first day of the riots reveals how unprepared most Indonesians were; although there had been some lower-level clashes in the months prior, the May riots unleashed much more widespread and intense violence across the capital and other cities. Most Indonesians at the time did not expect any intense violent actions from their fellow citizens so they were unprepared for the chaos disrupting their routines. In regards to the attacks towards Chinese communities, these personal narratives negate the early elite narratives by some government and military leaders that had denied or downplayed the violence towards Chinese communities.

Other responses revealed a novel theme about allyship; how a handful of people had protected one another, been empathetic and assisted one another during the riots. The

theme of allyship found in accounts of helping family and neighbours was not found in the previous literature on the May 1998 riots, and thus can enrich our understanding of these events more broadly. The absence of any narrative of intergroup helping previously is possibly due to the context of silencing created by the state (see Andajani-Sutjahjo et al., 2018; Winichakul, 2020). Help by *Pribumi* and resistance by the disadvantaged group (Chinese Indonesians) may both be underemphasised in previous research because of the political sensitivity of the riots and people's ambivalence and reluctance to discuss personal involvement in the violence.[3] Ambivalence on the part of Chinese Indonesians may also be because they do not want to overplay the fact that they could defend themselves but at the same time they do not want to be silent because stories are important for collective feelings and identity. This new narrative of allyship, however, attests to the resilience of communities and the possibility of solidarity between *Pribumi* and Chinese Indonesians in the face of state-led terror.

Lastly, this study strongly underlines how the topic of the May 1998 riots remains a sensitive issue that is difficult to discuss among civilians in Indonesia. As Andajani-Sutjahjo, Bennett and Davies (2018) and Winarnita and Setiawan (2020) have shown, the Indonesian government continues to silence open discussion of what happened in May 1998, let alone allow for further investigation into, or redress for, this period of state-led mass violence. The study data – from the reluctance shown by some to respond during the process of survey distribution to the quotes drawn from respondents – reinforce how frightening and painful it is to discuss some of May 1998 riots' themes. The pervasive silence that surrounds the riots means there are few permitted spaces for Indonesian civilians to discuss their memories or feelings.

It is a great strength of the present research to examine the unexplored stories of Indonesian civilians, but as a limitation of this research, it must be acknowledged that the diversity of experiences in different cities, or of members of different faiths, classes, and ethnicities has barely been touched on. Similarly, although it is a strength of the present research that the anonymous survey could connect with respondents in a way that may have empowered them to disclose and discuss their taboo memories, it would be a valuable direction of future research to explore narratives and themes from key respondents in detailed interviews. Particularly for the older generations, for whom the internet may feel less safe or natural, face-to-face interviews may offer an avenue for far richer, more detailed narratives.

In the meantime, this research has contributed to an understanding of Indonesian civilians' memories of May 1998 riots and sought to contribute to the scholarship of social memories more broadly. The social memories of groups are critical to how those groups see themselves, and for how members identify with the group (Brockmeier, 2002; Wertsch and Roediger III, 2008). When repressive contexts disrupt those processes, social memory-making continues, albeit in ways that demand ways of remembering, sharing, and speaking otherwise. As Winichakul (2020) has shown, when communities cannot speak openly about dark chapters of the past, public silence does not mean they are forgotten. Rather, within a context of politically-repressed memory-making, communities must use silence as a strategy to negotiate how they form and circulate personal and collective memories.

As the respondents in this survey demonstrated, silence/ing can take many shapes; from hesitancy to even fill in an anonymous survey, to reluctance to describe personal experiences, to self-censorship and generalised descriptions of the memories that they were willing to recall and write down. Yet, as the responses to this survey also show, the anonymity of the survey enabled some respondents to share deeply personal accounts and to speak of the trauma they and their communities suffered. Thus, although this study further highlights the constraints on public discussion about the May riots, and the general reluctance to talk about them, it also shows some of the ways in which Indonesian civilians, whether they be Chinese Indonesian or *Pribumi*, are negotiating their personal and collective memories about this dark, and critical turning point in Indonesian modern history. In chronicling these memories, the present research both deepens the scholarly collective memory for this under-studied event and illuminates further the ways in which silence, memories, and narratives interconnect to create stories of in the face of repression.

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Notes

1. Four months after the riots, the interim government under B.J. Habibie did accede to the demands of women's groups (such as by the women's NGO, Kalyanamitra, and the MATP group, the *Masyarakat Antikekerasan Terhadap Perempuan*, the Anti-Violence Organisation for the Defence of Women) and set up a Fact Finding Team. The Team's short report (Tim Relawan Untuk Kemanusiaan, [1998]1999), published in November of that year, was deemed woefully inadequate by these women's groups and, despite repeated demands, has never been followed up by the government (see Klute, 2001). The only official body to have investigated the sexual violence perpetrated during the May 1998 riots is the National Commission on Violence Against Women, *Komnas Perempuan*. Komnas Perempuan published a book of testimonies by women survivors (2003) and a report (2006). The National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) also followed up, calling on the Indonesian Attorney General's Office (AGO) to begin criminal investigations (see Winarnita and Setiawan, 2020, pp. 121–122). *Komnas Perempuan* is also the body which established the memorial to victims of the riots in 2015.
2. The survey questions were: 1. Please tell us in a few sentences what you think happened in the riots, overall. How long did they last, what happened, who did what, and what happened after?; 2. Please tell us about the impact of the riots on your family and neighbourhoods in a few sentences. Were the riots nearby? How did you hear about them? How did people react? What did you family members say and feel?; 3. If you were asked to re-imagine the events of May 1998, how did you feel when the incident occurred?; 4. What do you think are some causes of the May

1998 riots? What factors made the riots start, and why were there riots in some areas not others? What factors made the riots last as long as they did, and what made them stop?

3. Please note that these findings are focused on potential forms of allyship between family members and neighbours during the riots. For discussion of the solidarity that formed between the Chinese-Indonesian community, women's and human rights groups in the wake of the riots, see Anggraeni (2014).

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