

**UNDERSTANDING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL
HERITAGE PRESERVATION STRATEGIES
THROUGH INTERCULTURAL THEATRE
THEORY: A CASE STUDY OF OMBAK POTEHI
PERFORMANCES**

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FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS

UNIVERSITI MALAYA

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**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the innovative forms, performance styles, and dissemination pathways of traditional Chinese puppetry in Malaysia, with a specific focus on its development in the Penang region. With the migration of Chinese communities to the Nanyang region, various traditional Chinese art forms, including puppetry, were introduced to Malaysia, particularly in Penang. Locally known as "Potehi" in the Hokkien dialect, puppetry has adapted over time to thrive in Malaysia's multicultural environment. To take root and endure, foreign traditional cultures must embrace adaptation and innovation to keep pace with changing times and address the challenges of cultural integration. In response to these dynamics, a group of passionate young individuals in Penang emerged to revitalize the art of Potehi. Guided by seasoned performers, these young enthusiasts learned the traditional craft and eventually established the Ombak Potehi troupe. By integrating traditional Potehi techniques with other performing arts, they have successfully driven the transformation of this heritage art form. Using a qualitative research approach, this study takes the Ombak Potehi troupe as a case study and examines their performance modes through on-site fieldwork in Penang. The research focuses on three main objectives: first, conducting field surveys to collect data on the troupe's history and organizational structure; second, analyzing new performance techniques through observations and interviews to understand the current intercultural performance forms; and third, investigating the troupe's modern communication strategies. The findings

reveal that the Ombak Potehi troupe exemplifies modernity and innovation in both their background and operational style. While retaining traditional elements, their performances incorporate a range of influences, including Malaysian cultural features, Taiwanese opera styles, and Japanese puppetry techniques. This includes scriptwriting, dialogue delivery, and music arrangement, as well as updating stage structures and experimenting with modern theater. These efforts in intercultural adaptation have enriched the presentation of puppetry, making it more relatable to local audiences while fostering cultural exchange and understanding. Additionally, the troupe's innovations extend to their communication strategies, utilizing media, online platforms, and public workshops to broaden the reach of this traditional art form.

Keywords: Ombak Potehi, Intercultural Theatre, Cultural Heritage, Contemporary Practice

ANSTRAK

Kajian ini meneroka bentuk inovatif, gaya persembahan, dan saluran penyebaran wayang tradisional Cina di Malaysia, dengan tumpuan khusus kepada perkembangannya di wilayah Pulau Pinang. Dengan penghijrahan masyarakat Cina ke rantau Nanyang, pelbagai bentuk seni tradisional Cina, termasuk wayang kulit, telah diperkenalkan ke Malaysia, khususnya di Pulau Pinang. Dikenali secara tempatan sebagai "Potehi" dalam dialek Hokkien, wayang ini telah menyesuaikan diri dari semasa ke semasa untuk berkembang dalam persekitaran pelbagai budaya di Malaysia. Untuk bertapak dan terus kekal, budaya tradisional asing mesti menerima perubahan dan inovasi untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan arus zaman dan menangani cabaran integrasi budaya. Sebagai tindak balas kepada dinamik ini, sekumpulan anak muda yang bersemangat di Pulau Pinang telah muncul untuk menghidupkan semula seni Potehi. Dengan bimbingan daripada penggiat seni yang berpengalaman, kumpulan muda ini mempelajari seni tradisional tersebut dan akhirnya menubuhkan kumpulan Ombak Potehi. Dengan menggabungkan teknik Potehi tradisional dengan seni persembahan lain, mereka telah berjaya mendorong transformasi seni warisan ini. Kajian ini menggunakan pendekatan penyelidikan kualitatif dengan menjadikan kumpulan Ombak Potehi sebagai kajian kes dan meneliti mod persembahan mereka melalui kerja lapangan di Pulau Pinang. Penyelidikan ini tertumpu kepada tiga objektif utama: pertama, menjalankan tinjauan lapangan untuk mengumpul data

tentang sejarah dan struktur organisasi kumpulan tersebut; kedua, menganalisis teknik persembahan baharu melalui pemerhatian dan temu bual untuk memahami bentuk persembahan silang budaya yang terkini; dan ketiga, menyiasat strategi komunikasi moden kumpulan tersebut. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan bahawa kumpulan Ombak Potehi mencerminkan kemodenan dan inovasi dalam latar belakang dan gaya operasinya. Sambil mengekalkan elemen tradisional, persembahan mereka menggabungkan pelbagai pengaruh, termasuk ciri-ciri budaya Malaysia, gaya opera Taiwan, dan teknik wayang tradisional Jepun. Ini merangkumi penciptaan skrip, interpretasi dialog, dan susunan muzik, serta kemas kini struktur pentas dan percubaan dengan teater moden. Usaha penyesuaian silang budaya ini memperkayakan persembahan wayang kulit, menjadikannya lebih relevan kepada penonton tempatan, dan memupuk pertukaran budaya serta pemahaman. Tambahan pula, inovasi kumpulan tersebut turut tercermin dalam strategi komunikasi mereka, dengan memanfaatkan media, platform maya atas talian, dan bengkel awam untuk memperluaskan jangkauan seni tradisional ini.

Kata Kunci: Ombak Potehi, Teater Antara Budaya, Warisan Budaya, Amalan Kontemporar

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CHAPTER1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Definition of Potehi

Intangible heritage has become one of the discourses in international society and academia in recent decades. On the international stage, UNESCO plays a leading role in recognizing and safeguarding intangible heritage, as well as promoting international treaties and related activities (Lira & Amoêda, 2009). In 1997, UNESCO launched the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, raising awareness about the immediate threat to the importance of safeguarding and transmitting intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2006). In 2006, Chinese glove puppetry was included in the first batch of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection List (Zhao, 2020).

Potehi (Hokkien), also known as budaixi (Mandarin), is a traditional Chinese form of glove puppet theatre, characterized by the manipulation of puppets directly by the performer's hands (Cohen, 2018). In English academic discourse, it is commonly referred to as glove puppetry or Chinese glove puppet theatre (Tan, 2019), distinguishing it from other puppetry forms such as string puppetry (marionettes) or shadow puppetry. In this dissertation, the term Potehi (Hokkien) will be consistently

employed to refer to the traditional Chinese glove puppet theatre, also known in Mandarin as budaixi and in English academic literature as glove puppetry or Chinese glove puppet theatre. This standardized usage aligns with the art form's historical roots in Southern Fujian's Hokkien-speaking communities, where it originated as a vernacular performance medium before spreading across the Chinese diaspora.

Due to historical reasons, Chinese immigrants, predominantly from Guangdong and Fujian provinces, migrated to Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Indonesia. They brought not only their labor but also their cultural arts, including the "Potehi," which took root in Penang, Malaysia. However, with the passage of time, traditional Potehi, which was performed in its original form, faced challenges in being accepted by contemporary society. Potehi troupes encountered severe survival issues. The need arose to inherit, develop, and promote traditional culture. In response, a group of Potehi performers emerged in Penang, utilizing Malaysia's multicultural characteristics to integrate different performance cultures and achieve contemporary cultural art practice. This aspect will be elaborated in detail in the background section of this chapter, leading to the introduction of the research object, objectives, and scope. Additionally, this chapter will present the problem statement, research objectives, and research questions based on the identified research problem, highlighting their significance, research implications, and the limitations of the current study.

1.2 Research Background

1.2.1 Chinese Potehi

China has a rich cultural heritage of intangible cultural assets, and Potehi has been included among them. When tracing the historical origins of Potehi and reviewing different literature, it is evident that scholars hold varying perspectives. However, most agree that it originated in Quanzhou during the Ming Dynasty. This belief is based on the legend of "Liang Binglin inventing Potehi" that circulated in Quanzhou during the Ming Dynasty (Huang, 2019). However, there are also references in ancient texts from the Eastern Jin Dynasty that describe performances similar to Potehi (Liu, 2016).

Potehi has been passed down in China to the present day, with particular emphasis on preservation and development in the Fujian region, supported by national policies and the perspective of "aesthetics of intangible cultural heritage" (Xie, 2024). Specialized puppet theaters have been established in Fujian province alone, with hundreds of performances held each year. Since 1960, the Quanzhou Potehi Theater has performed abroad dozens of times, vigorously promoting and exchanging puppetry arts. In China, there are also two top-tier drama academies that have established specialized

programs in puppet performance to train future generations of puppetry inheritors through professional teaching methods.

China has a wide variety of puppet types, and Potehi is characterized by puppets consisting of four main parts: the head, limbs, clothing, and headgear. Puppeteers manipulate the puppet's body with their palms and control the limbs with their fingers (Zheng & Wang, 2019). This is also the reason why puppet troupes in Malaysia, after the introduction of Potehi, adopted the name "Zhǎng Zhōng Bān," which translates to "In the Palm Troupe." During Potehi performances, traditional music is accompanied, and the dialogue is delivered in Hokkien, showcasing the local flavor and distinctive characteristics.

1.2.2 The Migration of Chinese

The history of Chinese migration dates back to ancient times, and tracing the earliest history of overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia is challenging due to the close interactions and exchanges between the Chinese empire and neighboring countries (Greta, 2021). According to Kian's research (2013), the period between 1850 and 1940 marked the beginning of modern Chinese migration, with over 19 million Chinese immigrants arriving in Southeast Asia. Chinese descendants born in Southeast Asia have now spanned several generations, particularly in countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, where the Chinese diaspora is widespread.

The significant influx of Chinese immigrants to Malaya (now Malaysia) began after the Second Opium War (Zhang, 2020). According to Chai and Hamid (2024), the Chinese population in Malaysia currently accounts for 24.6% of the total population, making them the second-largest ethnic group in the country. Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, is not only a convergence of monsoons but also a major crossroad of civilizations (Embong, 2002). Chinese migration not only brought a large labor force but also introduced traditional Chinese culture to Malaysia, including cuisine, dialects, education, culture, and art. Regarding cultural arts, as most Malaysian Chinese immigrants originated from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, the cultural arts they brought predominantly reflect the traditions of these two regions (Kang, 2006). Potehi, for example, originated in Fujian and is now primarily concentrated in Penang. Historically, Penang's population was predominantly Chinese, which is an exception in a country predominantly inhabited by Malays (Hanna, 1979).

1.2.3 The Potehi in Malaysia

After the arrival of Potehi in Malaysia, numerous "In the Palm Troupes" were established, and currently, the Beng Geok Hong Palm Troupe holds the longest history, founded in 1930. It inherited the performance style and puppet imagery of the Fujian "Southern School" of Potehi (Kang, 2006). In Malaysia, puppetry performances

usually take place only on the day of worshipping deities. On such occasions, devotees offer Potehi as an expression of gratitude and entertainment for specific deities (Tan, 1981). Therefore, Potehi often appears in temple fairs, deity worship ceremonies, and special holidays. There is a saying that defines the target audience of Potehi: "Potehi is performed for the gods to see, not for people."

With the development of time, traditional arts need to be updated as the traditional performance methods may no longer be suitable for contemporary society. Art is facing the need for transformation, integration, and innovation. In the next section, we will present the research problem statement and explain the relationship between Ombak Potehi Troupe and this study.

1.3 Problem Statement

Chinese traditional Potehi, arrived in Malaysia, a diverse country in Southeast Asia. It is widely acknowledged that Malaysia embraces a fusion of three Asian races: Malay, Indian, and Chinese (Mazanah & Merriam, 2000). Each race represents a distinct culture. Despite Malaysia's unique inclusiveness and diversity, Chinese traditional arts, as a foreign culture that migrated in the previous century, have been in search of their cultural identity (Tong, 2006). In the nation-building process of post-colonial Malaysia's multicultural society, Chinese cultural identity plays a significant role.

Malaysian Chinese have attempted to create a new form of cultural identity known as "Malaysian Chinese cultural identity" (Matondang, 2016).

Potehi, possesses strong ethnic characteristics. The puppet costumes adopt the distinctive style of the Minnan region in Fujian, China. The puppet heads were originally brought from Fujian province 80 to 90 years ago (Tan, 1981). Additionally, when Potehi arrived in Malaysia, it was performed using the Hokkien dialect, which originated from the southern regions of China (Tan, 1981). The music of Potehi also arrived in Malaysia during that period, accompanying musicians from southern Fujian province. The melodies resemble those of Quanzhou Nanyin, a traditional music style from Fujian (Wang, 2018). The stories depicted in Potehi often revolve around Chinese mythology and historical figures (Tan, 1981).

In Malaysia, especially in the Penang region, Potehi is still being diligently preserved and developed. One of Intangible cultural heritages (ICH) listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) is the heritage city or site of George Town in Penang, Malaysia. George Town, Penang, was inscribed in the World Heritage List on July 7, 2008, leading to the annual celebration of the Heritage Festival in the city (Li, 2024). Heritage is defined as something inherited from the past that can be passed on to future generations (Imon et al., 2007). The meaning of the term cultural heritage has evolved over the past few decades. Initially, it solely referred to masterpieces with artistic and historical value; now it is used more broadly, encompassing everything

that holds special significance for people. UNESCO categorizes cultural heritage into two types: tangible and intangible heritage. "Tangible heritage exists in material form, meaning it can be physically touched, such as monuments, buildings, artworks, paintings, objects, and more. Intangible heritage, on the other hand, exists in non-material form, such as music, dance, literature, drama, language, knowledge, local traditions, and so on" (Farahani & Mohamed, 2012).

Intangible cultural heritage is more challenging to gain recognition and protection compared to tangible cultural heritage (Way & Wei, 2023). The process of cultural promotion and identity often encounters obstacles. According to a report by Sin Chew Daily (2023), Beng Geok Hong, the oldest and most renowned Potehi troupe in Malaysia, has suspended all performances in 2023. For over a century, Beng Geok Hong had been a prominent presence in various religious festivals in Malaysia. However, with the younger generation losing interest in traditional arts, many traditional art forms face the task of transformation. The traditional and unchanging performance styles are no longer suitable for contemporary society. In 2015, Ombak Potehi troupe was established, with its members being apprentices trained by Beng Geok Hong. The troupe not only inherits and learns traditional performance styles but also places particular emphasis on contemporary practices. Their new works incorporate local Malay elements and draw influences from diverse sources, such as Taiwanese nge-kiong and collaborative performances with Japanese puppetry. This

fusion of various cultural elements enriches the performances of Ombak Potehi, creating a unique and dynamic artistic experience.

Due to the interaction between local culture and local interpretations, cultural continuity accompanies cognitive interaction. This transformation is part of a broader cultural process known as localization (Tan, 2020). This is not the first time Potehi has undergone localization overseas. When Chinese traditional Potehi arrived in Indonesia, it was known as Wayang Potehi. During its development in Java, this art form tended to adapt to the changes of the times. The popular Wayang Potehi in Java today is the result of the fusion of Chinese and Javanese cultures, with the puppeteers using a mixture of Hokkien and Javanese in their dialogues and leaving behind a significant amount of literature research (Gao, 2021). However, reviewing the literature on Malaysian Potehi, existing studies primarily focus on its history and traditional performance styles, with limited research on its current transformative stage, especially concerning the case of the Ombak Potehi troupe. Further research could provide in-depth insights into the fusion of different cultural arts and how to adapt contemporary practices into various art forms.

1.4 Research Objectives

At this stage, the critical challenges associated with traditional Potehi in Malaysia have been understood, prompting the need for a case study approach to tackle these issues. This will involve incorporating explanations on comprehending cultural preservation strategies, which will have the following research objectives:

1. Investigate the current status of traditional Potehi in Malaysia and understand the history of Ombak Potehi's establishment.
2. Analyze how the Ombak Potehi troupe innovates traditional Malaysian Potehi art through innovative artistic methods within a intercultural framework to promote contemporary practices, preserve heritage, and foster exchange.
3. Explore how the Ombak Potehi troupe uses creative communication strategies like art collaborations and community outreach to engage audiences, broaden influence, raise awareness, and cultivate appreciation for Ombak Potehi performances in an intercultural theater setting.

1.5 Research Questions

To achieve the aforementioned objectives and address the issues stated, this study will propose the following research questions:

1. How did the Ombak Potehi Troupe establish itself in this context?
2. What elements has the Ombak Potehi troupe incorporated to innovate its performance techniques?
3. What new communication methods has the Ombak Potehi troupe adopted to engage with the public?

1.6 Justification: Ombak Potehi as Case Study

The selection of Ombak Potehi as the primary case study is deeply rooted in its pivotal role as a contemporary intercultural theatre group that significantly redefines traditional Potehi performance norms. Situated within Penang's richly diverse cultural milieu, this ensemble represents a notable departure from conventional Potehi troupes by actively embracing transcultural performance practices. The troupe's structural makeup and strategies for engaging with audiences mirror the multicultural fabric of

Malaysian society. Led by a youthful cohort, Ombak Potehi purposefully recruits artists from varied ethnic backgrounds and crafts performance scripts in multiple languages (Hokkien, Malay, and English). This operational model fosters authentic intercultural exchanges, eschewing shallow cultural mimicry in favor of genuine dialogue and exchange.

The selection of Ombak Potehi's representative works for analysis in this case study is particularly significant for their innovative reinterpretation of Chinese migration narratives through an intercultural lens. The troupe's 2017 production *Kisah Pulang pinang* exemplifies this approach through its sophisticated dramaturgical reframing of traditional Potehi storytelling. By integrating Malay oral history traditions with Chinese diaspora narratives, the production constructed a shared historical imaginary that resonated powerfully with Malaysia's multiethnic audiences.

1.7 Significance of the Study

By reviewing the relevant literature, this research holds significant importance in addressing and filling the gaps in the research field. Currently, Malaysian scholars have primarily focused their research on local Chinese traditional arts such as Cantonese opera and Teochew opera, while research on Potehi is limited to the exploration of its history and traditional performance forms (Koh & Ho, 2009).

According to the case study described by Crowe (2011), the case study method allows for in-depth and multidimensional exploration of complex real-life issues. Thus, This study uses the Ombak Potehi troupe and its intercultural performance style as a case study to systematically examine the existing Malaysian puppet theater. By exploring the contemporary artistic forms arising from the fusion of different cultures, it fills a theoretical research gap. It provides empirical research data on cultural exchange, intercultural performance, thereby promoting cross-disciplinary fusion and innovation in artistic forms.

Apart from addressing research gaps, this study holds significant importance in the preservation, protection, promotion, and innovation of traditional arts. Intangible cultural heritage represents a living cultural legacy, embodying rich historical traditions and ethnic sentiments (Kurin, 2007). Its most essential characteristic is its emphasis on non-materiality and quality that transcends material forms. Its survival and development depend on the oral transmission and dedicated practitioners across generations, indicating the challenges inherent in its preservation (Eichler, 2021). Intangible cultural heritage is not reliant on material forms but is showcased through human transmission, diverse tools, and flexible formats, rendering traditional management and preservation methods inadequate to meet its evolving needs (Sun, 2022). In the contemporary context of Malaysia, the preservation and revitalization of traditional puppetry, such as Ombak Potehi, through localized adaptations that incorporate elements from different ethnicities, not only ensure the continuity of

traditional arts but also enhance their relevance and resonance with audiences from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural nature of Malaysia. For example, when Chinese puppetry was introduced to Indonesia, it became known as "Wayang Potehi," following the approach of "Min Nan roots, Indonesian practice." Contemporary Wayang Potehi often showcases cultural fusion and syncretism (Stenberg, 2015).

In addition to puppetry, traditional Chinese arts in Malaysia also include Teochew opera, Cantonese opera, Gezi Opera, and Teochew iron rod puppetry. These art forms share similar historical backgrounds and were brought to Malaysia by Chinese immigrants. According to He (2015), research on Cantonese opera in Malaysia indicates that it has declined in popularity since the advent of popular culture and modernization, similar to other traditional and folk arts. Kang Hailing from Xiamen University, who specializes in research on Chinese-language arts in Malaysia, highlights the challenging situation faced by Teochew opera in Malaysia. Traditional Teochew opera struggles to compete with diverse modern entertainment options. The crisis facing Teochew opera primarily stems from internal issues such as outdated themes and a lack of artistic tradition, which hampers its development. Additionally, the audience base is shrinking, and non-Chinese individuals lack awareness and appreciation for Teochew opera as a foreign import (Kang, 2005). This study can provide theory and practical guidance for the improvement of other Chinese-language

arts in Malaysia, aiming to expand their audience base and address the challenges they face.

1.8 Chapters Outline

The study begins with Chapter one, which provides an introduction to the history of Chinese Potehi and its development in Malaysia as the research background. It then identifies the research problem and formulates research objectives, research questions, and the significance of the study. Chapter 1 sets the context and establishes the framework for the research.

The second chapter will present a literature review, which includes an overview of existing literature on Potehi in China and Malaysia. It collects and evaluates important research in the field and introduces relevant theories that form the theoretical framework of the study.

The third chapter introduces the methodology employed in the study. The chosen methods have been carefully considered, and a qualitative research approach using a case study method is adopted. Ombak Potehi is selected as the primary case for the study, and data collection involves observing the troupe's rehearsals and performances, as well as conducting interviews with key members of the troupe.

The fourth chapter discusses the findings, data collection, and analysis. In this chapter, the author presents the results from the field observations and interviews conducted with Ombak Potehi troupe, providing an in-depth understanding of the details of the troupe's localized performances.

The concluding chapter summarizes the research findings, emphasizes the significance of the study, and restates its limitations. It also provides recommendations for future research based on the study's outcomes.

CHAPTER2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A literature review not only helps researchers gather insights from others interested in a particular research problem but also allows them to examine the findings of similar or related studies. This enables researchers to assess the relevance of their work to the research questions of interest (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990). In this chapter, the researcher provides a comprehensive literature review on the types of puppetry, the historical research on puppetry in China and Malaysia, studies on performance arts, and the functional roles of puppetry. The cultural integration of foreign puppet shows is highlighted in the section focuses on the research literature related to Wayang Potehi in Indonesia. Based on this foundation, in the final section of this chapter, the theoretical framework for this study is proposed and discussed.

2.2 Heritage Research Discourse

Due to the nature of Potehi as an intangible cultural heritage, this chapter first provides a summary and discussion of relevant literature on the concept of "heritage." According to Carman (2003), heritage primarily falls into three categories: (1)

movable items, such as antique collections; (2) preserved and stable architectural ruins; (3) landscapes, perceived as natural or cultural forms of existence that are solid and tangible on a global or regional scale, with heritage also possessing aesthetic characteristics. Subsequently, Howard (2003) offers a definition of heritage as "environment or interests passed down from previous generations," which those generations hope to preserve and pass on to their descendants. Therefore, the collection of heritage is for personal or societal benefit, leading to the classification of heritage into private and public heritage categories.

Munjeri (2004) conducted research on the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage, discussing the intrinsic value of cultural heritage and its authenticity. The value of heritage items (e.g., objects, collections, buildings) is bestowed and acknowledged by people in society. Understanding the value of tangible heritage can be achieved through intangible expressions, thereby establishing a connection between society and values.

2.2.1 Cultural Heritage in Penang

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to local cultural practices, expressions, and tools that are transmitted through generations, providing a sense of identity, continuity, respect, diversity, and creativity to local communities (UNESCO, 2006). Community

involvement approaches are crucial for safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and for performing arts traditions such as Potehi, efforts should be made to ensure the broadest possible participation of communities, groups, and individuals who create, preserve, and transmit Intangible Cultural Heritage within the framework of their safeguarding activities and actively involve them in its management (Buckley, 2016). Traditional bearers and experts, as noted by Smith et al. (2009), believe that Intangible Cultural Heritage is only truly recognized when those who create, preserve, and transmit it, without their acknowledgment, no one else can decide which expressions or practices are their heritage.

Potehi puppet theatre represents a significant cultural artifact of Hokkien performing arts that migrated from Quanzhou, Fujian Province during the mass Chinese diaspora to the Malay Peninsula between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the dominant Chinese sub-ethnic group in Penang, the Hokkien community has preserved a distinct linguistic variant - a localized Zhangzhou dialect of Hokkien that reflects their primary regional origins in southern Fujian (Tan, 2019). In June 2008, Potehi was officially inscribed on China's Second National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Huang, 2024). The 2005 National Heritage Act of Malaysia establishes a comprehensive legal framework for safeguarding the nation's natural heritage, tangible and intangible cultural heritage (including traditional arts and culinary traditions), underwater cultural heritage, and "living human treasures" (designating master practitioners of traditional skills). This legislation implements centralized

governance mechanisms to systematically preserve these diverse heritage elements while explicitly aligning conservation efforts with national identity formation (Tan, 2022).

2.3 Chinese Traditional Potehi

While the previous section has examined Potehi within the framework of heritage studies, this section will trace its historical and geographical evolution, beginning with its origins in China. The literature review here adopts a spatial-diffusion approach, analyzing how Potehi migrated across regions and adapted to local cultural contexts over time.

2.3.1 History in China (Zhou Dynasty – Song Dynasty)

Different scholars have different perspectives on the historical origins of Potehi. According to Huang (2019) and Shi (2017), based on their research on the history of Potehi as mentioned in "Records of Collected Fragments," the emergence of the rudimentary form of Potehi can be traced back to the ancient Zhou Dynasty¹,

¹ The Zhou Dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE) is traditionally divided into the Western Zhou (c. 1046–771 BCE) and Eastern Zhou (770–256 BCE), the latter further including the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period. It laid the ideological foundations of Chinese civilization, including Confucianism and the Mandate of Heaven.

revealing a history not limited to the officially recorded thousand years but extending to three thousand years. From this perspective, Potehi can be considered one of the oldest and most ancient forms of puppetry in the Chinese culture. The passage describes the nature of puppetry in ancient China:

In Ding's (1993) article "An Analysis of Puppetry in the Song Dynasty," he argues from the perspective of the inherent characteristics and historical development patterns of puppetry that flesh puppets are more reasonable to be considered as Potehi. Huang (2017) conducted further research on the concept of "flesh puppets" and found that in ancient China, flesh puppets coexisted with string puppets, rod puppets, water puppets, and medicine-induced puppets as a type of puppetry. Flesh puppets were manipulated by the puppeteer's hand, and during the Tang and Song dynasties², they had many child followers. Historical research on Potehi confirms that a similar entertainment form resembling Potehi existed as early as the Jin dynasty. As dynasties progressed, the terminology may have differed, but this type of performance and entertainment remained prevalent in people's lives. In 2006, Potehi became one of the first intangible cultural heritage items protected in China (Lin, 2022), possessing rich aesthetic and cultural value.

² The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) are often regarded as two of the most culturally and economically advanced periods in imperial China, with the Tang noted for cosmopolitanism and the Song for technological and intellectual flourishing.

2.3.2 The Performing Arts (Traditional Era – Present)

Chinese Potehi was inherited and developed in the southern Fujian region of China during the Traditional Era period³. Currently, Chinese scholars have conducted extensive research on the artistic value and transmission methods of Potehi. Firstly, in terms of puppet design, Zheng and Wang (2019) provide a fundamental concept that "a Potehi consists of a head, limbs, clothing, and headgear, with the puppet head being the core. From an artistic perspective, it involves the use of bold exaggeration, clever transformations, and rich decorative flavors in image design and production, based on a foundation of realism." Although the costumes and facial colors of Potehi have undergone various changes over time, this fundamental essence remains unchanged.

The stage for traditional Potehi is typically enclosed by a stage board that is approximately 5 feet high and 4 to 6 feet wide, commonly known as a "one-character stage." The backstage area is covered by a curtain, and there are side curtains on both sides that can accommodate 2 to 4 puppets. Two chairs are placed in the backstage area, allowing the main and supporting puppeteers to sit and facilitate the performance of the Potehi (Zheng & Wang, 2019). In terms of design, costume plays a significant role in the aesthetics of the puppetry. The puppet's head is carved from

³ The "Traditional Era" refers broadly to pre-modern China, especially from the Zhou Dynasty through the late Qing Dynasty (i.e., before 1912), encompassing imperial rule, Confucian socio-political structures, and classical cultural norms.

camphor wood, with hidden mechanisms inside, enabling the puppeteer to control the facial expressions and muscles of the puppet. Simultaneously, the movements of the puppet's limbs and arms are diverse. The performer inserts bamboo sticks into the puppet's sleeves, twists them, and controls the puppet to perform relatively challenging actions such as opening fans, changing clothes, sword dancing, fighting, and jumping, captivating the audience's attention. Additionally, puppet theaters offer a wide variety of performances that cover traditional, modern, mythological, and fairy tale themes, making them highly popular among audiences (Huang & Chantamala, 2022).

Tu (2004) and Liu (2016) conducted research on the performance style of Potehi, where the puppet's movements, lines, and singing are all controlled by the puppeteer. In Yang's (2022) study, it is described that during the performance, the artist must begin by shaking the hands wearing the puppet, manipulating the puppet according to the storyline of the puppet play. The artist also subtly moves behind the barrier to create a realistic effect, such as manipulating the puppet's fingers in accordance with the content of the dialogue. This showcases the unique artistic form of Potehi as a folk art. Compared to other types of puppets like string puppets or rod puppets, Potehi is easier to learn and master, which is one of the reasons for its spread overseas (Chu, 2017).

Potehi in China is further classified into the Southern and Northern styles, which are not based on geographical locations but rather on differences in music, percussion instruments, and performance styles (Shi, 2017). The Northern style of Potehi is rooted in the traditional "Han tune" but later adapted to the Peking Opera (Chen, 2023). According to Kang's (2006) article, it was subsequently introduced to Malaysia, and the current performances in Malaysia are referred to as "Southern-style Potehi." Chinese research on Southern-style Potehi mainly revolves around its fundamental characteristics and artistic value. Hong (2010) and Li (2023) explain that it is performed in the form of storytelling, emphasizing imitation in the performance, and showcasing a strong presence of physical movements and skills.

2.3.3 The Folk Culture of Potehi

Regarding the folk nature of Potehi, Ni (2022) emphasizes in their research on the ethnic characteristics of Potehi that its folk essence is most prominently demonstrated through the continuous incorporation of widely circulated folk stories and legends. Potehi exemplifies the synthesis of Minnan folk culture and performing arts through three key aspects: (1) Its characterizations reflect Han cultural values, particularly through heroic archetypes championing justice; (2) The unique palm-and-finger manipulation technique showcases distinctive physical theatre, with combat sequences mirroring the region's historical militancy; (3) Its repertoire adapts

enduring folk narratives like Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea, transforming oral traditions into performative cultural memory. As both artistic practice and social chronicle, Potehi preserves Minnan's historical consciousness while dynamically engaging contemporary audiences.

Potehi is predominantly associated with Hokkien Han communities, particularly Minnan dialect speakers, and has become a distinctive cultural marker among Taiwanese and Southeast Asian diasporic populations (Lin, 2022). Through historical development, the art form has undergone significant localization in Malaysia, evolving into a unique theatrical variant distinct from its mainland Chinese origins while maintaining continuity within overseas Chinese communities (Kang, 2006).

Furthermore, closely related to folk culture is the role that Potehi plays in religion. In the folk context of Potehi, the term "folk" primarily refers to the grassroots populace of pre-modern societies (including farmers and commoners), rather than the gentry or court nobility (Zheng & Wang, 2019). Potehi performances often take place at temple fairs, festivals, and markets, serving as a form of entertainment and educational tool for the common people. Regarding the origins of theater, whether it is Chinese theater or other forms of theater, the most common explanation is that it originated from rituals (Llamas, 2013). Van der Loon (1977) stated in a research article that Chinese theater never completely lost its ritualistic essence and, like in China and elsewhere,

ritual can always become theater. For Van der Loon, the primary function of Chinese theater is worship: its purpose is to pay homage to various gods on the occasions when it is performed. The purpose of puppetry performances, in turn, is for ritualistic purposes. Xia (2005) extensively discusses artifacts, characters, and rituals in her work and suggests that puppetry serves religious functions of exorcism and witchcraft by combining stage performance with altars, eliminating disasters, seeking wealth, and expressing blessings. Ye (2009) analyzes the historical relationship between puppetry and primitive religious rituals and presents different approaches. Reviewing the literature, scholars have explored the relationship between puppetry and religion through research methods such as literature studies, content analysis, and field surveys.

2.3.4 Current Stage of Development (21st Century Innovations)

As a traditional art form, Potehi often appears on stage or during festivals. To adapt to the needs of China's social development in the 21st century⁴, reforms and innovations are required. Through literature research, it has been discovered that Chinese Potehi has made new findings in cross-disciplinary areas. In a survey on the current status of Potehi, Cao (2023) points out that traditional Potehi lacks innovation and is

⁴ The 21st Century in this context highlights social, cultural, and technological changes emerging in China since the year 2000, including digital media, gender discourse, and global cultural exchange.

experiencing a decline in audience numbers. However, with the help of online media, innovative development is achievable. Studies have been conducted on the audiovisual and gamification aspects of Potehi, attracting a younger audience. Chen (2013), Chu (2017), and Yang (2022) have all conducted research on the educational functions of Potehi. They have introduced Potehi into drama education classrooms, which can facilitate the development of students' multiple abilities.

2.3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature review on Chinese Potehi provides a historical and contextual foundation for future research on Potehi in Malaysia. Scholars have conducted comprehensive and systematic studies on Potehi, covering its origins, performance styles, and social functions. These studies showcase the rich cultural heritage of Potehi and its potential for adaptation and revitalization. They emphasize the importance of preserving and promoting this traditional art form while exploring new avenues for its continued relevance in contemporary society.

2.3.6 Malaysia Potehi

Given that the literature review of this study adopts a spatial-diasporic narrative framework, the preceding section on Chinese Potehi has systematically analyzed its

historical evolution, performance conventions, ethnic significance, and contemporary developments. The discussion now shifts to the Malaysian context, examining how Potehi transformed through Chinese diaspora communities and adapted to local sociocultural conditions.

2.3.7 History in Malaysia (20 - 21th Century)

There is a scarcity of literature specifically focusing on the history of Chinese Potehi in Malaysia. However, some clues can be found in literature related to the migration of Chinese people to Nanyang (Southeast Asia) and the historical development of Chinese language arts in Southeast Asia and Malaysia. Southeast Asia is home to the largest overseas Chinese population, with a history of Chinese diaspora dating back to 20 - 21th century⁵ (Greta, 2021). Unger (1944) conducted research on the history of Chinese people in Nanyang and their functional roles in different representative regions. He pointed out that Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia primarily originated from the southern provinces of China, specifically Guangdong and Fujian. The immigrants from Fujian spoke Minnan dialect, which is also the most widely spoken among Chinese communities in Nanyang. Therefore, the dialects used in Potehi performances have long been closely related to these linguistic backgrounds.

⁵ The 20th–21st century in Malaysia spans from the early 1900s (under British rule) to the present, covering independence (1957) and modern development

In the study of Malaysian Chinese history, Greta (2021) employed literature analysis to analyze the history and reality of Chinese people in Southeast Asia. She pointed out that across the Southeast Asian region, due to different background conditions, each country has formed its unique Chinese identity. For example, in Thailand, Chinese culture has mixed and blended with local culture. In contrast, Malaysian Chinese have maintained a distinct identity separate from the Malays. Tan (2017) conducted research on the dissemination of Minnan culture in Malaysia, providing a comprehensive overview of Minnan culture in Malaysia, encompassing language, religious customs, cuisine, and music and film. The process of dissemination in Malaysia exhibits characteristics of "integration" and "harmonization." Ruan (2014) analyzed the influence of Chinese culture in Southeast Asia, highlighting that due to China's historical culture of "harmony," Southeast Asian Chinese culture has coexisted and interacted with local cultures without assimilation. Throughout the development process, it has embraced contradictions, differences, and struggles.

Kang has been dedicated to the study of Chinese language arts in Malaysia. In her literature, she explores the dissemination of Chinese language opera in Malaysia. She specifically investigates the transmission and development of Cantonese opera, which has undergone stages of transplantation, prosperity, decline, reform, and decline (Kang, 2006). Kang (2008) also analyzes the performance activities of Chinese language opera in Malaysia, which follows the secular customs of rural theatrical

performances in China. She identifies two major functions, namely "religious" and "entertainment," highlighting its primitive, inclusive, and anti-normative characteristics. Subsequently, Kang conducts in-depth research on the religious rituals associated with Chinese language opera in Malaysia. Kang (2008) points out that Chinese language opera is intertwined with Chinese festive folklore, and the display of opera serves to interpret and disseminate these festive customs. Performances, including puppetry, can be observed in the folk life of Malaysian Chinese. Kang (2008) adopts an anthropological perspective to analyze Chinese language opera as a unique cultural practice. Apart from fulfilling the primary function of appeasing deities and entertaining spirits, it serves as a symbolic expression for the Chinese community, enabling them to assert their identity within the "us" group and communicate their aspirations among different ethnic groups. In one of her articles specifically addressing "Chinese Puppetry in Malaysia," Kang (2006) provides a comprehensive overview of the history of puppetry in Malaysia, with a focus on the Teochew puppet theater in Penang. However, there is a lack of research on Potehi, which has also had a significant impact in Malaysia. The localization of puppetry performance language is mentioned but not extensively explained.

2.3.8 Potehi in Malaysia (20 - 21th Century)

After arriving in Southeast Asia, Potehi, known as "glove puppetry," adopted this name due to the influence of the Hokkien dialect. Cohen (2018) provides an overview of the dissemination of Potehi in Southeast Asia, particularly in Indonesia and Malaysia. The study highlights the commonalities and differences in the variations of this performance art, offering a model for future research on other theatrical movements in Asia. Tan (1981) offers a comprehensive introduction to Potehi in Malaysia. Through a comparison with Chinese literature, it is discovered that the character types in Malaysian Potehi are derived from elements of traditional Chinese opera. The facial colors, costume designs, story sources, performance styles, stage setups, and ritual practices all inherit from Chinese Potehi, and this adherence to tradition has persisted for several decades.

In Malaysia, Potehi has given rise to different troupes. Palm-sized troupes are primarily concentrated in Penang. Historical and existing troupes include Beng Geok Hong Glove Puppet Show, Hock Lye Puppet Enterprise, Keat Hiang Hokkien Gloves Puppet, Ombak Potehi, Xin Khim Hong Puppet Show, and Guat Poh Hong Potehi Troupe. Except for Ombak Potehi, the rest of the troupes maintain the performance style of traditional Hokkien Potehi. Ombak Potehi is a disciple of Beng Geok Hong Glove Puppet Show, indicating a master-apprentice relationship. However, as of 2023, Beng Geok Hong Glove Puppet Show has ceased operations, reflecting the limitations faced by Potehi's development in the local context.

Regarding Ombak Potehi, a troupe composed of amateur young individuals, there is limited research available. Preliminary information can only be obtained through the troupe's website and online performance videos. These young members learn role interpretation, mastery of accompanying music, dialogue delivery, and puppet manipulation techniques from the predecessors of Beng Geok Hong Glove Puppet Show. As many members are non-Chinese and unfamiliar with the Hokkien dialect, they have condensed the original three-hour performances into a 30-45 minute highlight reel. The musicians compose music based on traditional Potehi melodies, and the dialogues are written in text format for ease of learning. Their notable work, "Kisah Pulau Pinang," depicts the history of Penang, featuring characters from diverse ethnic backgrounds dressed in their respective traditional costumes, accompanied by representative music.

In the research on Potehi in Penang, the literature by Tan Sooi Beng from the University Sain Malaysia plays a pivotal role in providing a cutting-edge foundation for this study. This is further accentuated by Tan Sooi Beng's influential role in the establishment of the Ombak Potehi troupe. This aspect will be expounded upon in the fourth chapter of the dissertation, highlighting the scholarly significance of Tan Sooi Beng's contributions to the field. In the literature review section, this segment will focus on Tan's publications regarding Potehi. Beginning with a chronological timeline, we trace back to Tan's study in 1981 on Malaysian puppet theater, where it was noted that Malaysian puppetry was traditionally performed to commemorate deities, while

Potehi performances demanded the agile coordination of hands and fingers, necessitating years of specialized training. The roles in Malaysian Potehi are categorized as Seng, Toa, Kang Lang, Thiu, and Hoa Bin, continuing the stylistic traditions of Chinese puppet theater.

Significantly, in this article, Tan also highlights the current challenges faced by Malaysian Potehi performers. Many of these performers, typically in their 30s or 40s, have backgrounds in Penang's Hokkien Opera troupes. As they age and find themselves less suited for on-stage performances, they transition to become puppeteers manipulating the puppets behind the scenes, thus extending their careers in the performing arts. However, these performers often rely on multiple jobs for their livelihood. Most lack higher education, making it difficult for them to secure government or office positions. For instance, female puppeteers often double as seamstresses or work in factories, while male puppeteers may also work as fishermen or vendors.

In Tan's analysis on the societal status of performing arts in Malaysia in 1989, it is noted that Chinese cultural groups consciously integrated local music, dance, and theatrical themes into their performances to attract a wider audience and meet local demands. This deliberate effort involved incorporating elements such as indigenous folk songs and creating new works infused with local dance rhythms.

In Tan (2017) article following the establishment of the Ombak Potehi troupe, it is mentioned that this street puppetry performance is part of a longstanding initiative on Penang Island, where a group of young individuals from the Ombak Potehi troupe have revived the art form of puppetry. Potehi puppetry, originating as a Fujianese performing art, was brought to Penang by a significant influx of Chinese immigrants who settled on the island, a pivotal port and island on the northwest coast of the Malay Peninsula. Some immigrants stayed on the island, while others moved to neighboring states like Kedah or Perak to engage in business, establish farms, or work in tin mines. By the first half of the 20th century, Potehi performances evolved from commemorating temple deities to becoming a popular form of entertainment and a social avenue for the Fujianese community on Penang Island.

Over the course of a century of immigration up to contemporary society, the current status of Potehi in Penang has evolved. A century ago, there were over ten troupes on the island; today, only four active traditional troupes remain. Temples still host Potehi troupes, as it is believed that deities enjoy watching performances during their birthday celebrations. However, this art form is on the decline, with dwindling audiences and apprentices struggling to find mentors (Tan, 2017). Based on this current state, Tan advocates for a community engagement approach that emphasizes dialogue and traditional bearers as knowledge generators, with the community's youth taking on roles as researchers, apprentices, and performers.

2.3.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, despite being an important aspect of Chinese traditional art in overseas development, the research on Potehi in Malaysia remains relatively limited. Existing literature primarily focuses on other forms of Chinese opera, such as Cantonese opera and Teochew opera. There is a lack of research resources and literature specifically dedicated to Malaysian Potehi. Furthermore, there is currently no cross-cultural research on Ombak Potehi, a troupe that integrates diverse cultural elements into traditional Potehi performances. However, in Indonesia, Wayang Potehi has notably assimilated into the local culture and is performed in the Indonesian language. There is already a substantial body of literature on the localization of Wayang Potehi, and the next section will provide a review of this literature to offer theoretical and methodological insights for this study.

2.4 Localization of Wayang Potehi

Around the 17th century, with the arrival of Chinese immigrants, Potehi developed in Indonesia and underwent cultural adaptation with the local culture (Kurniawan, 2017). Since the ascent of President Suharto in Indonesia in 1967, the issuance of Decree No. 14 strictly prohibited the development and performance of any Chinese-related cultural and artistic forms. During this period, the use of the Chinese language was

also prohibited. However, this policy inadvertently provided another opportunity for the development of Indonesian Chinese Potehi. Faced with pressure from the Indonesian government, Wayang Potehi switched to performing in the Indonesian language. Suharto's New Order policy aimed to resist Chinese culture but unexpectedly allowed Wayang Potehi to take root in Indonesia and become a localized practice.

Cai (2015) interviewed Sukar Mudjiono, a local puppeteer of Wayang Potehi, who mentioned that the stage and puppets used in performances are now locally made by Indonesians. However, the embroidery on the costumes is outsourced to local Chinese craftsmen. More complex instruments like erhu, jinghu, suona, and yangqin are imported from China, while simpler percussion instruments are created by local Indonesians using instruments brought from mainland China as samples. The performances are primarily conducted in the Indonesian language, with Hokkien used as a secondary language. In addition to using traditional Chinese music, Beijing opera, folk songs, and popular music, Indonesian Potehi sometimes incorporates Indonesian folk songs or popular songs for special effects. For example, the dangdut music genre is often featured in Chinese Potehi performances. Stenberg (2015) studied the hybrid cultural strategies of contemporary Wayang Potehi in Indonesia, which exhibit a sense of linearity, fusion, and loyal Chinese-Indonesian identity. Due to the performers and performance backgrounds, it has become a hybrid genre and a local product, symbolizing extensive exchange between China and local performances. It is used to

fulfill ethnic identity and integration policies. Wayang Potehi has become a successful form of cultural adaptation between Chinese and Javanese cultures, focusing not only on Chinese stories but also retelling Indonesian history, particularly stories of heroism (Ryhilda & Hanjani, 2023).

Liang (2021) conducted a study on the cultural reconstruction and value addition of localized Wayang Potehi from the perspective of ethnic anthropology. Indonesian Potehi has gradually evolved from religious ritual performances and symbolic representations into a means of survival for Indonesian Dalang. With changing social contexts and the era, performances gradually became more Indonesian in language to attract local Javanese audiences and cater to their psychological interests. Especially in the recitation of suluk, the fixed poetic form, the dialogue or poetry is mostly conducted in Indonesian. Additionally, depending on the situation, elements of humor that Indonesian audiences can better accept and understand are incorporated, interpreting contemporary lifestyles and gradually completing the cultural reconstruction and value addition of the theatrical art form.

2.5 Conclusion

The conclusion of the literature review indicates that China, as the birthplace of Potehi, boasts a rich array of research resources. Scholars have conducted extensive

field investigations and analyses of various aspects of Potehi, including historical records and performance characteristics. However, upon the migration of Potehi to Malaysia, research materials become scarce, with a lack of qualitative studies and systematic research processes dedicated to Potehi. Particularly in the context of intercultural integration, where different cultures converge, some puppetry troupes have embarked on initiatives to adapt Potehi to contemporary society. This study aims to address research gaps by exploring how Malaysian Potehi adapts to contemporary practices through intercultural performances using qualitative research methods. In this process, Chinese literature and resources will provide analytical tools and theoretical guidance for the performance aspect, while insights from Indonesian Wayang, which shares origins with Chinese Potehi, will offer valuable references for the localization of performances.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is a structure that can accommodate or support the theoretical foundations of a study. It represents the synthesis of key ideas in a research field and provides a theoretical background and foundation for the overall study, including the analysis of data and interpretation of the meaning embedded in the research data (Kivunja, 2018). The focus of this research is to examine Ombak Potehi troupe as a case study, analyzing their intercultural performances, innovative performances, script

adaptations, and creative dissemination. The study aims to explore how Potehi, a traditional puppetry art originating from China, transforms through intercultural exchanges in Ombak Potehi troupe, resulting in different forms of artistic expression and contributing to the innovation and development of Potehi.

2.6.1 Justification of the Theory

The choice of Intercultural Theatre Theory for this research is well-justified, as the study seeks to explore the performance transformations of Ombak Potehi in adapting to contemporary society to preserve and transmit intangible cultural heritage. Intercultural Theatre Theory uniquely focuses on the interactions between cultures, providing a robust framework for analyzing cultural exchange and fostering deeper understanding. Its emphasis on the dynamic interplay between diverse cultural elements within theatre and performance aligns closely with the objectives of this research.

Localization involves adapting sociocultural practices to specific local contexts, exemplified by cultural hybridity like Western opera's Sinicization (Bing, 2008; Gong, 2019). While localization emphasizes place-based adaptation, intercultural theatre theory offers a transnational framework analyzing dynamic cultural syntheses. This theoretical distinction proves particularly relevant for studying contemporary

intangible cultural heritage, which increasingly emerges as hybrid forms through transcultural interactions rather than singular localized adaptations.

Although globalization, acculturation, and multiculturalism are also critical frameworks for examining cultural interactions, their focus differs. Globalization, as defined by Held and McGrew (2000), highlights the increasing inter connectedness of political, economic, and cultural activities across global contexts. While globalization encompasses both surface-level interconnections and deeper processes like “glocalization”—the blending of local and global influences—it does not center on the artistic and performative dimensions as Intercultural Theatre Theory does.

This study adopts an intercultural framework rather than acculturation theory due to fundamental theoretical divergences in conceptualizing cultural dynamics. While acculturation theory (Redfield et al., 1936; Berry, 1997) effectively explains unidirectional cultural adaptation patterns through its bidimensional model, intercultural theory better accommodates the multidirectional, creative exchanges characterizing contemporary intangible cultural heritage.

Meanwhile, multiculturalism often addresses racial dynamics, with practical applications in political participation, resource allocation, and educational reforms.

While multiculturalism provides valuable frameworks for institutional recognition of cultural diversity (Mao, 2023) and challenges assimilationist models (Song, 2010),

this study adopts an intercultural perspective for three key reasons. First, intercultural

theory better captures the dynamic, processual nature of cultural exchange in performative contexts, as opposed to multiculturalism's focus on static group rights. Second, where multiculturalism examines structural relations between established groups (Tamir, 1995), intercultural analysis illuminates emergent hybrid practices in artistic collaboration. Third, multiculturalism's primary concern with institutional justice (Colombo, 2015) proves less suited than interculturalism's emphasis on creative adaptation mechanisms for examining the fluid cultural negotiations characteristic of contemporary intangible heritage practices.

In summary, the adoption of Intercultural Theatre Theory provides a rich and nuanced framework for exploring the complexities of contemporary intangible cultural heritage. It facilitates an analysis of the dynamic cultural interplay inherent in the performance transformations of Ombak Potehi, offering valuable insights into the preservation and evolution of heritage arts within multicultural contexts.

2.6.2 Theoretical Framework

Based on the research objectives, the theoretical framework for this study is the Intercultural Theatre theory, which will be systematically analyzed from several perspectives. The concept of "interculturalism" encompasses a rich array of content, and its elements can intersect rather than being exclusive. Interculturalism, initially

conceived as a political movement, aims to actively encourage dialogue and communication between different cultures. It is often used to describe the exchange and fusion between a country's own culture and Western ideals, with the goal of achieving values of mutual respect. Interculturalism supports the widely accepted viewpoint that concepts such as official language, mainstream culture, and territorial unity alone are insufficient to create cohesion. They must be combined with identity recognition, collective memory, and a sense of belonging. Interculturalism exhibits several distinct attributes. Firstly, as a global model of social integration, interculturalism primarily develops within a binary paradigm. One inherent feature of this paradigm is a strong recognition of majority/minority relations and the tensions associated with them. Secondly, while promoting respect for diversity, this model is more conducive to initiatives of interaction, communication, connection, and intercommunity engagement. Cultural fusion is also a significant characteristic within the intercultural process. While seeking fair interaction between continuity and diversity, interculturalism allows for the recognition of certain elements that prioritize the unique background of the majority culture (Bouchard, 2010) .

Interculturalism began to receive attention in the theater industry in the 1980s when Richard Schechner incorporated this theory into his works. He believed that proponents of interculturalism rejected utopian plans and instead explored the challenges that arise when cultures clash, overlap, or become distant from each other (Schechner, 1991). Furthermore, Richard Schechner distinguished between

interculturalism and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is characterized by coexistence, implying a form of equality while obscuring true social relations and emphasizing cultural equality. On the other hand, interculturalism refers to situations where various diverse cultural works are not suitable, overlap, or stand out, emphasizing the mutual influence, openness, flexibility, and hybridity between cultures (Epskamp, 2003).

Interculturalism is a highly controversial concept, as it raises questions and criticism regarding Eurocentrism, cultural appropriation, power imbalances, and the legitimacy of representing others. These issues have led to ongoing revisions and modifications in the discourse surrounding intercultural performance. One of the main criticisms of intercultural performance is that such exchanges often occur in an unequal manner but are often packaged under the umbrella of universal aesthetic values, thus disregarding the inherent inequalities stemming from economic and power disparities in the context of global mobility. In his work "The Intercultural Performance Reader" (1996), Pavis analyzes the potential problems in intercultural theater and emphasizes the dominant position of Western culture within it. Notably, Pavis proposes that the most effective form of intercultural practice to resist standardization and counter the Europeanization of mega-productions is the shared engagement of actors with their own technical and professional identities on a material level. To summarize intercultural theater, Pavis introduces the hourglass model. This model draws upon the flow of fine sand in an hourglass, representing the layered filtration and

recombination processes involved in the cross-cultural transfer between source and target cultures. Additionally, Pavis identifies a series of theatrical elements as filters that influence intercultural flows (Pavis, 2003).

However, scholars have also raised critical inquiries about the hourglass model. Indian scholar Rustom Bharucha acknowledges the autonomy manifested through the intervention of intercultural theater within critical and liminal spaces. However, he emphasizes its limitations due to capitalist market constraints and the voluntaristic interventions constrained by state and market institutions. In response, Bharucha proposes the pendulum model to highlight the interplay of forces between two endpoints to balance intercultural exchanges. Even when there may be an imbalance of power between these endpoints, the swinging motion of the pendulum aims to achieve a certain level of consensus (Bharucha, 2003). Additionally, some scholars argue that this theory fails to account for the counteractive forces of collision or obstacles that occur during cultural exchanges. The represented process in this theory, in fact, eliminates cultural differences and selectively utilizes culturally convenient elements for absorption (Lo & Gilbert, 2002).

Intercultural theater encompasses public performance practices that combine specific cultural resources in terms of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and the reception levels of interpreting communities. So far, the theoretical discourse on intercultural theater has predominantly focused on Western experiences, highlighting a Western-centric perspective. Intercultural theater in Europe and

America can be broadly categorized into three types. Firstly, there is the adaptation and utilization of stories and theatrical traditions from outside the Western context, such as Peter Brook's adaptation of the Indian epic "Mahabharata." Secondly, there is the integration of theatrical performance traditions from non-Western cultures into actor training and performances, often employed by directors like Grotowski, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Schechner. Furthermore, it is worth exploring how European and American directors and playwrights incorporate and draw inspiration from Eastern theater and culture. For example, Bertolt Brecht's study of Peking Opera and his concept of "Verfremdungseffekt" (alienation effect) (He, 2020). Chinese scholar Feng Wei (2016) has proposed that Intercultural theater primarily involves the appropriation of intangible cultural elements, which can be categorized into content appropriation, subject appropriation, style appropriation, and motif appropriation. These appropriations encompass different approaches and objects, thus requiring differentiated evaluations of works.

Intercultural theater can be defined as the combination of specific cultural resources in terms of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and/or the reception levels of interpreting communities. Currently, the majority of interpretations focus on the intentions of the directors and the identities of the performers, categorizing intercultural theater into different types. Among them, the most representative type is intercultural adaptation and the interweaving of performance cultures. The former is based on the appropriation and re-creation of dramatic texts,

exploring how theater works from other cultures are presented on stage. The "indigenization and contemporaneity" of adapted works in terms of form and content is an important theme (He, 2020). In the past, the term "intercultural" always referred to the fusion of Western and non-Western elements, with the non-Western aspect not limited to specific regions like Asia, Africa, or Latin America. The interweaving takes the form of combining Western modern theatrical texts or performance styles with elements from Eastern traditional theater.

With the rise of Asia and the growing confidence in its own culture, Western culture is no longer regarded as the sole truth, and Asian countries have their own rich cultural heritage. This is clearly demonstrated in the puppet displays of the Ombak Potehi troupe. In this study, we will combine the concept of intercultural theater theory to form a theoretical framework, focusing on field data collection and subsequent data analysis of the Ombak Potehi troupe, with a primary focus on interculturalism.

Firstly, intercultural adaptation refers to the appropriation and re-creation of theatrical works from other cultures to meet the demands of contemporary stage presentations and cater to local audiences' acceptance. In the performance practices of the Ombak Potehi troupe, we can examine how they adapt and present the traditional Potehi puppetry form, originating from the Fujian region of China, in a localized and contemporary manner. The troupe may accomplish this through adaptations of scripts, adjustments in performance styles, and the incorporation of contemporary elements.

This includes an investigation of specific cultural resources in terms of narrative content, aesthetic performance, production processes, and audience reception. By introducing theoretical perspectives, we can delve into how the Ombak Potehi troupe integrates different cultural elements in their narrative construction, performance styles, and creative processes to resonate with contemporary audiences and showcase unique cultural fusion on stage. This involves considering the troupe's interaction, reference, and fusion with different cultural traditions. Secondly, with the guidance of theory, we can explore how the troupe employs intercultural elements in actor training, stage design, music arrangement, and other aspects to create a distinctive performance style and viewing experience. Such research can help us better understand the troupe's creative process, aesthetic choices, and their unique contributions in the field of intercultural theater.

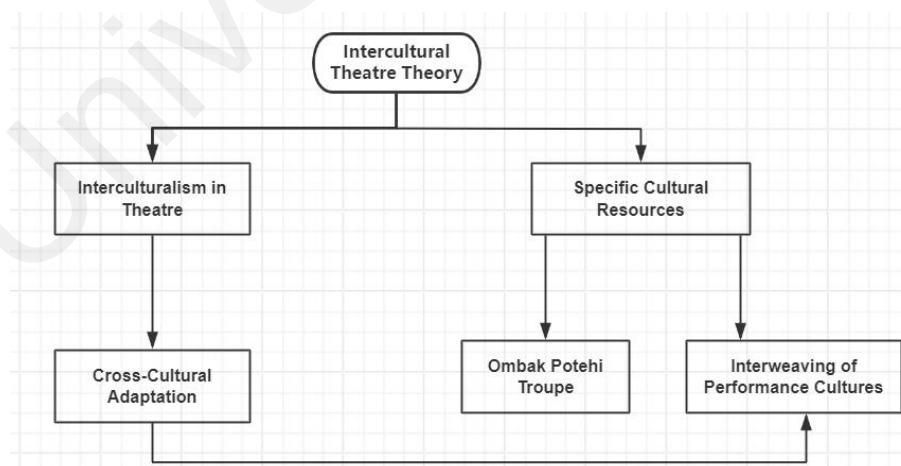


Figure 2.8.1: Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This study investigated the intercultural performance of Chinese Potehi in Malaysia, with a specific focus on the pioneering troupe Ombak Potehi as a case study of the intercultural performance process of Malaysian Potehi. The analysis encompassed various aspects including the troupe's formation history, adaptations, and cultural integration. Through an in-depth exploration of these dimensions, this qualitative study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the process by which Potehi performances inherited intangible cultural heritage arts and adapted to contemporary practices.

This chapter provided an overview of the research methodology employed in this study. It emphasized the use of qualitative research as the foundation, with Ombak Potehi being the chosen case for investigation. The study adopted a qualitative analysis approach, specifically utilizing a case study method to examine the establishment, operations, and productions of the Ombak Potehi troupe. Through the examination of specific cases, it explored the emergence of a novel form of intercultural performance for Potehi in Malaysia. This methodology enabled a

detailed investigation of specific instances and facilitated a comprehensive exploration of cultural dissemination within the context of the troupe's development.

The chapter provided a detailed explanation of the rationale behind the selection of the case study approach. It also outlined the data collection process, which included interviews with key stakeholders, archival research, and observations of rehearsals. Additionally, it discussed the data analysis techniques employed to derive meaningful insights from the collected data. Through rigorous analysis of qualitative data, this study provided a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors influencing the growth and evolution of the Ombak Potehi troupe in Malaysia.

3.2 Case Study

This study employed a case study research method, which was inherently qualitative in nature. Case study represented an important anthropological type, although it differed from anthropology in several key aspects. According to Stake (1995), case study researchers might focus on an individual project, event, or activity, rather than a group itself. While Stake viewed the "case" as the subject of study, some scholars argued that it was an investigative procedure (Merriam, 1998).

Case study, as a research method, was employed to gain a deep and multifaceted understanding of complex issues in real-life situations. It was an established research design widely used across various disciplines, particularly in the social sciences (Crowe, 2011). There had been multiple definitions and interpretations of case study, with Bromley (1986) suggesting that it involved a systematic investigation of an event or a set of related events aimed at describing and explaining the phenomenon of interest. Case study could be utilized to explain, describe, or explore events or phenomena that occurred in everyday contexts. In the context of explanatory case study research, Doolin (1998) highlighted that researchers could effectively employ a critical and reflexive perspective, attempting to consider the broader social and political environments that shaped the case.

The research chose to utilize the case study as a research method for several reasons. First, case studies allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the research subject, providing in-depth insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Second, the chosen case, Ombak Potchi, offered a unique and specific context for studying the intersection of cultural performance and intercultural communication in Malaysia. Third, case studies enabled the examination of complex and contextual factors that influenced the growth and evolution of the Ombak Potchi troupe. By employing a case study approach, this research captured the intricacies and nuances of the subject matter, contributing to a rich and detailed understanding of the cultural transmission phenomenon in the context of the troupe's development.

3.3 Data Collection

The data collection for this study involved both primary and secondary data. The primary data primarily came from observations of Ombak Potehi troupe performances, interviews with the troupe's leaders and performers, as well as observations of their daily rehearsals. On the other hand, secondary data referred to data collected by someone else earlier. In this study, secondary data were gathered from books, journal articles, dissertations, video recordings of the troupe's performances, radio interviews in which the troupe's leaders had participated, and public speeches given by the troupe's leaders. Additionally, video materials related to the troupe were also utilized. The combination of primary and secondary data provided a comprehensive understanding of the case and contributed to a rich analysis of the intercultural performance of Chinese Potehi in Malaysia.

3.3.1 Interview

Interviews served as an essential means for researchers to examine, validate, or challenge the accuracy of their impressions obtained through observations. In fact, Fraenkel and Wallen (1990) described interviews as the most important data collection technique available to qualitative researchers. In qualitative research, it was

preferable to conduct interviews towards the end of the study as they often elicited reflections on the researcher's understanding of the current situation.

Various types of interviews existed, and for this study, semi-structured interviews were primarily employed. Semi-structured interviews offered greater flexibility as they allowed for deeper engagement and questioning based on the interviewee's responses, while still being based on a prepared set of questions.

Due to the different languages familiar to the interviewees, and the researcher's proficiency in Mandarin Chinese, English, and Cantonese, the language of communication during the study was adjusted to each interviewee's language preference. In situations where the Hokkien dialect was required, Mr. Marcus Lim provided translation assistance to facilitate communication.

The study conducted interviews with three key informants: Mr. Marcus Lim (Troupe Leader), Mr. Keith Song (Troupe Manager), and Mr. Tham Win Leong (young performer). A total of eight in-depth interviews were carried out, focusing on five core aspects of the troupe's operations: organizational structure, script development, rehearsal processes, performance execution, and artistic productions.

3.3.2 Nonparticipant Observation

This study adopted a non-participant observation approach, in which the researcher maintained a distanced position without interacting with study participants (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990). The researcher observed the theater troupe's rehearsals from an unobtrusive vantage point. The primary rationale for selecting non-participant observation was to preserve objective detachment, thereby avoiding any potential influence on the troupe's behavioral dynamics and performance processes.

Although the researcher possessed undergraduate training in traditional Chinese puppetry, the current investigation focused specifically on intercultural performance. The researcher recognized that prior exposure to conventional Chinese puppetry performances might introduce observational biases. Consequently, non-participant observation was determined to be the most methodologically appropriate approach for maintaining research objectivity.

Prior to commencing formal observations, the researcher secured permission from the troupe's artistic director and identified relevant rehearsal sessions aligned with the research objectives. Throughout the observation period, the researcher systematically documented the proceedings through written field notes, audio-visual recordings, and photographic evidence of the troupe's rehearsal activities. The observation period for

this research took place from July to September 2024 in Penang, Malaysia. The study observed Ombak Potehi's script discussions, rehearsals, master interviews, school workshops, pre-performance preparations, and backstage activities during performances.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis as the data analysis method. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method that served as a descriptive approach to data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It also proved to be a powerful method for analyzing data, enabling researchers to summarize, highlight key features, and interpret a wide range of collected data. It involved the process of selecting codes and constructing themes, incorporating explanations during the coding process (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

The data collection process involved gathering relevant materials for analysis, including observation records, video clips, photographs, and other textual, visual, or audiovisual resources related to the theater troupe's performances. These data sources were carefully selected to ensure the reliability and completeness of the data. Once the data was collected, it was segmented into analyzable units, which were defined as specific performance segments, character behaviors, dialogue excerpts, or other

elements relevant to the performances. Each unit was then assigned codes or labels to identify keywords and analyze their meanings for subsequent analysis.

3.5 Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is as follows: This study focuses on the intercultural performance of Chinese traditional Potehi in Malaysia, specifically through the case analysis of Ombak Potehi Troupe. As this research has not been conducted in Malaysia before, the scope of the study is limited to the intercultural performances of Potehi by Ombak Potehi Troupe and does not encompass other puppetry groups. Furthermore, the study specifically focuses on the intercultural performance of Potehi and does not represent other forms of Chinese traditional arts in Malaysia. The field research will be conducted for a period of three months, from July to September 2024. This time frame coincides with the annual major production rehearsals and performances of Ombak Potehi Troupe. The time of data collection will be carried out in Penang, Malaysia, where the troupe is located.

3.6 Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this study are the issues and challenges faced by the researcher during the research process, which may impact the results and their interpretation

(Price & Murnan, 2004). Two limitations were identified in this study during the process of sampling data collection. Firstly, the study faces a limitation in terms of dialect. Potehi performances are primarily conducted in Hokkien. The researcher needed to watch live Potehi performances and videos during data collection, which could pose barriers to understanding the plot and dialogues due to this language influence. Therefore, the researcher made efforts to learn Hokkien and received assistance from troupe leader Mr. Lim in translating and explaining the meaning of the dialect during live observations. Subtitles in Mandarin were also included in the video samples. Secondly, this study, during the data sampling process, primarily relied on the perspectives of members of the Ombak Potehi troupe, without comparison to other Potehi troupes or gathering opinions from individuals in different professional backgrounds regarding the innovation of Ombak Potehi performances.

Delimitations essentially are the conscious restrictions set by the authors, focusing on the researcher's definitions, determining their boundaries or limits of work, striving to keep the research aims and objectives achievable (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). This study also has two delimitations: (a) This study focuses on Ombak Potehi as a case study for the intercultural performance of Potehi in Malaysia, limited to a single troupe. Therefore, the generalizability of the research findings may be limited, as other puppetry troupes may also incorporate local elements or have different characteristics and influencing factors. (b) The study is constrained by time and location. The overall duration of the study spans from 2023 to 2024, with field data

collection taking place from July to September 2024. This time limitation may affect the completeness and comprehensiveness of the research findings. Conducting field research within a limited time frame may not capture the full range of performance seasons and other factors that influence the intercultural process. The study's location is in Penang, the home of the Ombak Potehi troupe.

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CHAPTER4 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reports on the data collected during fieldwork conducted in Penang. The data sources included non-participant observation of the research subjects, semi-structured interviews with key members of the troupe, as well as performance recordings provided by the troupe, along with recordings of various activities.

The first part of this chapter describes the background of Ombak Potehi and the troupe's structure to address the first research question. The second and third sections analyze the innovative technologies, rehearsal modes, and cross-cultural elements of Ombak Potehi troupe, particularly focusing on the main repertoire since the establishment of the troupe to answer the second research question. The final part of this chapter discusses the communication methods employed by Ombak Potehi in the current geographical and developmental context to address the third research question.

4.2 Organization of Ombak Potehi Troupe

As a new generation theater troupe in Penang, Malaysia, Ombak Potehi's founding background and operational model differ significantly from traditional methods. In this section, researcher collected information on the troupe's founding history, member organization, and management framework through textual data and field surveys.

4.2.1 Establishment History

Ombak Potehi, also known as "破浪布袋戲" in Chinese, emerged as a result of a series of significant events and collaborative efforts. Before the establishment of Ombak Potehi troupe, the history is extensively discussed in the second chapter's literature review section. Traditional Potehi in Malaysia has given rise to multiple troupes, with Penang being a primary hub, yet some face developmental constraints, such as the cessation of operations by the Beng Geok Hong Palm Troupe. Malaysian Potehi performers encounter challenges due to aging, rendering on-stage performances less viable, leading them to transition to puppet manipulation behind the scenes to prolong their careers in the performing arts. However, these performers often rely on multiple jobs for sustenance, lacking higher education which hinders their access to government or office positions, thus many engage in alternative

occupations like tailoring, factory work, fishing, or vending. This encapsulates the current state of Potehi among Chinese immigrants in Malaysia over the past century (Tan, 1981).

In 2013, during the Heritage Celebration in George Town, Penang, four traditional puppetry troupes were invited to showcase their performances. At that time, Malaysian contemporary artist Mr. Liew Kung Yu, while watching the traditional Potehi performances, observed that many of the costumes worn by the veteran troupes' puppets were damaged. This realization immediately highlighted the necessity for protection and restoration, leading to his proposal to seek funding to send representatives abroad to learn professional techniques. Repairing the puppet costumes is indeed an effective preservation measure, similar to the restoration of cultural artifacts. However, visual documentation is an even more powerful way to protect history. Visual documentation can be defined as a collection or repository of visual materials, such as photographs, films, videos, artworks, and other visual forms that hold historical, cultural, or artistic significance. These archives are valuable resources for preserving and recording visual history, providing visual narratives of past events, people, places, and objects. The visual representation offers a tangible connection to the past, allowing us to witness moments that are difficult to express through words alone. Images capture details, facial expressions, and emotions, enabling a more vivid and direct understanding of the historical context (Frank & Luz, 1924).

As a result, Tan Sooi Beng from USM (University of Science Malaysia) proposed a more profound suggestion. Tan advocated for comprehensive documentation of the rich history spanning several decades or even centuries of these puppet troupes through written and visual records. This approach would not only ensure the preservation of traditional puppetry but also provide valuable insights into the cultural heritage and artistic evolution of these troupes. Inspired by Tan's vision, a team called "Kar-wan POTEHI 布袋戏之友" was established under her leadership the following year. The team consisted of dedicated researcher who closely collaborated with Mr. Liew Kung Yu. Their task was to systematically document the practices, techniques, and stories of the remaining four puppet troupes in Penang.

The team embarked on an extensive research and documentation journey, directly engaging with puppeteers and immersing themselves in the cultural environment of Potehi. They conducted interviews with experienced practitioners, observed rehearsals and performances, and meticulously documented the intricate details of the puppetry tradition. Through their efforts, a comprehensive knowledge archive was established, covering the historical development, performance techniques, repertoire, and cultural significance of these puppet troupes. The documentation process involved not only written records but also visual materials such as photographs, videos, and audio recordings. These multidimensional records captured the essence of the performances, the craftsmanship of the puppets, and the emotions conveyed by the puppeteers.

Eventually, the research team compiled the collected materials into a book titled "Potehi Glove Puppet Theatre of Penang: An Evolving Heritage (2017)." These documents not only ensured the preservation of traditional practices but also provided a platform for further research and exploration. They revealed the dynamic nature of Potehi, showcasing its adaptability and resilience in the face of changing times while emphasizing the importance of cultural heritage preservation.

In early 2015, Tan Sooi Beng, under the name of the mother troupe Ombak-Ombak ART Studio, gathered a group of young individuals. After a rigorous selection process, they decided to seek guidance from the century-old Beng Geok Hong Palm Troupe. Simultaneously, the current troupe leader, Mr. Marcus Lim, was recommended to Tan by members of Kar-wan POTEHI. He became a bridge between Beng Geok Hong Palm Troupe and the younger generation, facilitating communication and understanding. Under the guidance of Beng Geok Hong Palm Troupe and Mr. Marcus Lim, the young enthusiasts embarked on a journey of learning and preservation. They followed the traditional teaching methods of oral transmission and personal mentorship, meticulously organizing, adapting, and creating traditional repertoire. This process involved studying the intricate movements, gestures, and vocal techniques of experienced puppeteers while injecting new vitality into the performances.

Following its debut performance in June of the same year, "Wayang Time" received high praise from various sectors, establishing a strong foundation for the troupe. Subsequently, a series of captivating performances were held in Balik Pulau and Bangkok, further enhancing their reputation. Recognizing the need for an official name, troupe leader Mr. Marcus Lim officially named it Ombak POTEHI in 2017, with the Chinese name "破浪布袋戲" (Pò Làng Bù Dài Xì).

The chosen name not only expressed gratitude towards the parent troupe but also encapsulated the aspiration for the troupe to overcome challenges and forge new paths. It symbolized the spirit of "riding the waves" and the hope that Ombak POTEHI would continuously innovate while preserving the traditional art form.

The name Ombak POTEHI carries profound significance. "Ombak" represents the surging waves, signifying the troupe's determination to venture into uncharted territories and break new ground. It reflects their willingness to embrace change and adapt to the evolving cultural landscape. "POTEHI," derived from the term "布袋戲" (Bù Dài Xì), refers to glove puppetry, acknowledging the roots and traditions from which the troupe emerged.

4.2.2 Core Members of Ombak Potehi

As Ombak Potehi is a self-organized troupe, they usually recruit part-time actors and musicians for training and rehearsals before performances. The troupe consists of a core group of five members who are responsible for the day-to-day operations and external development of the troupe.

Marcus Lim (Troupe Leader)

Mr. Marcus Lim, a dedicated individual with a passion for the arts, serves as the leader of Ombak Potehi. Alongside his role as a Purchasing Department Supervisor, Mr. Marcus Lim has been an integral part of the troupe since 2015. Within Ombak, he takes on multiple responsibilities, including those of a playwright, director, and puppeteer. Marcus's journey in the performing arts began in 2010 when he joined the community organization Arts-Ed, immersing himself in various cultural crafts and culinary arts. Prior to Ombak, he actively participated in performances at the Penang Chao Art Gallery, showcasing his talent in Chao Opera and Teochew Puppetry. Additionally, Marcus has been involved in stage plays, specializing in elderly male roles, and has held significant positions within religious organizations. His diverse background and dedication make him a vital member of Ombak Potehi, contributing to its daily operations and external development.

Keith Song (Troupe Manager)

Mr. Keith Song, a versatile individual with a strong academic background, joined Ombak Potehi in 2023. Holding a Bachelor's Degree in Art & Social Sciences,

majoring in Chinese Studies and East Asian Studies from the University of Malaya, Mr. Keith Song brings a wealth of knowledge to the troupe. His role within Ombak involves brand management and content planning, utilizing his skills in strategic planning and creative development. Prior to his involvement with Ombak, Mr. Keith Song gained experience in various fields. He worked as a part-time teacher in secondary schools and private high schools, showcasing his passion for education. As a freelance producer, he immersed himself in photography and videography projects, honing his skills in visual storytelling. Mr. Keith Song also managed a thematic photography studio in Kuala Lumpur for seven years, where he developed branding strategies and content planning for photographers. Additionally, he served as a moderator for makeup training courses in a renowned Makeup Academy in Kuala Lumpur. In his capacity as a Chinese Astrologist, Mr. Keith Song provides fortune reading services and life planning advice based on Chinese astrology readings. With his diverse background and expertise, Keith contributes to the growth and success of Ombak Potehi.

Kang Su Kheng (Musical Director)

Ms. Kang Su Kheng, a highly skilled and versatile musician, has been a member of Ombak Potehi since 2015. With a Master's Degree in Collaborative Piano, she brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the troupe. Ms. Kang's role has evolved over the years, starting as a gong player and currently serving as a drummer and composer for Ombak. Prior to joining Ombak, she held various positions in different music

groups and genres. She worked as a Chinese drums coach in secondary schools, imparting her knowledge and skills to young learners. Additionally, Ms. Kang served as an instructor and performer of Malay traditional music, including gamelan and asli. Her proficiency in classical piano also led her to work as a piano instructor, nurturing the talents of aspiring pianists. Furthermore, she showcased her creativity as a composer for dance groups and theater productions. Ms. Kang's diverse experiences and passion for music greatly contribute to the artistic development of Ombak Potehi.

Germaine Chooi (Music Composition)

Ms. Germaine Chooi is a dedicated professional with a strong background in the pharmacy field. She joined Ombak Potehi in 2023. Ms. Chooi holds a diploma in Pharmacy and an MBA degree. Within Ombak, she serves as a musician and is responsible for handling internal affairs, contributing to the overall functioning of the group. Prior to joining Ombak, she gained valuable experience in various musical endeavors. She was a member of the Hui Yin Seh Chinese Orchestra, the Chao Art Gallery Band, and the LoFi Shanghai Band, showcasing her musical talent and versatility.

Jasniza Johari (Musician)

Ms. Jasniza Johari, an accomplished professional in the field of inclusive education, joined Ombak Potehi around 2015 or 2016. With a Bachelor's degree in Psychology from HELP University and an ongoing Postgraduate Certificate in Autism Studies

from Griffith University, she brings a wealth of knowledge and expertise to her role. Within Ombak, Ms. Johari initially started as a puppeteer and later transitioned to narrating characters. She also explored her musical talents by playing percussion. Additionally, she has contributed to the creative aspects of the troupe, including lyrics-writing and script-writing. Prior to joining Ombak, Ms. Johari worked extensively in teaching children, adolescents, and young adults with developmental differences in various settings, such as early intervention and vocational training. Her involvement in community-based performing arts projects since 2007, under the guidance of Prof Tan Sooi Beng and organizations like arts-ed and Ombak2 Arts Studio, introduced her to the world of Potehi. Ms. Johari's diverse experiences and commitment to inclusive education enhance the artistic and inclusive aspects of Ombak Potehi.

4.2.3 Organization Structure

The organizational structure and management approach of Ombak Potehi differ significantly from traditional theatre companies. In most theatre companies, the troupe leader serves as the central figure, leading the affairs of the company. However, in Ombak Potehi Theatre Company, the core is not a person but rather the central concept of "Ombak Potehi" itself. As analyzed in the previous sections regarding the establishment of the troupe, it was created by Prof Tan to preserve the art of potehi

and nurtured by young individuals. After the conclusion of this research, this group of young individuals continues to sustain the troupe and manages it with innovative ideas. The process of theatrical production is a collaborative creative process, distinctly reflected in the community composed of theatre practitioners and their audience. The theatrical context holds value not only for the directors but also for the entire production team. The activities of theatre involve the synergy among individuals within a group, with their collaborative creations influenced by the environment to which they belong (Bickerstaff, 2011).

At the center of Ombak Potehi Theatre Company is the core team, consisting of Tan as the company's advisor and two experienced artists serving as mentors. Leading the troupe is Mr. Lim, the troupe leader. The organizational structure extends upwards to include the advisory role of Chen and downwards to three main departments: Puppetry and Skill Training, Housekeeping and Administration and Brand Management and Administrative Planning. Additionally, two specialized departments, namely Music and Sound Technology, and Malay Language Content Translation and Creation, branch out from the main departments. Tan, as the troupe's advisor, provides guidance based on his expertise and experience in the field. The mentor artists play a crucial role in passing on traditional knowledge to the young performers, ensuring the preservation of Potehi puppetry while encouraging innovation. Mr. Lim, as the troupe leader, oversees the overall operations of the company and ensures effective coordination among the departments.

The Puppetry and Skill Training department focuses on honing the performers' artistic skills and enhancing their understanding of Potehi puppetry techniques. The Housekeeping and Administration department handles the logistical aspects, such as scheduling, finance, and human resources. The Brand Management and Administrative Planning department is responsible for developing strategies to promote Ombak Potehi and plan future performances. The Music and Sound Technology department works on creating appropriate soundscapes and music to complement the puppetry, while the Malay Language Content Translation and Creation department ensures cultural authenticity by providing translations and creating content in the local language (see Fig.). Ombak Potehi Troupe's organizational structure fosters collaboration and innovation. The mentorship program enables the exchange of knowledge between experienced artists and young learners, facilitating the evolution of Potehi puppetry performances. The interdepartmental collaboration ensures a seamless flow of information and ideas, allowing for the integration of diverse skills and perspectives in the creative process.



Figure 4.2.1: Management of Ombak Potehi (Provided by Ombak Potehi)

4.3 The Cultural Space of Ombak Potehi Performances

4.3.1 Folk Cultural Space

Potehi, as a stage performance art deeply rooted among the general public, relies on a diverse range of folk activities and cultural spaces that embody these folk activities for its exhibition and performance. The term "cultural space" can also be referred to as "cultural venue." According to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the anthropological concept of "cultural venue" is defined as a place where folk and traditional cultural activities are concentrated, but it is also defined as a specific period of time characterized by a particular event, the

existence of which depends on the presence of cultural activities conducted in a traditional manner (Lazaro Ortiz & Jimenez de Madariaga, 2022). It is closely linked to people's lives and their cultural sentiments. The performance of Potehi relies on specific folk traditions and is an integral part of these activities. Here is a compilation of all the performances and their corresponding venues since the establishment of Ombak Potehi.

Years	Place	Repertoire	Space
2015.07	George Town, Penang	The journey reveals the strength of the horse - Heaven bestows a fortuitous union	Outdoor, Armenian Street
2015.08	Butterworth, Penang		Outdoor, Jln Jeti Lama
2015.11	Bangkok		Outdoor
2015.11	George Town, Penang		Outdoor, Victoria St.
2015.12	Penang Balik Pulau		Outdoor Balik Pulau Market
2016.07	George Town, Penang	Guanyin Adopts the Red Child	Outdoor, Esplande
2016.08	Butterworth, Penang		Outdoor, Jln Jeti Lama

2017.07	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Outdoor , Penang Youth Center
			Outdoor , Musium Penang (Mascalister)
2017.08	Butterworth, Penang		Outdoor, Jln Jeti Lama
2017.10	Kuala Lumpur		Indoor, Wisma MCA KL
2017.11	George Town, Penang	Guanyin Adopts the Red Child&Kisah Pulau Pinang	Indoor, Komtar Ballroom
2017.11	Tokyo, Japan		Indoor, Tokyo Metropolitan Theater Exhibition Hall, Tokyo Taisho University, Café
2018.08	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Indoor , Penang House of Music
2018.11	Taiwan, China		Outdoor
2019.02	Butterworth, Penang		Indoor , Sunway Carnival Mall

2019.02	George Town, Penang	The Second Sino-Japanese War and Li Dianmo	Indoor, Li's Ancestral Hall
2019.07	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Outdoor, Armenian Street
2020.07	George Town, Penang		Indoor, Penang House of Music
2020.12	penang	The Oath of the Peach Garden	Online
2021.11		Go home for the New Year	
2022.07	George Town, Penang	Potehi: Han. Libao	Outdoor Grass
2023.05		Potehi: Han. Libao	Penang Old Town Association
2023.05		Chance Encounter of Fate	Outdoor, COEX
2023.07		Sequel to Journey to the West	Indoor, COEX Tangga
2023.07		The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba	Indoor , Majestic Theatre

2023.08	Sarawak, Kuching	Daily Life of Musium Staffs	Indoor , Riverside Majestic Hotel
2023.09	George Town, Penang	Potehi: Han. Libao	Outdoor,COEX
2023.10	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Ourdoor,COEX
2024.02	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Ourdoor,COEX
2024.03	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Ourdoor,COEX
2024.03	Penang	The Real Monkey King	Indoor, Dewan Sri Pinang
2024.04	Taiwan, China	Crossing the Ocean	Outdoor,Taichung Ministry of Culture Cultural Assets Park
2024.05	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Indoor, Dewan Sri Pinang
2024.05	George Town, Penang	Kisah Pulau Pinang	Indoor,USM Dewan Tuanku Syed Putra

Table 4.3.1 Performance Records

From the aforementioned table, it can be observed that Ombak Potehi's performance venues are highly diverse, showcasing innovation while building upon tradition. During the initial two years of the theater troupe's establishment, most of the performances were conducted outdoors, primarily in temples and ancestral halls, which were the traditional settings for specific Potehi performances. To some extent, these venues carried the spiritual aspirations and values of the community. Temples serve as unique places for folk beliefs, religious rituals, and activities. According to the Cihai dictionary (1947), "folk beliefs" refer to the concepts, beliefs, or behaviors widely circulated or propagated in everyday life, particularly the reverence and admiration towards certain spiritual concepts or tangible objects. This psychological and behavioral manifestation is characterized by common folk beliefs and general superstitions. Another key term, "ancestor worship," is associated with the traditional Chinese concept of "clan." It involves the participation of the entire clan during major festivals, life rituals, and ancestral worship activities (Lakos, 2010) . The performance of Potehi in ancestral halls represents a vivid expression of the "ancestor worship" activities conducted at the clan level, reflecting people's nostalgia and reverence for their deceased ancestors.

Following that, the Ombak Potehi theater troupe transitioned to indoor performances, taking place in theaters, auditoriums, and other similar venues. During the COVID-19

pandemic, the troupe also adapted to the modern society by embracing online performances, showcasing their ability to adapt to the changing times. This shift to indoor and virtual performances reflects the evolving nature of the art form and its response to societal challenges. This adaptation to modernization and utilization of technology allows for greater accessibility and extends the reach of Ombak Potehi beyond physical boundaries.

4.3.2 The Construction of the Potehi Spectator-Performer Relationship

The concept of "spectator-performer relationship" involves the interaction between the audience and the actors, particularly the stimulation and influence of the audience's desire for the actors' performance. This concept encompasses two aspects: the psychological interaction between the audience and the actors, and the behavioral interaction between them. (Li, 2013) The spectator-performer relationship includes both narrow and broad dimensions. In the narrow sense, it refers to the interaction between actors and the audience during theatrical performances, while in the broad sense, it encompasses the interaction between creators and spectators throughout the entire process of theatrical creation. The creative team consists of playwrights, directors, stage designers, and actors, who collaborate to create the theatrical environment. The spectators include live audiences and the general public, whose

attention and feedback drive the regeneration of theatrical meaning and facilitate a broader exchange of spectatorship within society. (Zhong, 2015)

The different stage structures can influence the audience-performer relationship. Here, they are classified into three categories: semi-open stage structure, fully enclosed stage structure, and fully open stage structure.

Firstly, the fully enclosed stage structure refers to the original mirror-like stage, consisting of a simple and lightweight set with a table, two chairs, and assumed imaginary scenery such as cloth cities and flag cars. In the traditional Potehi puppetry, which features 8-inch puppets, a "straight table" of about 6 feet in length is used, with vertical curtains placed on the left and right sides for "entrance" and "exit." The main and supporting puppeteers sit on long benches behind the curtains, performing in a small designated area. (Gao, 2009) In this fully enclosed stage, the audience can only see the puppets and cannot see the performers behind the screen. However, since these performances usually take place in bustling markets and festive events, the audience's attention is not solely focused on the puppets but can be diverted by the surrounding environment. It should be noted that the initial purpose of this performance style was not solely for artistic appreciation or immersing the audience in the world of theater but rather to serve as entertainment for "celebrations, birthdays, and religious rituals."



Figure 4.3.1: Fully Enclosed Stage Structure (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2017)

Afterward, when Potehi enters the theater or auditorium for performance, it belongs to a semi-open stage structure. This type of stage structure is suitable for setting up temporary Potehi stages on the theater's stage. In the theater, the Potehi stage may have a background scenery or stage setup, but the audience can still view the performance from the front or sides. The stage may have boundaries or curtains, but it is not completely enclosed, allowing the audience to see the actors and props on the stage. This semi-open stage structure retains a certain level of visual contact and interaction, enabling the audience to better engage in the performance. However, it is important to note that this form differs from the realism of Western theater. Potehi itself is an art form with metaphorical elements, and the representation of puppets and the environment is inherently virtual (Torop, 1999). The concept of the "fourth wall" that separates the audience and actors is almost nonexistent in puppet theater. Through a combination of reality and illusion and the expressive technique of vivid

performance, puppetry maximizes the realism, subtlety, and emotional expression, captivating the audience and immersing them in the illusion created by the assumed dramatic situations (Ye, 2019) . This sense of involvement enhances the understanding and appreciation of the content of the puppetry performance. In puppet theater performances, the ultimate goal is to convey the story to the audience through performance. The audience cannot directly communicate face-to-face with the puppeteers (Gu, 2014) . The puppets and the entire stage setup serve as both the messages conveyed by the performers and the medium of communication between the puppeteers and the audience. In this sense, the distance between the puppets and the audience is naturally reduced. The emotions and expressions of the puppets are conveyed through body language, and the smaller size of the puppets also influences the viewing effect corresponding to the distance.



Figure 4.3.2: Semi-Open Stage Structure (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2024)

The last type of stage structure is the fully open stage, which is a new experiment in Ombak Potehi. In this structure, the performers walk directly out from behind the backdrop, fully exposed to the audience while manipulating the puppets. The initial presentation of the fully open stage is the relationship between "performance" and "observation." The puppeteers are aware that they are manipulating the characters and being observed by the audience, and the audience is aware that they are watching a puppet show controlled by the puppeteers.



Figure 4.3.3: Fully Open Stage (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2023)

In traditional human theater performances, the stage is a performance space before or after the actors' entrance or exit. When the actors are on stage, it serves as the location for the character's actions, and the functionality of the stage does not overlap within the same timeframe (Huston, 1992). However, the fully open stage of Potehi puppets

presents a contradiction. It is both the scene where the puppet characters' actions take place and the scene where the actors perform. Therefore, the audience, while watching the theatrical performance, is aware of the assumed nature of puppetry and does not fully immerse themselves in the various situations faced by the puppets. Instead, they approach it with a critical and rational attitude detached from the plot. This creates a distance between the audience and the puppet characters. However, at the same time, it brings the audience closer to the performers. Like the puppeteers, the audience is aware that the stage space is both the location of actions and the place of performance. They share a common understanding of the "performance-observation" relationship in the stage space. The simplified puppetry stage allows the audience's attention to be focused on the puppets and the performers. They can experience the vivid and delicate art of Potehi and appreciate the puppeteer's impressive manipulation skills, rich facial expressions, and synchronized body language with the puppets. As a result, the audience follows the puppeteer's manipulation to understand the plot and provides feedback on the technical or challenging movements of the puppeteer's manipulation. While the puppeteer needs to align their actions and expressions with the puppet characters during the performance, they can also receive feedback from the audience, which influences their manipulative performance. With enthusiastic audience responses, the puppeteer's confidence grows during the performance. In this strong interaction between the audience and the puppeteers, the audience becomes closer to the performers.

4.4 Ombak Potehi's Rehearsals and Performances

During the field research, the researcher conducted non-participant observation of Ombak Potehi's rehearsal process, focusing on the operational methods during rehearsals and the teaching techniques employed by the troupe members. Subsequently, researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the troupe leader and the scriptwriter, which provided a clearer understanding of each stage of the rehearsal process. These interviews facilitated the analysis of the troupe's innovative approach in comparison to traditional Potehi troupes. Additionally, the researcher closely followed Ombak Potehi during their formal performances, observing the entire journey. The analysis of the troupe's rehearsals primarily revolves around script creation, the rehearsal process itself, and the points of innovation.

4.4.1 Rehearsal Mode

In contrast to traditional Potehi troupes, Ombak Potehi mainly uses original scripts that have not been circulated in the world and are all created by the troupe itself. In traditional Potehi troupes, the scripts used are primarily derived from the original and unaltered manuscripts passed down from previous generations. The script creation process of Ombak Potehi involves a collaborative effort among the troupe members. During the interview, it was revealed that the script is collectively created, with

contributions from multiple individuals. The troupe leader primarily handles the writing aspect, particularly the lyrics and dialogues, while incorporating the ideas shared by other members.

For example, the play "Kisah Pulau Pinang," which is the most frequently performed production in the troupe, has a different story background compared to traditional Potehi historical hero tales. The story is set in the land of Penang, and the troupe members conducted real field research to explore Penang Island and gain a deep understanding of its historical events and overall state at the time. This involved visiting communities, consulting archival materials, and seeking advice from local elders. The troupe combined these historical resources to create characters and develop the plot. This particular example highlights the troupe's incorporation of authentic elements into the script, aiming to provide a true reflection of the culture and historical background surrounding Penang Island. Furthermore, the script creation process of this play demonstrates a multidimensional approach to storytelling, involving cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions of learning, as mentioned by Spelt, Luning, van Boekel, and Mulder (2017). By integrating personal experiences, field research, and community engagement, the play "Kisah Pulau Pinang" enriches the narrative with authenticity and cultural depth. By drawing on real-life observations and knowledge, the troupe members are able to infuse a deeper understanding of the theme into the play. The active sharing of ideas and contributions

from the troupe members foster a collaborative environment where creativity and cultural sensitivity merge (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 15 July 2024).

Furthermore, the theater troupe's approach to script creation emphasizes specialization and collaboration, emphasizing professionalism and cooperation. In their latest production, 'A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea,' they collaborated with performers from Taiwan, China. The collaboration specifically involved the incorporation of traditional Taiwanese chant singing, with the primary responsibility for original design entrusted to professional performers from Taiwan. The troupe provided their insights and desired concepts, while the professional artists contributed their specialized knowledge in chant singing to design and create specific segments. This collaborative approach allows for a deep integration of diverse artistic perspectives and promotes dynamic synergy in the script creation process. The script will ultimately be reviewed and refined by a member named Keith, who has an academic background in literature. This ensures that the script aligns with literary standards and maintains the intended essence of the creation (Keith Song, personal communication, 15 July 2024).



Figure 4.4.1: Discuss the script (Photo by the Researcher)

The rehearsal process of Ombak Potehi troupe follows a systematic approach, starting from the initial formation of the team, casting, and then the actual rehearsals. Ombak Potehi employs a scientific thinking model to coordinate and mobilize its members, while also adhering to a balanced approach of individualized instruction and standardized teaching in its guidance process.

Firstly, after the script is finalized, Ombak Potehi divides the actors into two groups for rehearsals. One group consists of puppetry and dialogue coaches, while the other group comprises musicians. The puppetry and dialogue coaches begin by studying and expressing the emotions of their respective characters based on the assigned roles in the script. They engage in discussions with the director to explore how to portray

the characteristics and emotions of their roles. Additionally, if there are characters requiring specific dialects, the coaches also work on pronunciation and recording for memorization purposes.

As for the musicians, they train in music and emotional expression according to the instructions of the troupe leader to complement the dialogue performances. The coordination between music and dialogue is an essential aspect of Ombak Potehi's rehearsal process. The dialogue coaches require musical accompaniment during their performances, so they collaborate with the musicians to discuss the selection of music for each scenario. They contemplate whether to use traditional opera music or folk music, as well as the rhythm of the music and the arrangement of transitions. The musicians create music scores and train together with the dialogue coaches for synchronization.

In addition to group rehearsals, Ombak Potehi also emphasizes individualized instruction. The troupe leader customizes the roles and script modifications based on the characteristics and abilities of each actor to better showcase their potential. This tailored approach aligns with the unique traits of the actors and enhances their integration with the characters. For example, as mentioned in the data collection, one character was originally portrayed as a Penang Chinese from Fujian, but the director changed the character's origin to Guangdong to allow the actor to perform in Cantonese, better suiting the local historical context.

Furthermore, Ombak Potehi implements standardized teaching, ensuring consistent training in basic movements and postures. The actors undergo collective training in fundamental skills, including basic puppet movements and specific postures. Different characters have different posture requirements, and this standardized teaching ensures that the actors possess consistent foundational skills in their performances. These actors do not have formal contracts with the troupe but participate based on their passion and interest in traditional Potehi performances. Most of the young actors start with no prior experience and grow into performers capable of captivating audiences. In guiding and teaching young actors, the troupe leader has employed some unconventional methods compared to traditional theater troupes. One aspect involves a unique approach to pronunciation and delivery of lines. Young actors may be more accustomed to expressing themselves in Chinese, where Mandarin has only four tones, while dialects like Hokkien may have seven or more tones and variations, making it challenging for them to adapt their tongues (Chang & Hsieh, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to demonstrate proper mouth shape and pronunciation through practical examples (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 15 July 2024).

For instance, exaggerated mouth shape demonstrations have proven highly beneficial for young actors. Sometimes, their inaccuracies in pronunciation stem from not opening their mouths wide enough, resulting in sounds that differ from the intended ones. To address this, the troupe leader showcases exaggerated mouth shapes when

producing specific sounds, allowing the actors to observe and mimic them. This approach extends to the manipulation techniques used in puppetry as well, where efforts are made to explore more effective guidance methods. In traditional puppet manipulation instruction, a demonstration is presented, and the actors then practice on their own based on their understanding. However, Ombak Potehi's instructional approach is more scientifically grounded and incorporates new methods. It involves breaking down the performance actions and skills into smaller components, which proves beneficial for teaching. For example, when a puppet needs to turn around, the troupe leader guides the actors to fold their fingers, press down on the puppet's head, and rotate it with their thumbs to help them accomplish the maneuver (Tham Win Leong, personal communication, 15 July 2024).



Figure 4.4.2: The leader guides the puppeteering (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2016)



Figure 4.4.3: Troupe photo after rehearsal (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2016)

By examining the rehearsal and creative processes of the Ombak Potehi troupe, it is evident that its innovative and forward-looking approach, serving as an effective method for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, warrants a detailed analysis of its uniqueness. The Ombak Potehi troupe stands out from traditional theater troupes with its notable innovations in script creation and rehearsal methods. While traditional troupes often adhere to historical stories such as *Fan Li Hua* and *Da Ming Fu*, which have become enduring classics, Ombak Potehi explores two forms of original script creation. First, it adapts classic scripts to make them more relevant to contemporary audiences. Second, it draws inspiration from the local culture and customs of Penang, using the region as a backdrop for creating engaging narratives.

This article examines the distinctive features and developments in script creation and

rehearsal methods employed by Ombak Potehi compared to traditional theater troupes.

Traditional theater troupes predominantly rely on orally transmitting their knowledge, with students and young performers observing the performances of experienced artists and deciphering the essentials of movement and acting techniques on their own (Shen, 2007). This teaching model is prevalent among traditional troupes due to their long-standing practices and the expertise developed by experienced artists over the years. However, Ombak Potehi incorporates new pedagogical approaches by deconstructing movements and employing systematic and structured methods to facilitate faster comprehension among amateur performers. By adapting classic scripts, Ombak Potehi bridges the gap between traditional narratives and contemporary storytelling. It reinterprets well-known stories, infusing them with current themes and perspectives. This approach not only makes the performances more accessible and appealing to a wider audience but also allows the troupe to explore social, cultural, and political issues relevant to present context.

In contrast to traditional troupes like Beng Geok Hong Palm Troupe, which focus on finding actors suitable for predetermined roles, Ombak Potehi prioritizes a tailor-made teaching approach. Through the collection of interview data, it has been observed that traditional Potehi troupes in Penang, both historical and contemporary, predominantly adhere to inherited scripts. Due to the fixed nature of these scripts, traditional troupes exhibit limited flexibility in casting decisions. Prior to commencing rehearsals,

directors within these troupes typically assign roles based on the available members, often leading to instances where actors may not be ideally suited to their roles. This necessitates additional training time or adjustments in casting arrangements (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 15 July 2024).

In contrast, Ombak Potehi's adaptable scripts offer a higher degree of flexibility, allowing the troupe to shape character traits in accordance with the individual strengths and characteristics of the actors. This personalized approach not only enhances the capabilities of the performers but also brings forth their unique talents, resulting in more authentic and captivating portrayals.

Furthermore, Ombak Potehi's rehearsal methods differ from conventional approaches. Moving beyond reliance on observation and imitation alone, the troupe employs innovative training techniques. By breaking down complex movements and sequences into smaller, more manageable components, they enable a more thorough grasp of the craft and accelerate the learning process for amateur performers.

Ombak Potehi's artistic approach differs from conventional theater practices through its emphasis on understanding contemporary audience expectations. This dual perspective considers both spectators' reception and performers' delivery. By incorporating audience feedback and preferences, the troupe develops performances that establish stronger engagement with viewers. The company also trains performers

to be more attuned to audience responses, adjusting their expressions and delivery accordingly. This recipient-focused methodology helps create a more interactive theatrical environment that reduces the conventional separation between performers and spectators. Ombak Potehi employs innovative narrative strategies, combining multimedia components and participatory features to enhance audience involvement. These adaptations have introduced fresh possibilities for traditional performance while maintaining cultural continuity, demonstrating how established art forms can evolve to remain relevant.

Looking back at the preparatory rehearsal stage of the Ombak Potehi theater troupe, where performers from different cultural backgrounds come together, the presence of diverse ideas and concepts permeates the core of the rehearsal process. This resembles implicit intercultural theater, which refers to forms of performance or composition that do not explicitly exhibit intercultural elements on the surface but embody deep-seated intercultural conflicts, dialogues, or fusions within their essence. Its emergence stems from the nature of theater and is driven by playwrights' profound reflections on intercultural issues and their pursuit of high aesthetic value (Wang, 2020) . The core value of implicit intercultural theater lies in its ability to go beyond simply presenting the "mixing of different cultural elements" for the audience's appreciation. Instead, it explores a possible world from an intercultural perspective, raising questions and proposing approaches to challenges that humanity may face. It does not seek to create a new theatrical form through the interweaving of performance

cultures but rather strikes at the inner world of modern individuals through implicit cultural conflicts or oppositions. It reconstructs the structure of modern personalities through inherent aesthetic appeal (Wang, 2020).

The rehearsal processes of Ombak Potehi reveal complex intercultural dynamics as performers navigate distinct cultural frameworks that inform their artistic decisions. While homogeneous cultural backgrounds typically foster unified interpretations, the troupe's deliberate inclusion of practitioners from Chinese and Malay traditions has illuminated significant creative negotiations. These emerge particularly when adapting narratives based on historical accounts of Chinese migrants settling in Penang, where interpretive conflicts arise regarding: (1) divergent understandings of protagonists' psychological motivations, (2) variations in dramatic pacing rooted in cultural narrative traditions, and (3) contrasting approaches to presentational style and emotional expression. This intercultural negotiation aligns with Gallagher's (2016) conceptualization of theater as fundamentally dialogic. The troupe's methodology systematically addresses these cultural intersections through three primary dimensions: first, in textual adaptation where cultural signification requires mediation; second, in physical staging where embodied traditions converge; and third, in presentational modes where performative conventions interact. Their segmented rehearsal technique - which isolates cultural elements before strategic reintegration - provides an analytical framework for these encounters, enabling potential frictions to become sources of artistic innovation rather than obstacles. This processual approach

demonstrates how traditional forms can evolve through structured intercultural engagement while maintaining narrative and performative integrity.

4.4.2 Performance Process

The researcher conducted non-participatory observations, assuming the role of an observer, to closely document and experience the fundamental operations and processes of Ombak Potehi troupe during their performances. In recent years, the troupe's performances have increasingly shifted towards indoor venues, diverging from the traditional Potehi street performances associated with temple festivals, which were primarily aimed at deity worship. Presently, the troupe performs in diverse locations such as school auditoriums, theaters, art festivals, museums, and even restaurants, with the goal of reaching out to audiences and tourists alike.

During this particular performance, set in a grand banquet hall with a distinctly British architectural style, Ombak Potehi troupe showcased their act as the opening program, enlivening the atmosphere for the attending audience. The fusion of Potehi, rich in Chinese aesthetics, with the sounds of gongs and drums in a Western-style setting created a captivating juxtaposition.

Approximately three hours before the start of the performance, the troupe leader would arrive at the studio to organize the necessary tools for the show. Whenever performing within Malaysia, the troupe leader would dismantle the frame stage and bring it along. They carefully counted the cloth puppets and performance props required for the specific show. As members of Ombak Potehi were all amateur enthusiasts of Potehi and did not have formal contracts with the troupe, and most of them had other primary occupations, these preparations were primarily undertaken by the troupe leader. The picture below shows the props that the group leader needs to use to prepare for the performance in the studio.



Figure 4.4.4: The leader arranges the props (Photo by the Researcher)

Upon arriving at the performance venue, the troupe leader immediately commenced the meticulous setup of the Potehi performance stage. These wooden panels were

conveniently designed for easy assembly and mobility, specifically tailored for the troupe's performances in various locations. Through close observation, the Potehi performance stage resembled a bookshelf, with the actors positioned behind it. The stage consisted of three tiers of wooden boards, with the first and second tiers used to hold the puppets and props relevant to the storyline, while the topmost tier served as the platform for showcasing the puppets. The entire stage was enclosed by black curtains. In fact, since the establishment of the troupe, the outdoor performance stages had initially adopted Beng Geok Hong's design, featuring vibrant yellow curtains. However, with further improvements, Ombak Potehi's performances now incorporated projected curtains. In addition to depicting the story backgrounds, the projected curtains also displayed the lines of the puppet characters, which were presented in three languages: English, Chinese, and Malay. This multilingual approach aimed to facilitate understanding for audiences with different native languages, while the use of black curtains helped focus the audience's attention.

The troupe leader's meticulous preparation and the innovative use of projected curtains exemplify Ombak Potehi's commitment to enhancing the visual and linguistic aspects of their performances. The custom-designed wooden panels enable quick and efficient setup, allowing the troupe to adapt to diverse performance venues. The tiered structure of the stage optimizes the arrangement of puppets and props, ensuring smooth transitions and seamless storytelling. The incorporation of projected curtains adds a dynamic element to the performances, presenting both visual and textual

information to enhance audience engagement. The use of multiple languages reflects the troupe's inclusivity, catering to a wider audience base and facilitating intercultural understanding. The deliberate choice of black curtains as a backdrop serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it creates a visually immersive environment that accentuates the presence of the puppets and directs the audience's focus towards the performance. Secondly, it provides a blank canvas for the projected visuals, ensuring clear visibility and legibility of the puppet characters' lines and story elements.



Figure 4.4.5: The leader sets the stage (Photo by the Researcher)



Figure 4.4.6: View from behind the stage (Photo by the Researcher)

4.5 The Origin of Ombak Potehi's Puppets, Music, and Costumes

The Ombak Potehi theater troupe utilizes the art of puppetry in their performances and exhibitions. The puppets used in their shows are predominantly sourced from Indonesia and Taiwan. In the early days of the troupe's establishment, cost considerations led to the usage of puppets with plastic or glass fiber heads. However, as the troupe grew more established and performances became more stable, the puppets transitioned to being made primarily from wood, which offered increased durability and longevity compared to fragile glass materials. These puppets, with their wooden construction, not only symbolize the traditional craftsmanship associated with

puppetry but also enhance the authenticity and longevity of the art form. The transition from using plastic or glass fiber heads to wooden ones demonstrates the troupe's dedication to preserving the cultural heritage of puppetry while prioritizing durability and practicality.

Additionally, the troupe collaborates with local professional designers for the creation of costumes that accurately represent the distinct characters portrayed in their productions. This attention to detail is particularly evident in the design of costumes for indigenous characters, such as the "Nyonya" community, where historical accuracy plays a crucial role, it requires an accurate representation of historical fashion trends. The careful selection of colors and patterns ensures that the costumes align seamlessly with the characters' qualities, further immersing the audience in the rich cultural tapestry of the performances (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 18 July 2024).



Figure 4.5.1: Puppet at theater troupe exhibition (Photo by the Researcher)

The musical tunes currently employed by the troupe trace back to Beng Geok Hong. When Potehi originated in Fujian, performances were already divided into Southern and Northern styles, commonly referred to as "Nan Yin Bei Guan" in the vernacular. This distinction between the South and the North is not based on geographical boundaries but primarily on differences in musical melodies and performance styles. This division has persisted in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, maintaining the two distinct styles. The Northern style, known as "Bei Diao," predominantly features clear singing and is often accompanied by wind and percussion instruments to create an atmospheric performance. Instruments such as the barrel drum, flute, suona horn, cloud gong, bamboo clappers, sea whistle, cymbals, gongs, sheng, temple block, and single-headed drum are commonly used. On the other hand, the Southern style, known as "Nan Yin," is characterized by elegant and refined vocals resembling

Southern operatic tunes, with a lively rhythm and performance style akin to Pear Garden Opera. Selections of performances often draw inspiration from Pear Garden Opera, with graceful and intricate melodies complemented by a rich variety of instruments during performances, including suona horns, erhu and sanxian string instruments, resonant cups, small and large gongs, flower drums, bamboo flutes, and pipa (Zheng & Wang, 2019).

After its establishment around 1930 in Penang, Beng Geok Hong split into two different troupes. One inherited the musical tunes of Nan Yin, presenting lyrics in the style of "Gao Jia Xi"; while the other predominantly adopted the musical style of Bei Guan, performing "Gezi Opera" melodies. Following a period of market research, it was found that the audience reception for "Gezi Opera" was broader and more positive (Pan & Wang, 2012). Consequently, subsequent Potehi performances have consistently adopted the musical style of "Gezi Opera". The Ombak Potehi troupe continues to uphold this tradition, using "Gezi Opera" as its primary performance format.

Through the above narrative, it can be observed that performances of Potehi place a high emphasis on musical details. During on-site research on the Ombak Potehi troupe, it was found that they regularly engage in unique activities aimed at enriching their artistic pursuits. During data collection, a non-participatory observation was made of an internal dialogue session with veteran artists from Beng Geok Hong. The

dialogue involved a Taiwanese teacher experienced in performing Gezi Opera, who participated in the performance "A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea", and a veteran artist from Beng Geok Hong skilled in singing for puppet performances. These individuals engaged in discussions about Gezi Opera (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 18 July 2024).

Chinese traditional music introduced from Taiwan to Malaysia primarily focuses on Minnan music, with Gezi Opera being particularly significant. Gezi Opera, originating from Minnan in Taiwan in the 1920s, quickly spread to Malaysia. The prevalence of the Minnan dialect and culture within the Malaysian Chinese community facilitated the rapid establishment and prosperity of this theatrical genre, which is based on the Minnan dialect and local music (Wang, 2009).

The dialogue session was open for young actors of Ombak Potehi to observe. The discussions primarily focused on the intricate nature of Gezi Opera, subtle differences in theatrical performances, and variations in melodies. Through such exchanges, coupled with impromptu singing, interesting outcomes emerged: despite sharing the same theatrical narrative, significant differences could exist in the final musical arrangements, or adaptations of the same story might exhibit subtle discrepancies. Through these intergenerational interactions, the troupe not only preserves its traditions but also creatively evolves by embracing diverse perspectives and

interpretations, underscoring the importance of cultural exchange and continuity in the performing arts field.



Figure 4.5.2: A conversation with Beng Geok Hong (Photo by the Researcher)



Figure 4.5.3: Taiwanese artist plays the yueqin and artist Beng Geok Hong sings (Photo by the Researcher)

4.6 Intercultural Performance Analysis of Plays

Established in 2015, Ombak Potehi Theatre Group stands as a relative newcomer in the theatrical scene. Focused on original works or adaptations, the group intertwines elements from diverse cultures. This study delves into the intercultural innovations and new technologies within the group's repertoire. By scrutinizing several classic productions through video recordings, live observations, and interviews with key creators, the analysis aims to unravel the infusion of fresh cultural elements and new techniques in Ombak Potehi's performances.

4.6.1 A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea

The theatrical production currently in preparation by the troupe ingeniously combines Potehi puppetry with the art of recitation singing for a harmonious stage performance. In the selection of disparate art forms for integration, Ombak Potehi meticulously considers feasibility and overall impact. The primary rationale behind choosing recitation singing lies in the fact that the lyrics in Potehi are derived from the Minnan Gezi Opera tradition. Recitation singing, in essence, serves as the precursor to Gezi Opera, the progenitor of this art form. When four-line verses are combined with Gezi Opera tunes to narrate a story, it transforms into recitation singing. Adding physical movements to this foundation completes the authentic rendition of Gezi Opera.

The shared musical and linguistic roots between these art forms propel the selection process, facilitating a seamless integration that enhances the overall performance. Furthermore, in terms of narrative selection, the production delves into the history of the Chinese community in Penang, recounting authentic stories from the era when Chinese immigrants settled in Nanyang. Interwoven within these narratives is the backdrop of real events like the "Zhangzhou-Quanzhou Rivalry," a historical armed conflict between the two major immigrant groups from Zhangzhou and Quanzhou prefectures in Fujian Province. By incorporating these historical contexts, the script gains resonance with the audience, deepening their connection to the storyline. In essence, the fusion of Potehi puppetry with recitation singing in Ombak Potehi exemplifies the power of intercultural collaboration and historical storytelling in the realm of theatrical arts. Through this innovative blend, the production not only celebrates the cultural heritage of the region but also captivates audiences with compelling narratives that bridge the past and the present.

The production consists of four acts, each themed as follows: Departure, Overseas Journey, Settling Down, and Taking Root. The first act, Departure, unfolds against the backdrop of the First Sino-Japanese War and the invasion of China by the Eight-Nation Alliance. At that time, the people of old China were in dire straits, grappling with famine and surrounded by the ravages of war, prompting them to flee in search of refuge. Witnessing how many risked their lives to venture overseas to Nanyang for a chance at a better life, the young scholar Chew Maosheng is inspired to

follow suit, hoping to find sustenance and warmth. After pleading with his parents and seeking their blessing, he embarks on preparations for the journey to Nanyang. On the eve of departure, Chew Maosheng also brought along a bit of water and soil from his hometown as he boarded the ship. However, he was puzzled to find himself lined up and tied with a rope, much like livestock.

In the following act, while onboard the ship, Chew Maosheng encounters a young boy named Bao. Through Bao's lamentations, Chew learns that these migrants bound for overseas are being sold as laborers to the next buyers by intermediaries, commonly referred to as "piglets." Once they sign their names and make their mark, these individuals are not allowed to return. Moreover, due to the harsh conditions at sea, Bao, already afflicted by illness, soon succumbs to death. To make matters worse, fearing contagious diseases, the crew callously stuffs Bao's body into a sack and throws it into the sea. As the boy breathes his last, he continues to call out for his mother back home, dreaming of earning enough money in Nanyang to reunite with her one day. Yet, tragically, he meets his end in a foreign land.

Following the third act, upon the ship's arrival and docking in Singapore, the characters begin the search for employment. At this juncture, a foreman seeks a person proficient in accounting, and Chew Maosheng, having received an education, volunteers encouraged by his companions. This action incites dissatisfaction among the existing workers, who believe he lacks the understanding of proper procedures.

Just as tensions escalate, a riot breaks out, drawing inspiration from a real historical event known as the "Riot of the Five Cereals." The turmoil stems from fluctuating rice prices, sparking clashes between the Teochew and Hokkien communities in Singapore at that time.

In the final act, Zhou Maosheng eventually settles down in Penang after much wandering, maintaining communication with his parents in China through letters over the years. However, he has recently stopped receiving letters from his parents. Initially attributing this to the long journey and possible loss by messengers, he is devastated to eventually learn the tragic news that his parents had passed away due to an illness several months ago. Chew Maosheng is overwhelmed by grief and regret, realizing that despite finding work and stability in Nanyang, he will never see his parents again. Observing many fellow Chinese who earn money intending to return home, Chew Maosheng knows that his homeland is now a place he can never go back to.

The title of this play is "A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea," where the term "song" symbolizes the entrepreneurial anthem of overseas Chinese (Hong,2011). "Guofan" in Minnan dialect means "going to Nanyang." "Guofan Ge" is a folk song that was once popular in the regions of Fujian, Taiwan, and Chaoshan, depicting the arduous experiences of the people in these areas who sought their livelihoods and engaged in commerce in Nanyang out of necessity. It is a series of songs that narrate

the entrepreneurial journey of overseas Chinese. Minnan has many folk songs and nursery rhymes, with many of them focusing on overseas Chinese and their families (Lin, 2014).

The background for the creation of such works lies in the aftermath of the Opium War, where on one hand, imperialist aggression plunged China into a dark period of semi-feudal and semi-colonial rule. This was exacerbated by political corruption, continuous warfare, frequent disasters, and rural bankruptcy, leading to a surplus of labor drifting aimlessly. On the other hand, the rapacious exploitation of Southeast Asian resources by imperialism led to some degree of economic development in the region. The massive labor force required for this development held significant appeal for the large numbers of unemployed along China's coastal regions, resulting from rural bankruptcy. Hence, a large wave of Chinese emigrants emerged during this period (Liu, 2002).

This style of performance art is known as "Nian Ge," a representative form of Taiwanese rap art. Originally, it was transmitted orally, with enthusiasts or folk artists engaging in a form of semi-spoken, semi-sung performance. Over time, to aid in memorization and dissemination, some individuals began to transcribe the lyrics. The lyrics are typically written in a "seven-word, four-line" or "seven-character" format, organized into segments of four lines with all lines rhyming. During performances, artists are accompanied by instruments such as the shell-stringed instrument or the

yueqin, adjusting the balance between spoken word and song depending on the context (Yang, 2006).

唸歌：

一更鼓打響高樓，回看人間多少愁，客旅南去夢悠悠，怎知父母淚雙流。
二更渺茫起寒風，萬種愁腸總是空，恰似長江千尺浪，從此一去無影蹤。
三更打破半夜天，鬱鬱游魂最可憐，流落地頭無人伴，茫茫海中獨自眠。
四更月色漸朦朧，孤魂一去分西東，生死一別難相見，除非夢中再相逢。
五更燭盡燈火殘，空中寂寂水潺潺，去時容易轉時難，游魂無路透陽關。 - 改自《度亡。五更歌》

Figure 4.6.1: "The excerpt of 'A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea' in the style of Nian Ge."

(Provided by Ombak Potehi, 2024)

In the realm of "Nian Ge," the origins of sung recitations vary; some performers improvise their lyrics, while others draw from written records known as "Ge Zai Ce." Adaptations are made based on the performance conditions, setting, and duration (Yu, 2022). Many Hakka "overseas emigration songs" adhere to the basic format of seven-word, four-line verses, incorporating unique mountain song styles such as female solos and male-female duets (Lin, 2014).

In this particular production, the lyrics of the Nian Ge segment were rephrased and adapted based on classic Nian Ge compositions to better suit the storyline. During the script creation phase, there was a collaborative effort between two distinct theater groups. The head of Ombak Potehi was responsible for the initial draft of the script,

while a Nian Ge teacher from Taiwan oversaw modifications and further creative input for the Nian Ge sections. Notably, both parties engaged in numerous script discussions and readings. Researcher observed an intriguing scene where, despite the Taiwanese teacher primarily focusing on the Nian Ge aspects of the script, they contributed various reflections and questions regarding the script's structure, logical coherence of the narrative, ensuring that every detail adhered to logical consistency and historical accuracy.

As an original theatrical production, this work showcases several noteworthy points of intercultural innovation. Firstly, it breaks away from the traditional "跑马台" (pao ma tai - raised stage) design by introducing a dual-tiered structure that is meticulously optimized for visual impact. Unlike conventional parallel tiers, this design features varying heights and distances, creating a sense of visual depth. During performances, the puppet characters moving on the stage create a visually dynamic and overlapping effect for the audience.

Modern theatrical stages consist of three essential elements: the floor, the ceiling, and the vertical surfaces. The spatial configuration of modern theaters provides actors and scenes with a three-dimensional space, allowing for physical movements that are supported by the space and viewed from different perspectives by the audience. The narrative effect of theatrical performances varies depending on the type of space utilized, with different performance areas and viewing angles influencing the

storytelling process. The interplay between spatial factors and narrative effects is crucial (Hu, 2018).

Traditionally, Potehi performances are confined to the uppermost tier of a stage within a frame, with horizontal movements during the show. However, in this production, the design integrates principles of visual dynamics and spatial perception, blending traditional performance structures with contemporary stage technology concepts. The introduction of a two-tiered stage design adds depth and dimension to the performance space, creating a sense of proximity and distance that enhances audience engagement with the unfolding narrative. Through the incorporation of dynamic movements and interactions among characters on stage, the performance achieves a visual richness that transcends traditional boundaries, providing audiences with a multi-layered experiential journey.

As live performers on stage, the Nian Ge performers typically situate themselves fixedly in the area diagonally in front of the puppet performance space, positioned approximately at one-third of the stage's horizontal axis. The use of multimedia tools in this production diverges significantly from past practices. In previous performances, projections were employed to focus and concentrate the audience's attention by displaying background imagery on the stage backdrop, predominantly in the foreground. However, in this instance, the stage depth is expanded, and the projection screen used during performances will be positioned in the rear area behind the Potehi

puppet stage, occupying the entire backdrop space. This setup allows for scenes required by the narrative to be projected in the background, such as on a ship, at sea, or within the bustling marketplace and temples of Penang. By utilizing this configuration, the backdrop, elevated and lower platforms, and the layered presence of the Nian Ge performers collectively contribute to a sense of depth and richness in the visual storytelling experience. The strategic use of projections to depict various backgrounds adds depth and context to the performance, creating a sense of realism and cultural authenticity that resonates with audiences on an intercultural level.

In the Intercultural fusion within this artistic category, the combination of Nian Ge and Potahi involves blending two distinct forms of performance art—one rooted in musical expression and the other in traditional puppet theater. Despite both sharing a common origin in "Gezi Opera", the mere historical connection does not guarantee a seamless integration. Therefore, in this regard, the creative team of the theater company has conscientiously deliberated on the functional positioning of "Nian Ge" performance art within the play and how it can harmonize with Potahi.

In the context of a narrative background with puppet characters and a puppet performance stage, the incorporation of live actors introduces a multifaceted transformation to Nian Ge. The Nian Ge performers take on multiple roles, serving as both singers and narrators of the background story, and even embodying characters such as parents. Initially, the Nian Ge performers assume the role of the "storyteller,"

using Minnan dialect narration alongside puppet performances to engage the audience in the story. This form is commonly referred to as "off-screen voice," yet in this performance, the source of the voice is not external to the scene but revealed to the audience below. The Nian Ge performers enrich the performance by singing traditional tunes, reciting rhymes, and delivering dialogue to enhance the storytelling layers.

A clever aspect of this setup is the simultaneous portrayal of the puppet characters as the protagonist's parents. With the parents located far away in Zhangzhou, China, separated by miles from the protagonist Chew Maosheng, when Chew Maosheng's puppet interacts with his parents, the Nian Ge performers use a storytelling approach that transcends the limitations of the stage, creating vivid scenarios for the dialogue between the protagonist and his parents. This utilization of puppet dialogues, role transitions, and voice representation not only adds depth to the Nian Ge performance but also injects a richer background context into the entire production, supporting the development of the storyline. Additionally, during the puppet dialogues, focused lighting on the area of the Nian Ge performers, along with the spatial distance between the front and back puppet performance areas on the stage, sparks the audience's imagination. This setup symbolizes the oceanic distance between Malaysia and China, representing the separation between parents and their child who is far away, evoking a poignant sense of homesickness and longing.

The Nian Ge performers also interweave a stand-up comedy style into their performances, a scene that frequently occurs on traditional Nian Ge stages. In a way, it is akin to a more flexible performance style, although it is not purely classified as such. For instance, when the Nian Ge teacher plays a tune and the character beside them acts out a scene, if something feels off, they might interject with a line like, "Why are you doing it that way?" This kind of spontaneous departure from the script adds extra layers of dialogue. The design and presentation of this performance style, whether in puppetry or traditional Nian Ge, offer increased interactivity and real-time engagement. Similar to scenes in Taiwanese opera performances like "Fan Lihua Battles Xue Dingshan," unexpected modern elements such as sudden downpours, thunderclaps, or even car accidents can occur. In response, performers may humorously exclaim, "Oh my, you scared me! How did a car end up in ancient times?" The introduction of these sudden events and modern elements in this performance style, akin to the theatrical device "deus ex machina," brings dramatic surprises and twists for the audience.

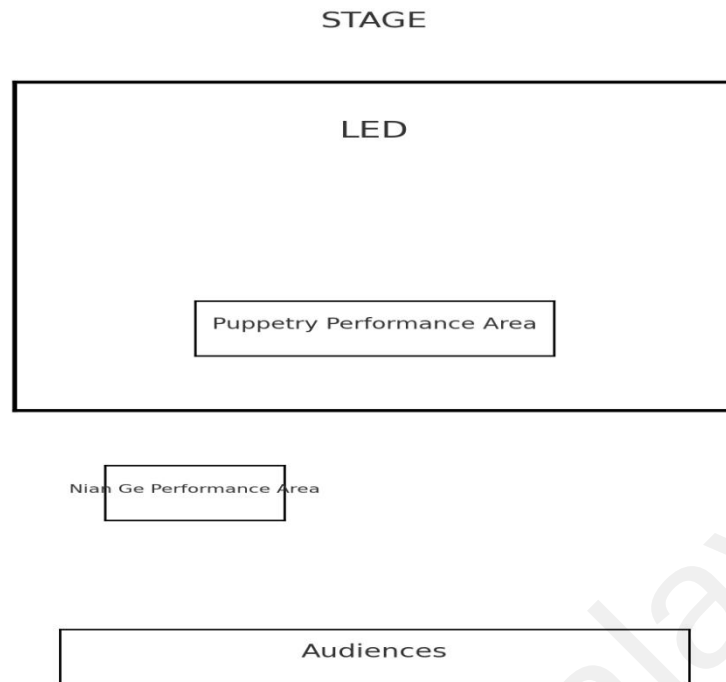


Figure 4.6.2: Draft chart of stage structure

The third point is innovation in performance materials , Academic analysis of the original Potehi often revolves around traditional narratives (Zhu, 2011). Even when depicting historical events, it tends to remain faithful to the Fujianese or Minnan dialect. The willingness to incorporate numerous new elements is indicative of a shift towards experimentation and adaptation within the traditional framework of this art form. This openness to innovation suggests a potential evolution in the thematic and linguistic boundaries traditionally associated with Potehi performances. The innovative approach taken in the creation of the Potehi script for "A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea" marks a significant departure from traditional narratives in Malaysian Chinese puppet theater. This project, unlike its predecessors, delves deeper

into themes of regionalism, ethnicity, and individual identity against the backdrop of locations such as Zhangzhou, Singapore, and Penang.

The emotional climax of this production is the theme of homesickness, particularly poignant within the emotional backdrop of Nanyang Chinese sentiment. Serving as a bittersweet thread woven throughout the narrative, it evokes a sense of nostalgia and yearning, resonating with the audience on a deeper emotional level. This is a departure from the common happy endings found in traditional puppet performances. This shift towards exploring the inner turmoil and dilemmas faced by the characters adds a layer of complexity and realism to the storytelling. By infusing local elements and contemporary themes into the scriptwriting process, boundaries are pushed, redefining the storytelling possibilities within this traditional art form.

4.6.2 Kisah Pulau Pinang



Figure 4.6.3: Promotional Poster of Kisah Pulau Pinang (Poster courtesy of Ombak Potehi, 2017)

The title of this production in Malay translates directly to "A Story on the Island of Penang," a naming choice that reflects its perfect localization. Since its premiere in 2017, the number of public performances of this production has reached 16 or even more, making it the most frequently performed and representative work of the Ombak Potehi troupe. In interviews with the leader, it was emphasized that this production serves as the foundational play of the troupe, one that every member must study, practice, and rehearse. Many elements of this play effectively enhance the basic skills of actors, whether they are puppeteers or musicians (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 21 July 2024).

The inspiration for creating "Kisah Pulau Pinang" (The Tale of Penang Island) stemmed from drawing upon the performance mode of Wayang Potehi from Indonesia, with a desire to create a localized performance that could resonate beyond linguistic boundaries. Wayang Potehi performances incorporate local languages, such as Javanese (Kurniawan, 2017). Early discussions among key figures within the troupe, including the troupe leader, actors, and other experienced members, centered around crafting a production that authentically embodied the essence of the locale. As mentioned earlier, prior to the commencement of the creative process, a Malay actor within the troupe conducted fieldwork research within the community. Her investigations extended to engaging with the Malay community, providing valuable insights that informed the creative direction of the production. Subsequently, during

the writing process, they insisted on integrating the Nyonya (Peranakan) community, a crucial decision. The Nyonya community, with its unique cultural characteristics, was seen as a fitting representation of Penang, enriching the authenticity and vibrancy of the performance (Tan, 2019).

In 2017, the first part of the story depicted the tale of love and friendship among four friends from diverse racial backgrounds. Chew and Yi were Chinese immigrants who arrived from China as businessmen, Nya was a locally born Chinese woman who married Chew (embracing Malay and other cultures), and Kahssim was an Indian Muslim managing his grandfather's spice business. Their lives intertwined with the bustling spice trade, multicultural street festivals, Muslim pilgrims listening to conversations in the mosque, clandestine societal struggles, and social dances in the amusement park.

In the second part, "Penang Stories" (2018 and 2019), these four friends recounted events that occurred during the Japanese occupation of Penang. On December 8, 1941, Japanese soldiers cycled from Gaya Island on the east coast to other areas of Malaya, launching a sudden attack on the British forces. Over 140 aircraft bombed George Town. Fires ravaged the main areas of the old city, such as Chulia Street, Beach Street, Pitt Street, and Campbell Street. People screamed, cried, and bodies littered the streets. As the Japanese flag was raised, locals had to bow daily, shouting "Long live the Emperor of Japan." Puppeteers reenacted performances where collaborators identified

as anti-Japanese Chinese (purges) were revealed. Those selected would be immediately executed or disappear. Qiu portrayed one of the victims missing during the war. Yi, Nya, Siang (Nya and Chew's son), Kahssim, and his wife Tima fled to the countryside; women played crucial roles in family care by growing their own food and medicinal plants. This part of the story aligned with the actions of young Malaysian Chinese attempting to uncover what their grandparents or parents experienced during the Japanese occupation period.

The third part of "Penang Stories" showcases the intricate journey towards independence. Tunku Abdul Rahman, who later became Malaysia's first Prime Minister, led a delegation composed of representatives from Malay, Chinese, and Indian political parties to London to negotiate the terms of independence. Upon returning, preparations were made for the first local and national elections in Malaya. In the story of Ombak Putih, a medical graduate who returned from studying in England, he joined the Workers' Party, representing the working class and engaging in the struggle for independence. He aided in translating pamphlets from Chinese to English, depicting the lives of actual activists within the Workers' Party. In 1956, the Workers' Party won the first local council elections in Malaya, gaining control of the George Town Municipal Council. However, the party was banned in 1969 due to its leftist activities. Finally, the protagonists partake in the Independence Day celebration held at the Penang Waterfront Arts Center.

The elements in this work are ingeniously combined, with primary data sources including performance recordings, actor interviews, and references to Tan's article (2019) that analyze the partial adaptation of this work to contemporary practices and local culture. The standout feature of this drama is the integration of traditional Chinese puppetry with local Malay elements, achieving intercultural, cross-regional, and intercultural appeal. This fusion is prominently displayed in the characters, dialogues, music, instruments, and costumes.

Inspired by real historical and geographical data from Penang, the character of "Kahssim," a local Indian Muslim in Penang, is featured. According to documented sources, these Indian Muslim communities in Penang originated from the densely populated Tamil Nadu regions of Trineveli and a major town in Kadayal Nallur (Pillai, 2015). Upon migrating to Malaya with their families, they did not disperse but rather concentrated mainly in Penang. They established the Malabar community and had their own mosque (Chuah et al, 2011). In the narrative, the character "Nya" embodies the essence of the Nanyang culture as a "Nyonya", also known as Peranakan, which translates to 'child' or 'descendant'. Through Nya's lyrics in the play, it is evident that her grandfather migrated from China and subsequently married a local Malay, leading their descendants to be known as Nyonya. Following this, the characters Yi and Chew in the play are descendants of the Chinese, while Timah is of Indian descent and is married to Kahssim. Characters can project The Ombak Potehi theater troupe uniquely localizes their original script by intertwining it with indigenous historical

narratives, crafting characters and stories that resonate with the local historical context.

The next part is an analysis of the dialogue and music, as these two elements intertwine prominently in this play. The dialogue in this work blends multiple languages, including Hokkien, Malay, Mandarin, and Cantonese, reflecting Penang's diverse linguistic landscape. Rooted in a real background, the script typically utilizes a mix of vocabulary from different languages to express the same idea. For example, Nya's entrance song lyrics:

Datuk dari China

Kahwin sama orang Malaya

Keturunan Baba Nyonya

Dunia dua budaya

Belajar buat gulai, kasut manik dan kuih nyonya

Keluar tengok dondang sayang pakai baju panjang

In this segment of the lyrics, Nya's song demonstrates the fusion of multiple languages and cultures, highlighting a unique feature of the play. When introducing herself, Nya describes her ancestors as a Datuk (a respected elder) from China who married a Malay person, leading to their descendants becoming Baba Nyonya. This passage conveys a clear message about Nya's complex identity and the amalgamation

of the two cultures she represents. Furthermore, the lyrics mention Nya's need to learn how to cook curry and make Nyonya desserts, emphasizing the cultural traits of her identity. Through these depictions of actions and skills, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the traditions and values of the Baba Nyonya culture. The lyrics also mention the importance of dressing modestly when going out to enjoy Nyonya folk songs, underscoring the significance of etiquette and respect in the Baba Nyonya culture. These details showcase the character's respect for tradition and pride in her own identity. It is worth noting the musical aspect of this segment of lyrics. The original song is a Malay children's song called "Lenggang Kangkung," known for its lively rhythm and playful theme related to water spinach. The play references this familiar song because it resonates with the Malaysian audience, and by adapting the melody and slowing it down, the revised tune aligns better with the sense of elegance Nya conveys about her Nyonya heritage. This subtle adaptation indirectly signifies the profound acculturation of these immigrant Chinese and their progeny into the local milieu, epitomizing a nuanced sense of indigenization.



Figure 4.6.4: "Nya" appearance clip (Provided by Ombak Potehi, 2017)

In the dialogue scenes between "Kahssim" and "Chew and Nya," a fascinating phenomenon is observed where Malay and Hokkien dialogues are exchanged, showcasing the interaction between Malay and Hokkien dialects and highlighting the genuine language dynamics of the early immigrant period. This linguistic fusion reflects the integration and coexistence of different cultural groups in the historical development of society. The dialogues in these two distinct languages provided by the director present a unique cultural landscape, emphasizing the diversity and coexistence of multiculturalism in society at that time. This form of dialogue not only enhances the vividness and representativeness of the plot but also prompts the audience to deeply contemplate the social life of early immigrant periods. Through the portrayal of this language exchange, the audience gains a better understanding of the challenges faced by early immigrant communities in terms of cultural exchange

and integration, and how they demonstrate respect and inclusivity towards multiculturalism through the blending of languages.

第四场 斗权。幕一

人物: Kahssim (丑。老生)、周茂生 (生)、林阿义 (丑)、社党四人
地点:

义: 茂生! 茂生! 你有听人说前街又在拼阵了吗?

周: 是啊! 刚才王老板路过这, 听说是福建党的头家联手和红旗番仔, 要来对抗广东帮, 抢这所在的控制权啦!

Kahssim: Tauke Chew! Baiklah jumpa lu kat sini, wa nak bincang sama lu tentang ...

周: Kahssim 先生, 你不知道前街又再打架了? 我看, 我们要赶紧离开才是!

Kahssim: Apa! ? Gaduh lagi? Aiyo, Melayu tiap-tiap hari gaduh dengan Melayu, Cina tiap-tiap hari kacau Cina, dari siang sampai malam, business sekarang teruk, susahlah macam ni!

义: 个人吃饭个人饱。顾好自己, 顾好生意就好了! 我们就赶紧回家, 如果遇到就麻烦了!

Figure 4.6.5: Script dialogue fragments (Provided by Ombak Potehi, 2024)

The process of story creation and dialogue design has undergone intercultural reconstruction, achieving a revitalization through The process of story creation and dialogue design has undergone intercultural reconstruction, achieving a revitalization through localization. Crafting indigenous stories is also an act of proactive creation. Ensuring that each aspect involved in adaptation is viewed and addressed from a 'localization' perspective is crucial. This entails not only deconstructing historical classics but also interpretively retelling the original work through the medium of stage

art. It further involves the creative reconstruction of different cultural elements from a localized viewpoint, artistically exploring the potential contemporary existence of Chinese traditional Potehi in Malaysia. The incorporation of a "localized performance" flavor into the dialogue is significant. Localizing the script of a play holds great significance as dialogue imbued with a sense of localized performance possesses a strong emotional appeal, attracting audiences in new ways, allowing them to immerse themselves in and appreciate a story that fully integrates the linguistic characteristics of Malaysia. Particularly, introducing different vocabulary into the dialogue to convey a single sentence, using language expressions and styles that resonate with the Malaysian people, enhances the colloquial and informal features of the dialogue, bringing the performance closer to everyday life.

Crafting indigenous stories is an act of proactive creation that aligns with contemporary practices. Ensuring that every aspect involved in adaptation is considered and addressed from a perspective of adapting to local culture is crucial. This process involves not only deconstructing historical classics but also interpretively retelling the original work through the medium of stage art. It further includes creatively reconstructing various cultural elements from a contemporary viewpoint, exploring the potential modern-day existence of Chinese traditional Potehi in Malaysia. Infusing a flavor of "localized performance" into the narrative is significant. Modernizing the script of a play holds great importance as dialogue infused with a sense of contemporary performance possesses a strong emotional

appeal, engaging audiences in novel ways and enabling them to immerse themselves in and appreciate a story that fully integrates the cultural nuances of Malaysia. Specifically, incorporating diverse vocabulary into the dialogue to convey a single sentence, utilizing language expressions and styles that resonate with the Malaysian people, enhances the colloquial and informal aspects of the dialogue, bringing the performance closer to everyday experiences.

In the realm of music, the incorporation of folk tunes such as "Rasa Sayang" and "Ikan Kek" serves as the foundational melodies, which are subsequently reorchestrated and infused with Hokkien lyrics. Through this musical amalgamation, the introduction of newly adapted songs representing two local ethnicities further enhances the cultural tapestry of the production, fostering a deeper sense of inclusivity and authenticity within the theatrical narrative. The incorporation of these reimagined melodies not only pays homage to the rich musical heritage of the region but also serves as a poignant reflection of the multicultural ethos prevalent in the locale. By infusing Hokkien language into the lyrics, the songs transcend linguistic boundaries, offering a harmonious blend of cultural expressions that resonate with audiences across diverse ethnic backgrounds.

The deliberate inclusion of the widely recognized Chinese melody "Wang Chun Feng" with Malay lyrics in the theatrical production signifies the troupe's intentional effort to bridge linguistic and cultural divides, showcasing the intricate interplay between

tradition and identity. By interweaving these distinct cultural elements, the production not only celebrates the diversity of the local community but also underscores the interconnectedness and shared experiences that transcend ethnic boundaries. The climactic rendition of "Tanggal 31 Ogos" serves as a Malaysian patriotic song commonly sung nationwide during the National Day celebrations. In this adaptation within the play, the performance blends Chinese and Malay languages, symbolizing harmony, integration, mutual respect among different ethnic groups, and collective progress. The fusion of Mandarin and Malay languages in the performance epitomizes aspirations for unity, inclusivity, and mutual respect among diverse ethnic communities.

During the grand finale, musicians blend and arrange compositions according to different ethnic styles, creating original pieces where performers collectively sing in Malay. The song conveys the message that Penang is an international port that has attracted a diverse array of immigrants. After several generations of living there, these different ethnic groups have come to regard Malaysia as their home; they are no longer immigrants. They have adapted to the local culture, food, language, and attire. Various ethnicities interact in their daily lives, leading to a fusion of cultures (Tan, 2019) . The interlude featuring "JingLing Nona," a familiar melody among the local populace, serves as an excellent musical segue within the composition. The lyrics convey auspicious wishes for harmonious coexistence among multiple ethnicities, reflecting a vision of peaceful and inclusive societal cohesion.

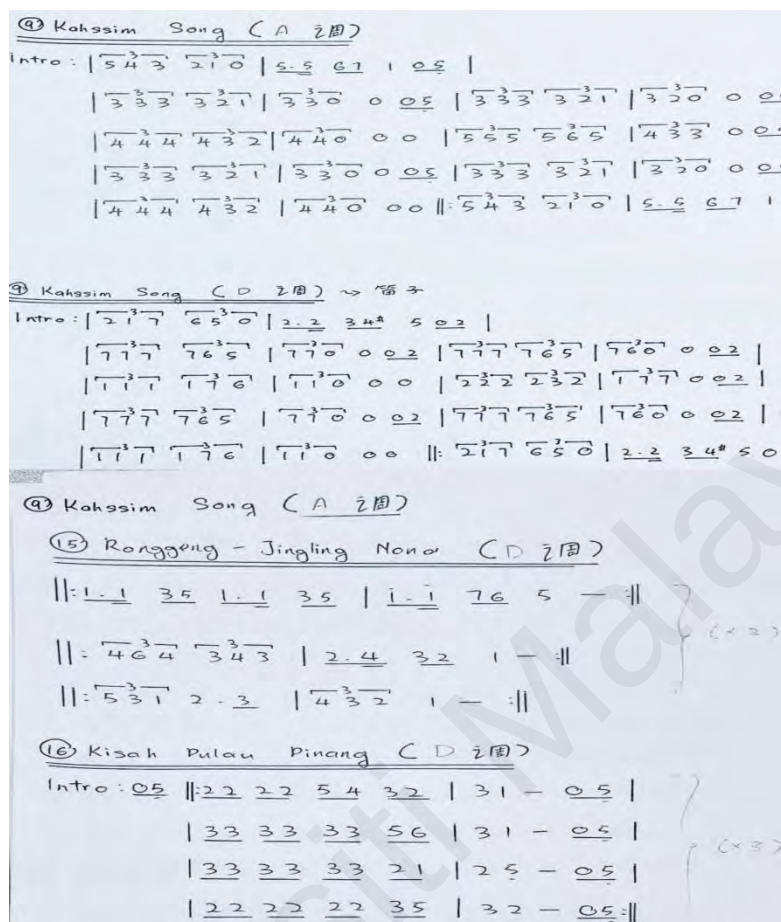


Figure 4.6.6: Original sheet music for "Kahssim Song" (photo by the Researcher)

The traditional elements are also preserved in the musical arrangements of "Kisah Pulau Pinang," incorporating segments from Chinese opera in the stage combat music and transitional interludes. For instance, pieces like "Hua Die," "Escape," and "Qizi Ping" draw from various regional operatic forms and Gezi Opera, amalgamating their strengths to create compositions suitable for Potehi. This fusion seamlessly integrates the musical structures and vocal styles of Potehi with the art of Chinese opera. The performances often commence with the resounding beats of traditional Chinese opera

percussion instruments, including drums, small drums, gongs, cymbals, small gongs, and clappers, creating a rich tapestry of layered accompaniment. During the dramatic segments, the instrumentation expands to include suona, erhu, yueqin, and flutes, adding depth and texture to the musical landscape.

Adding the Malay traditional drum "Kompang" to the musical ensemble, a customary instrument within the Malay community often played at weddings or gatherings, and incorporating this instrument into the play to perform Chinese ethnic opera music, this practice of blending musical elements not only provides the drama with a unique sound texture but also deepens the exchange and fusion of different cultures within the storyline. The use of the traditional Malay instrument "Kompang" in the play not only highlights the significance of Malay culture but also presents the audience with a music performance rich in regional characteristics and historical heritage.

Scholars of Interculturalism argue that social engagements take on universal forms, as evidenced by their ubiquity in practices shared across all groups, such as weddings and gatherings, food sharing, connecting through music, and employing vernacular languages (Crooke, Thompson, Fraser & Davidson, 2024). Extracting folk elements from local ethnic or societal backgrounds and situating them within an international context relevant to individuals beyond indigenous societies constitutes a fundamental aspect of interculturalism (Smith & Ward, 2000). The intercultural music presented in the performance of "Kisah Pulau Pinang" exemplifies a significant representation of

this phenomenon. Intercultural musical engagement refers to behaviors that involve encountering diverse cultures or non-native cultures through music. This can entail playing in a band with individuals or instruments from different cultures or listening to songs in different languages.

Costumes are also designed according to the different historical periods corresponding to the story's plot, especially Nya's attire reflecting the historical evolution. In the first part, before World War II, Nya wears a Baju Panjang (Tan, 2019). Historically, in Malaya at that time, the attire of the Peranakan Nyonya included the Baju Panjang, directly adapted from the Malay community's Baju Kurung. This was due to the batik sarong (batik-wrapped skirt) and three kerosang, which are brooches (Nugroho, 2023).



Figure 4.6.7: Nya's clothing Baju Panjang (photo by the Researcher)

In the third part, after the end of World War II, Nya's attire transitions to a kebaya (blouse) and sarung (cloth wrapped around the waist). The Nyonya's upper garment, the kebaya, is based on the lightweight and simple Malay batik attire, adorned with Chinese traditional clothing lace, and modified to feature a Western-style low neckline and shoulder pads. The lower garment consists of the Malay women's batik sarong. In terms of color and decoration, there is a blend of the Malay preference for Turkish green, along with traditional Chinese pinks and bright reds, embellished with elements like flowers, birds, fish, insects, and dragons and phoenixes symbolizing auspiciousness, drawn from Chinese traditional attire. Additionally, embroidery and beadwork are essential handicraft skills and decorations among the Nyonya. The beadwork patterns combine Chinese, Malay, and European styles, integrating this craft originating from China with local hues, presenting a uniquely charming and lifelike allure (Nugroho, 2023).



Figure 4.6.8: Postwar Nya Clothing (Video Screenshot from the Researcher)

The attire of the Baba-Nyonya represents a fusion of cultures. Cultural fusion refers to the process where different ethnic cultures, based on their traditional cultures, absorb and assimilate foreign cultures as needed in the process of cultural exchange to promote their own development (Huang, 2022). In the field of interculturalism, cross-cultural adaptation is defined as "a phenomenon of continuous and direct cultural contact between two groups composed of individuals with different cultures, leading to changes in the original cultural patterns of one or both parties" (Sun, 2018). In terms of Southeast Asian Chinese culture, cross-cultural adaptation can be seen as a process of learning from and abandoning one culture in favor of another, as well as the process of generating new cultures and establishing new cultural patterns.

The Baba-Nyonya community, descendants of intermarriages between Chinese and Malays, possess inherent abilities and advantages in cross-cultural communication and adaptation. Due to the necessity for survival and development, it is essential for them to adjust according to the lifestyle and work practices of the local indigenous society, shaping their own language, beliefs, and rituals. Through collaboration with Western colonizers and comparison with the indigenous society, they not only develop a sense of identity known as "proto-national," but also are endowed with the function of mutual respect and integration between Chinese and Malay cultures (Gungwu, 2018).

4.6.3 Intertextuality Between Scripts

In terms of performance order, *Kisah Pulau Pinang* is one of Ombak Potehi's earlier original works and has been repeatedly staged as a classic representative piece. Each iteration undergoes adjustments based on prior experiences, with modifications to its details since its 2017 premiere. In contrast, *A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea* (2024) is a newer production. The researcher presents these two plays sequentially to underscore the interconnectedness of their protagonists—both depicting Chew Maosheng, a Nanyang Chinese figure. After *Kisah Pulau Pinang* localized Chew's story in Penang, the troupe sought to complete his narrative arc by exploring his journey from China to Southeast Asia, resulting in *A Song of Crossing to the Southern Sea*. This deliberate sequencing creates intertextuality, enriching the audience's understanding of Chew's cultural displacement and adaptation. While intertextuality was not the primary focus of the troupe's creative process, its emergence reveals how diasporic stories naturally demand layered storytelling—where origins and destinations are inseparable. The decision to expand Chew's narrative retrospectively (from Penang back to China) reflects a broader cultural impulse to reconcile identity fractures caused by migration, a theme deeply embedded in Nanyang Chinese collective memory.

The concept of intertextuality was introduced by the renowned French literary theorist Julia Kristeva in the 1960s. She stated: 'Literary words are at the intersection of several discourses, and they are not a fixed point of meaning but a dialogue between various discourses.' The intertextuality between these two scripts implies that one text refers to another. This referencing can take various forms, such as dialogues, actions, plotlines, imagery, character names, and more. The value in studying intertextuality lies not in the similarities but in the differences - in the concept of 'difference within similarity' (Li, 2006). In this case, the differences—between the protagonist's rootedness in China and his reinvention in Penang—highlight how migration fractures and reconfigures identity. The intertextual link thus serves as an unconscious yet potent commentary on diasporic duality, a perspective that could be further explored through audience interviews or troupe archives to trace how these connections resonate culturally (Keith Song, personal communication, 20 July 2024).

Through the two productions, the protagonist and those who follow him grew up in the same background, but the context of the story and other characters and cultures in the two works are hugely different. This is the difference between the cultures of the two places. Through Chew Maosheng's story *Key Characters*, from China to Southeast Asia, focusing on Penang, the stories are intertwined to form an intertextuality of dramatic construction.

4.6.4 The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba



Figure 4.6.9: Promotional Poster of The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba (Poster courtesy of Ombak Potehi, 2023)

Ombak Potehi also collaborates with the Japanese ITO theater group to adapt and create stories from "Journey to the West," integrating the Japanese folklore of Onibaba into traditional Chinese mythology. They bring together puppets of different forms and cultural backgrounds to perform on the same stage, breaking the conventions of traditional performances. This achieves a cross-cultural fusion, where Potehi, in its traditional form, breaks the boundaries of conventional performance styles.

The story is based on one of the four classic Chinese novels, "Journey to the West." On their pilgrimage, Tang Sanzang and his disciples encounter Onibaba. This mysterious Onibaba has a hidden backstory. In her past life, she deeply loved a man and wished to marry him. However, he rejected her, leaving Onibaba heartbroken. In this life, she transforms into a monster that preys on men. Upon hearing about the handsome Tang Sanzang, she develops feelings for him and instructs her subordinates to capture him. While passing through the beautiful Binglang Island, Tang Sanzang instructs his eldest disciple, Sun Wukong, to scout ahead and find food, leaving the second and third disciples behind. Unfortunately, they are overpowered by the monster, failing to protect Tang Sanzang and allowing him to fall into Onibaba's clutches. Sun Wukong rushes to rescue his master and devises a plan. He uses his magic to transform into Tang Sanzang's appearance. Onibaba initially expresses her feelings and reveals her love to the fake Tang Sanzang. However, she soon realizes the deception and becomes furious, engaging in a fierce battle with the master and disciples. In the end, Onibaba is defeated by Sun Wukong. Just as she is about to be slain, Guanyin Bodhisattva descends, enlightening Onibaba and dispelling her resentment. Guanyin takes her to Mount Lushan, where Onibaba embarks on a spiritual path under Guanyin's guidance.

The play features a total of nine characters, including the four disciples of Tang Sanzang, Land Deity, Onibaba, her two subordinates, and Guanyin Bodhisattva. Tang Sanzang and his four disciples, along with the Land Deity, are portrayed using

traditional Potehi puppets. Onibaba and Guanyin, on the other hand, are manipulated by Japanese puppeteers using string-operated puppets. The simultaneous performance of Japanese Bunraku and Chinese Potehi represents a cross-cultural theatrical practice that showcases the characteristics of cultural fusion. The concept of Intercultural Theatre was introduced by Richard Schechner in 1977. He believed that genuine communication between artists extends beyond national boundaries, as official exchanges often involve artificial divisions. True communication occurs between cultures, facilitated by individuals and non-official groups, free from the constraints of borders (Schechner & Appel, 1990).

Through interviews with performers, the most distinctive aspect of this intercultural theatrical practice lies in its stage design. The height of the stage platform is approximately 30cm lower than the standard height of traditional Potehi performances. This shift has transformed the puppeteers' technique from seated manipulation to standing manipulation, creating greater possibilities for the puppeteers. The puppetry in this performance takes on various forms. In traditional Potehi performances, puppeteers remain hidden behind a mirror-like stage, allowing the audience to see only the puppets and not the puppeteers themselves. However, in the case of Japanese Bunraku, puppeteers typically wear black clothing and stand exposed on stage, moving in sync with the puppets (Lu, 2016). In the entire performance, Potehi actors alternate between being behind the stage and occasionally exposing themselves to the

audience while manipulating the puppets (Marcus Lim, personal communication, 20 July 2024).



Figure 4.6.10: Performance Scene (photo by Ombak Potchi, 2023)

Additionally, there is a character portrayed by a live actor - one of Onibaba's subordinates. This character engages in conversations with the puppets, creating a dialogue between humans and puppets on stage. The coexistence of live actors and puppets intertwines the realms of reality and illusion, blending the two dimensions. However, in Japan, the presence of both humans and puppets on stage is not entirely novel. Puppeteers often appear on stage holding string-operated puppets, but during the performance, they dress entirely in black and perform against a black background. The lighting is focused solely on the puppets, allowing the audience to only see the puppet performance. Therefore, the main focus remains on the puppets, and the term "puppetry" is more appropriate than "human puppetry" (Liu, 2005). Nevertheless, this

combination of two types of puppets and live actors on stage, with the brief appearance of live actors assuming non-dominant roles, achieves unexpected effects. Due to their larger size, fuller appearance, and more realistic movements, the sudden presence of live actors among a group of puppets provides a logical and reasonable explanation for stage dynamics without disrupting the overall structure where puppets take the lead. It is a remarkable artistic choice.



Figure 4.6.11: Actors and puppets share the stage (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2023)

Additionally, the incorporation of human actors alongside the puppets in this performance format allows the audience to observe every subtle movement of the puppeteers. Potehi originated from the art of Chinese opera, and as puppeteers, they must possess knowledge of classical dance movements in Chinese theater. They also need to master the techniques of opera and stage actors, as these skills are reflected in

the physical actions of the puppets (Tan, 1981). Therefore, during rehearsals, puppeteers not only focus on hand movements but also pay attention to their own body language, incorporating the essence of Chinese opera. This type of Intercultural Theatre deliberately eliminates political undertones and emphasizes a utopian-style cultural exchange in the realm of theater.

This production incorporates distinct musical elements from both cultures, creating a intercultural performance. Onibaba, who appears first, is accompanied by the traditional Japanese instrument called the shamisen, which sets the mood with its unique sound. The performance also includes a form of narrative storytelling known as "Joruri," which adds a touch of melancholy as it unfolds. When Tang Sanzang and his four disciples appear on stage, they are accompanied by the resounding beats of traditional Chinese opera percussion instruments. Their dialogues and singing are predominantly in the Fujian Nan dialect, known for its specific vocal style. Additionally, the local Land Deity character speaks in the local Malay language, and their songs are inspired by traditional Malay folk music. This intercultural performance showcases the integration of diverse musical traditions, highlighting the richness and complexity of both Japanese and Chinese cultures. The use of the shamisen and Joruri in Onibaba's scenes provides a distinct Japanese flavor, while the incorporation of Chinese opera percussion and the Nan dialect adds an authentic Chinese touch. The inclusion of the Malay language and folk music represents the local culture and adds another layer of diversity to the performance.



Figure 4.6.12: Performer plays shamisen (photo by Ombak Potchi, 2023)

As traditional puppets from two different countries engage in mutual exchange, the puppet performances embody their respective cultural backgrounds and mythical legends. The integration of these performances enriches the diversity of theatrical arts, contributing to the cohesion of society and communities, and fostering the development of the arts (Canyürek, 2019). Within the overall framework of traditional performing arts in Asia, puppets serve as representative art forms. The combination of puppet performances from diverse cultural backgrounds ultimately contributes to the construction of a shared Asian puppet cultural heritage.

Chinese scholar Sun Huizhu argues that intercultural theatre has gone through three stages. The first stage involves the cross-cultural aspects of the content in theatrical

productions. The second stage focuses on the cross-cultural elements in the form of the performances. In recent decades, a third stage has emerged in intercultural theatre, which combines both content and form (Sun, 2014). "The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba" not only emphasizes the integration of forms but also carries significant metaphorical implications in its content. "Journey to the West," one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature, tells the story of the Buddhist monk Tang Sanzang and his companions, Sun Wukong (Monkey King), Zhu Bajie (Pigsy), and Sha Wujing (Sandy), on their journey to the Western Heaven to obtain Buddhist scriptures. They face numerous challenges and confrontations with demons and monsters along the way, while also experiencing moments of doubt and conflict among themselves. The ultimate goal is to bring the scriptures back and save all beings. The story is rich in mythical elements and incorporates the philosophies of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, representing the essence of Chinese traditional culture.

As for "Onibaba," it is derived from Japanese folklore and their unique yokai culture, where various supernatural beings, including female monsters, are depicted in legends, poetry, Noh theater, films, and novels (Foster, 2015). "Onibaba" is a term in Japanese that translates to "demon woman." In "The Monkey King Adventures: Love of Onibaba," the character embodies traits more closely related to "Kiyohime" from the Japanese Noh play "Doujouji." The story revolves around Kiyohime, who falls in love at first sight with the monk Anchin but is rejected. Consumed by resentment, she

relentlessly pursues him, eventually transforming into a giant snake, crossing the Hidaka River, and coiling around a temple bell. She exhales flames, burning Anchin, who is hiding inside the bell, to death. Their karmic cycle ends with their tragic fate, and the temple continues to commemorate them.

Both "Onibaba" and "Journey to the West" share similarities as they belong to the rich artistic traditions of the East, whether it be the Japanese Noh puppetry or the Chinese traditional puppet theater. These art forms draw inspiration from the mythologies and legends passed down through generations in the East, often carrying strong religious connotations. Both works revolve around the core essence of Buddhism. Buddhism, which originated in India and was later introduced to China, has integrated with Confucianism and Taoism over time, firmly taking root in the region (Zhang, 2015). The teachings of Buddhism, particularly its concepts of inner nature and the relinquishment of desires, are prominently showcased. The notion of salvation and the Buddhist doctrine of karma and rebirth are also explored. It is well-known that Japanese culture has been deeply influenced by China, especially in terms of Confucian and Buddhist traditions, which continue to shape the social order in Japan to this day (Smith, 1983). The prevalence of Buddhist philosophy in Japan is also attributed to the influence brought by Chinese immigrants (Shi, 1978).

And in the analysis of "Doujouji," its Buddhist undertones also resonate with Chinese works. This piece is presented in the form of stop-motion animated puppets, bearing a

striking resemblance to Ombak Potehi's Onibaba in terms of its external appearance. In "Doujouji," the character Kiyohime is framed around the theme of jealousy towards women, expressing concepts such as selfishness, innate jealousy, an obsessive heart, unrequited love, and the transformation of love into resentment. This portrayal depicts Kiyohime as an intense and passionate female character. Ningyo Joruri is another term for Bunraku, a traditional form of puppetry in Japan. The term itself derives from Buddhist terminology and represents the traditional puppetry skills (Pate, 2013). The female characters portrayed in Ningyo Joruri exhibit typical personality traits, which serve as the focal point and intensify the dramatic tension of Joruri performances (Shiho, 2020).

The successful fusion of Japan's Onibaba and China's "Journey to the West" is precisely due to the complementary relationship between their Buddhist core. Both works draw inspiration from Buddhist teachings and incorporate them into their narratives, creating a thematic connection that enhances their compatibility. Onibaba embodies the characteristics of greed, anger, and ignorance, known in Buddhism as the "Three Poisons." In the story of "Journey to the West," the ultimate goal of the Tang Monk is to free people from the grasping, aversion, and delusion. In the new adaptation of the story by the theater troupe, the conflict arises from the design of Onibaba falling in love with the Tang Monk, representing the clash between these two ideological concepts. The portrayal of Onibaba reflects Japan's "chijo" culture, characterized by infatuation and obsession, contrasting strongly with the universal

love exemplified by the Tang Monk in "Journey to the West." Additionally, the unique Japanese aesthetic of "monoaware" or the sense of melancholic beauty contrasts with the brave and steadfast spirit found in Chinese literature, creating a visual impact.

4.7 Modern Communication Methods

With the vigorous development of new media forms, people have increasingly diverse and convenient channels to access cultural knowledge. The preservation of traditional essence culture and intangible heritage cannot be achieved without the widespread participation of the general public (Zhou, 2020). In the process of social development, new media integrates into the social and cultural knowledge system in diverse forms. To keep pace with the trends of the times, the inheritance and promotion of intangible cultural heritage need to be combined with the new era's media communication channels and forms. In this era of information explosion, traditional preservation methods are no longer sufficient to meet the requirements of protecting intangible heritage in the new era. Therefore, we should innovate the ways of protecting intangible heritage, strengthen the scientific application of technological innovation, and use new media to propel the protection of intangible cultural heritage to a new level (Yang & Su, 2021).

Ombak Potehi, as a vibrant new generation theater troupe, actively adapts modern methods in its external communications. For instance, they conduct various workshops and develop different types of workshops to cater to diverse audience groups. Additionally, they spread awareness of Potehi performances through lectures held in a variety of locations, including schools, public interest brand lectures, and museums. Moreover, Ombak Potehi has ventured into collaborating with modern theaters to create plays that showcase the unique features of Potehi performances. They have also embarked on a new path by incorporating shoots into their repertoire, utilizing modern media technologies.

4.7.1 Workshops

The term "workshop" is not a stagnant metaphor but a unique vocabulary that embodies creativity born out of collaboration and has a temporal continuity for transmitting knowledge across generations (Matthews, 2012). This section will introduce three different forms of workshops employed by Ombak Potehi in their outreach efforts to various age groups and diverse backgrounds.

Firstly, when engaging with pre-adolescent and adolescent students, Ombak Potehi's workshops create a fun atmosphere, captivating children with the enchanting colors of the puppets and captivating music. The theater troupe offers puppet painting

workshops, allowing participating children to personally experience the colors of the characters and understand the different roles of sheng (male), dan (female), jing (painted face), chou (clown), and mo (supporting) through the puppets' facial expressions. By painting the puppets, children gain a deeper understanding of the unique characteristics and appearances of each role. They learn to differentiate between the vivid colors and intricate designs representing different characters. This hands-on experience not only stimulates their creativity but also cultivates an appreciation for the diversity and complexity of puppetry. Through the process of painting, children establish a connection with the puppets, igniting their imagination as they envision the stories and performances these characters can bring to life.

In workshops designed for children, another exciting activity is introducing them to the music of Potehi and encouraging them to tap along with the rhythmic beats. They are introduced to traditional musical instruments used in Potehi performances and learn about the role of music in enhancing the storytelling and creating the atmosphere. By tapping along with the music, children actively participate and connect with the rhythm and energy of the performances. This interactive activity not only allows them to appreciate the artistry of Potehi music but also helps them develop a sense of rhythm and coordination. In the modern context, these types of workshops are characterized by the transmission and experiential learning of intangible cultural heritage (Ji, Fu, Tan & Sun, 2019). The younger generation plays a crucial role in inheriting and preserving this heritage, serving as a key driving force.

Engaging and fun workshops inspire children's interest, ensuring the transmission of traditions to the next generation (Kartopu & Bölükoğlu, 2016).

Ombak Potehi's workshops exemplify Pratt's (1992) concept of the contact zone—a space where Chinese-Malaysian heritage dynamically interacts with contemporary multicultural participants. These workshops operate as pedagogical contact zones, requiring facilitators to embody the intercultural competencies outlined by Paige (1986): cognitive flexibility when explaining puppet symbolism across cultures, cultural self-awareness in moderating Malay children's reinterpretations of Chinese color codes, and humor to navigate moments of semantic ambiguity. For instance, when a Tamil child associates the white-faced chou (clown) puppet with Indian roles, the workshop transforms into a creative laboratory of intercultural theatre.



Figure 4.7.1: Potehi enters campus (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2019)



Figure 4.7.2: Potchi enters campus (photo by Ombak Potchi, 2019)

The second type of workshop takes the form of a panel discussion and sharing session, primarily targeting university students and young working professionals. Its main objective is to deepen the understanding and appreciation of intangible cultural heritage among these young individuals. For example, at a panel discussion and sharing session held at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Mr. Marcus Lim, the director of Ombak Potchi, and Ms. Wu from the Teochew Puppet & Opera House take the stage to share about the existing traditional performing arts in Penang. During these events, students have the opportunity to interact directly with members of the theater troupe, sharing knowledge, skills, and personal experiences related to Potchi puppetry. This intimate dialogue allows the students to gain in-depth insights into the intricate techniques and craftsmanship involved in puppetry creation, as well as the historical and cultural significance behind each character and performance. The theater troupe members generously share stories, anecdotes, and traditional practices associated with Potchi, providing the students with a rich background knowledge. This workshop not

only offers educational value but also serves as a platform for intergenerational exchange, facilitating the continuation and preservation of Potehi puppetry traditions. It provides university students with an immersive and transformative experience, enabling them to become advocates for intangible cultural heritage and contribute to the ongoing importance and vitality of this art form in contemporary society.



Figure 4.7.3: Public Lecture (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2019)

Another example is when the theater troupe participates in a "TEDx Talks" event, a renowned platform where they have the opportunity to convey their content to a global audience. Mr. Lim, as the troupe director, presents the vision and innovative performances of the theater troupe, showcasing the charm of Potehi puppetry through live demonstrations.

The final type of workshop is a formal and professional short-term training program. Ombak Potehi theater troupe recruits interested participants through information releases and provides concentrated training for one week, taking beginners from the

introductory level to a basic mastery of puppet manipulation skills. Some participants are also internal members of the troupe who undergo consolidation and enhanced training through the workshop. The workshop instructors are invited from overseas and have extensive performance experience as well as progressive teaching expertise. For example, the founder of Paper Monkey Theatre in Singapore. The emphasis on "progressive teaching expertise" is due to the fact that, as mentioned earlier in the research, when Ombak Potehi was established, the younger generation interested in Potehi performance learned from the older generation artists of the Beng Geok Hong troupe. In that era, these older artists were engaged in such art forms due to their families' involvement, and naturally, the younger generation inherited the skills from their ancestors. The teaching methods of the older generation were primarily oral transmission, where the master performer would demonstrate while the students followed their actions and imitated their singing style.



Figure 4.7.4: Master class training (Photo by the Researcher)

This oral transmission aimed to create muscle memory in the students and was commonly used in traditional Chinese opera before the 20th century. "Muscle memory" is the primary mode of transmission in the inheritance of traditional opera singing skills, particularly in the past when there was less reliance on scripts and musical scores. The "oral transmission and personal instruction" through words and deeds is the main mode of transmission in traditional stage arts. To some extent, observing performances by experienced and peer actors is also another form of "personal instruction" (Hai, 2021).



Figure 4.7.5: Master class training (Photo by the Researcher)

Traditional puppetry involves highly technical movements, and each puppet character has its own set of entrance patterns and postures. This traditional teaching method of oral transmission and personal instruction also follows a progressive and subtle approach, starting from the simple to the complex, from the basic to the advanced,

from the shallow to the profound, from the external to the internal, from the physical to the psychological progressing step by step, subtly influencing the learners. At the same time, the students progress from not knowing the reasons behind the techniques to understanding them, until they can apply the knowledge freely and comprehensively (Sun, 1992). However, this teaching method is not suitable for non-professional enthusiasts or beginners without prior training. Well-known playwright Jiao Juyin (1988) has also criticized the oral transmission and personal instruction: "Performers typically lack literacy skills and rely entirely on auditory learning to memorize the texts. As a result, the orally transmitted rhymed lines gradually become difficult to understand, causing significant difficulties for the performers."

The workshop approach to teaching is more scientific and provides a structured learning environment where participants can follow a planned curriculum. It doesn't involve learning fully-formed puppetry performances at the beginner stage. The learning process progresses systematically from basics to advanced techniques, ensuring comprehensive understanding of the art form. The curriculum can be designed around specific themes, skills, and techniques, offering a comprehensive learning experience. Instructors analyze each movement of puppetry, providing detailed explanations for a range of fragmented actions, including finger exercises, puppet posture, walking, turning, flipping, and fighting, among others. This detailed analysis helps participants grasp the complexity of the art form and develop a deeper

understanding of its techniques. Moreover, the instructors teach in English and Mandarin Chinese, which attracts more public attention and increases participation compared to traditional artists who only speak the Hokkien dialect.

Ombak Potehi's intensive workshops exemplify an intercultural synthesis of knowledge transmission paradigms. The training negotiates between traditional Chinese kou chuan xin shou (oral transmission through familial lineages) and Western-structured skill decomposition (Schechner, 1973), creating what Waskul and Vannini (2016) characterize as dramaturgical embodiment - where performative bodies become sites of cultural meaning-making. For instance, the pedagogical approach to puppet "flipping" techniques operates as a contact zone: where traditional metaphors ("leap like a carp") coexist with biomechanical analysis (wrist rotation angles, finger pressure points).

4.7.2 Experimental Theater Collaboration

The Ombak Potehi Troupe also ventured into collaboration with stage drama in 2023, breaking away from the traditional practice of performing in makeshift pavilions on the streets. Instead, they entered the experimental theater space, allowing the audience to clearly witness the entire process of puppet manipulation by the actors. This

represents an innovative performance approach and signifies the transition of traditional art into the modern era.

The stage play "Le Tabouret" (translated as Chairs) marks Ombak Potehi's first collaboration with contemporary theater. The play is an adaptation of the absurdist play "The Chairs" by French playwright Eugene Ionesco. The protagonists are an elderly couple who are traditional Potehi puppeteers. Faced with the decline of traditional art and its waning popularity, the couple decides to retire and return to their hometown. One day, the female protagonist suddenly receives a divine message, indicating that she should invite everyone to their home and have the divine message conveyed to the public through a medium. The entire play is filled with absurdity, with the stage filled with chairs that remain unoccupied. However, through the performances of the two protagonists, it seems as though the stage is filled with people.



Figure 4.7.6: Performance scene (Photo by the Researcher)

The meaning behind the "chairs" in this play actually has two layers. Firstly, it symbolizes the obvious sight of empty chairs that the audience encounters, representing the gradual disregard for traditional art by the public. As mentioned in the dialogue of the play, "Even the past temple festivals and rituals no longer invite us to perform." Secondly, it carries a metaphorical meaning, representing the ideal vision of the Potehi industry, where there should be a full house before the art of Potehi. Through the popular art form of stage drama, the theme of "preserving intangible cultural heritage" is conveyed. By performing Potehi in experimental theater spaces, where the characteristics of the art form are fully exposed to the public, the seemingly unattainable traditional art can be integrated with modern elements and become a part of people's lives.

Potehi originates from traditional Chinese art, tracing back to the theory of the origin of Chinese drama. In his work "History of Song and Yuan Drama," Wang Guowei clearly stated, "The prosperity of singing and dancing can be traced back to ancient witchcraft. The rise of witchcraft can be traced back to the remote ancient times." This straightforwardly presents the viewpoint that Chinese drama originated from witchcraft (Wang & Zeng, 2012). Similar to Western drama, the origin of Chinese drama is closely connected to religious rituals, so witchcraft and its rituals should be the source, aligning with the notion of art originating from witchcraft (Liu, 2013). The relationship between drama and religion was initially concentrated in temple theaters,

where performances in temples constituted a kind of ritual, serving both efficacy and entertainment purposes. "Ritual performance" is an inclusive term that also encompasses puppetry (Zhao, 2017). Unlike commercial urban entertainment, theatrical performances in the past in China were typically part of temple fairs. Dolby (1976) pointed out the significant role played by temple stages in the history of Chinese drama.

As previously mentioned, Potehi serves a ceremonial purpose, such as during the month before and after the Hungry Ghost Festival, when over 200 neighborhoods in Penang, Malaysia, host related activities. Some are held in Chinese temples, while others take place in nearby squares or open spaces. The main activity during the Hungry Ghost Festival is the offering of sacrifices. Through the process of entertaining gods and appeasing spirits, the Chinese community welcomes the most lively and festive time of the year, where gods, spirits, and people all indulge in entertainment (Kang, 2009). Potehi performances are mostly staged in temporary pavilions set up within temples, with the primary audience being the gods and then the people.



Figure 4.7.7: Performance photos (Photo by the Researcher)

Ombak Potehi has innovated and changed the performance venues, transitioning from temples to Experimental Theatre, also known as Black Box Theatre. The concept of small theatre originated in late 19th to early 20th century France. The establishment of the "Théâtre Libre" by André Antoine in 1887 aimed to challenge and criticize the modern social civilization of Western society during a period of rapid economic development, catering to the aesthetic tastes of the emerging bourgeois class, with the dual goals of "breaking away from the old" and "embracing the new" (Tu, 2022). The unique spatial characteristics of this theater provide it with distinct functionalities, and its space usage is versatile and flexible. The theater's overall background is black, allowing the audience's attention to be focused on the people and objects on the stage. Additionally, the theater lacks a stage higher than the audience seating area, bringing the audience closer to the performance area and making it easier for them to immerse themselves in the theatrical atmosphere (Lee, 2010).

The performance style also incorporates elements from modern puppetry, such as the presence of puppets alongside actors on stage. For example, the British puppetry play "War Horse" brings giant puppetry installations onto the stage, merging puppets with actors to portray the convergence of real-life experiences within the theatrical context (Liu, 2022). Another approach referred to as "puppets sharing the stage" or "exposing the manipulator" is commonly used in many puppetry arts, like Japan's "Bunraku." During the Edo period, puppeteers would hide behind curtains while manipulating the puppets, but gradually transitioned to no longer concealing the fact that they were controlling the puppets. They began to display their hand gestures, allowing the audience to witness the manipulation while simultaneously showcasing the artistry and the work itself (Skipitares, 2004). The Potehi performance in "The Chair" is similar to the later period of Bunraku.

Ombak Potehi's migration from temple courtyards to black box theatres reveals fundamental processes of intercultural performance practice. The black box theatre functions as what performance scholars term a "contact zone" (Pratt, 1992), where distinct performance traditions encounter and transform one another. Within this space, the ritual dimensions of Chinese temple theatre (Kang, 2009) interact with experimental Western performance methods (Tu, 2022) through concrete artistic practices. Most significantly, objects originally used for ritual purposes - incense burners, ceremonial puppets, and ritual textiles - become integrated into contemporary stage design, their meanings expanding while retaining cultural significance. This

spatial transition enables performers to simultaneously honor traditional conventions and explore innovative expressions. Rather than marking a departure from tradition, the black box theatre becomes a site where tradition evolves through intercultural dialogue, reflecting Malaysia's complex cultural ecology.

This is a completely new performance fusion approach of Potehi, taking place in a more flexible and liberated stage space that can accommodate different types of performances and innovative artistic forms, thereby presenting a more contemporary and creative show for the audience. It is also a new mode of dissemination, injecting new vitality and innovation into traditional art, providing the audience with a richer and more intimate artistic experience, and promoting the exchange and integration between traditional art and modern culture.

4.7.3 Media Communication

The emergence of new media forms has fundamentally transformed the landscape of art dissemination, reshaping its forms, content, functions, and mediums (Xi & Gao, 2023). Traditional puppetry performance art, once a cultural industry of the agrarian era, now serves as a bridge for intercultural communication. As an ancient folk heritage, Potehi combines visual symbols, drama, and craftsmanship, embodying cultural memory that transcends borders. Empowered by media technologies, Ombak

Potehi's dissemination has evolved from temple fairs and markets to film, television, and digital platforms, transitioning from street performances to theatrical and virtual stages. This shift not only modernizes the art form but also enables intercultural engagement, allowing diverse audiences to access and reinterpret Potehi within global contexts.

Ombak Potehi often disseminates its works through non-profit initiatives, such as the Penang International Puppetry Festival, where performances are freely accessible. By leveraging Penang's status as a multicultural hub and tourist destination, the troupe facilitates intercultural encounters, inviting both local and international audiences to experience Potehi firsthand. This approach fosters mutual understanding, as spectators from different cultural backgrounds interpret the art through their own lenses, creating a dynamic exchange of meanings.

The troupe has also embraced virtual spaces as a site for intercultural dialogue. Since the 21st century, the internet—the "fourth medium"—has redefined the reach of traditional performing arts. Marshall McLuhan (1994) argues that new media transforms phenomena through "changes in scale, pace, and pattern." During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ombak Potehi adapted by recording performances and sharing them online, making Potehi accessible to global audiences beyond physical and cultural boundaries. Additionally, they launched virtual Potehi workshops, using digital classrooms to teach the art form. These initiatives not only meet audience

demand but also expand intercultural participation, as learners worldwide engage with Potehi, reinterpret its narratives, and contribute to its evolving legacy in a connected world.



Figure 4.7.8: Potehi performance recording (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2020)

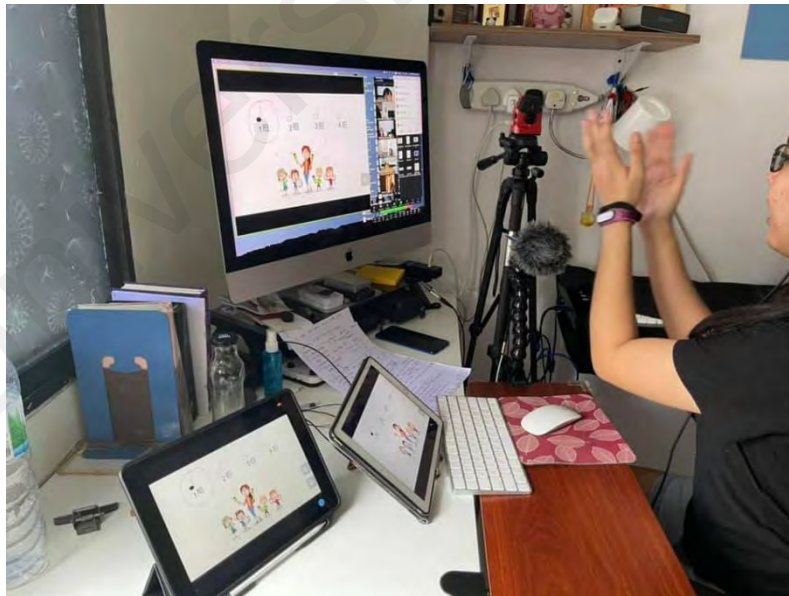


Figure 4.7.9: Online workshop (photo by Ombak Potehi, 2020)

4.8 Conclusion

From an Intercultural perspective, the heritage thinking and operational methods originating from Europe are seen to harbor Western hegemony (Byrne, 1991). While they preserve historical remnants, they fundamentally lead to the destruction of indigenous historical perspectives and cultural thought processes in different cultures (Lowenthal, 1998). The fundamental principle of heritage protection is the preservation of cultural diversity. So, where does the cultural diversity of heritage lie? Western scholars have explored the diverse paths of heritage in multicultural societies from different multicultural theories (Tunbridge, 2012). When considering the cultural diversity of heritage, it is more important to delve into different cultural traditions, examine the corresponding languages, understandings, thought processes in the context of modern and contemporary backgrounds, and the associated values (Hou & Wu, 2012). When implementing strategies for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, Ombak Potehi fundamentally focuses on cultural diversity. From the establishment of the troupe, script creation, stage elements, and new media dissemination to intercultural performances, particular emphasis is placed on integrating the traditional features of different cultures.

CHAPTER5 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

5.1 Introduction

This study delves into the Ombak Potehi troupe as a local Malaysian puppet theater group, emphasizing its pivotal role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through the revitalization and local development of this traditional performing art form. Through intercultural performances, the troupe actively explores and innovates original scripts, integrating new interdisciplinary elements into each production to expand the dissemination of performing arts as much as possible. Building upon the preceding research arguments, this chapter summarizes the findings of this study and provides recommendations for future work.

5.2 Summary of Findings

This study began in 2023, with the author collecting literature on Potehi to establish research questions and objectives through literature review. The literature review served as a crucial starting point, aiding the researcher in gathering secondary data and providing historical information on Potehi. By reading and writing the literature

review, the researcher also sought to identify differences in Malaysian Potehi from the literature, thus determining the research direction.

Writing a literature review is an appropriate first step in research, serving as the second chapter of this dissertation. Given that this study primarily focuses on Potehi in Penang, Malaysia, tracing its origins back to the Minnan region of China, the literature review delves into Chinese literature on Potehi, particularly emphasizing aspects such as history, styles, performance modes, and folklore. Chinese literature provides substantial theoretical and practical support. Transitioning from the history of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia to literature on Potehi in Malaysia establishes a chronological and spatial framework in the literature. When studying the emerging troupe Ombak Potehi in Penang, Malaysia, Chinese literature offers additional theoretical support, providing the author with new insights into comparisons between local new troupes and traditional troupes, as well as avenues for innovation. This exploration also reveals research gaps, as highlighted earlier, where Malaysian Potehi and Chinese Potehi are essentially the same performing art form; however, Malaysian Potehi represents a foreign artistic culture brought by the Chinese diaspora to Southeast Asia. As an "other" culture performing in the "host" country, it encounters challenges and uncertainties in dissemination.

Potehi is primarily concentrated in the Penang region of Malaysia, where literature on it is currently limited, especially as it transitions from traditional troupes to

incorporating local elements. Research on Chinese-language performing arts in Malaysia has mostly focused on more musically inclined forms like Cantonese opera and Teochew opera. In Penang, studies on Potehi are dominated by research papers from Prof. Tan at Universiti Sains Malaysia. This study analyzes the Ombak Potehi troupe as a case study, which was established under Prof. Tan's active research. Therefore, Prof. Tan's articles serve as crucial reference materials for understanding the traditional Potehi performance styles, folklore, and the historical background of this troupe in Penang. Subsequently, this group of young individuals dedicated to promoting traditional Potehi has effectively inherited and innovated the troupe, with a focus on diversifying performance styles and engaging in intercultural creative performances. As an innovative Potehi troupe in Penang, conducting fieldwork around this troupe remains a key focus of the research.

In this dissertation, let's revisit the problem statement and research questions outlined in the first chapter. As a traditional art form transplanted to Malaysia, spanning both time and culture, the first aspect involves a decline in the traditional cultural audience in modern society, leading to the need for transformation and innovation. The second aspect pertains to the necessity for foreign cultures to seek cultural identity in Malaysia, aiming at a broader integration with local culture to achieve a sense of identity. Against this backdrop, the establishment of the Ombak Potehi troupe has opened up new directions for the development of Potehi in Malaysia, incorporating intercultural performance innovations that not only blend with local elements but also

absorb diverse cultural influences. Consequently, the research objectives of this study are to explore the background of Ombak Potehi's establishment, new elements in performance techniques within their works, and their methods of artistic dissemination.

Chapter 2 of the dissertation also encompasses the theoretical framework section, with the guiding theory of the study being the intercultural theatre theory, also known as intercultural performance. This theory focuses on the intersections of different performance cultures on stage, involving the cross-pollination, selection, and value judgments among diverse cultural theatrical forms. Additionally, relevant associated theories have been summarized and reviewed, confirming the research methodology and guiding the research process.

Chapter 3 discusses the research methodology, confirming a primarily qualitative research approach centered on a case study. It elaborates on the data sources, data collection methods, and on-site fieldwork based on the research questions. A forward-looking approach is taken to anticipate potential limitations based on the methodology, which will be further summarized in this chapter. After reviewing the selected methods, such as on-site investigations, non-participant observation, and analysis, it was found that these methods are appropriate. During the on-site investigations, the author, aware of the potential influence of their original professional background on data analysis, maintained a purely observational role

throughout, following the troupe's activities. Additionally, backstage access, observing performances, training sessions, and accompanying the troupe were established as norms and entry points for adopting participant observation.

Chapter 4 delves into the discussion and analysis of the data. As a new generation troupe in Malaysia, the author, after researching historical records, discovered that the establishment of Ombak Potehi was the result of collaborative efforts from various individuals. Unlike the traditional apprenticeship system in older troupes, Ombak Potehi was initiated through the coordination of the central figure, Prof. Tan. Young people from various backgrounds were invited to join, learn from, and exchange ideas with traditional artists. At the core of Ombak Potehi's guiding principles lies the key concept of "originality and innovation," which has been pivotal in revitalizing Potehi in Malaysia through the troupe.

The author also investigated the relationships within Ombak Potehi troupe, noting that as all members are enthusiasts, the troupe does not operate under a traditional hierarchical structure with a single leader. Instead, the core concept within the troupe is that every member can equally communicate and contribute to every aspect of the production, signifying a democratic approach to creativity. The author cataloged all performances since the troupe's inception, noting the diverse venues and stages where performances took place. It was found that variations in stage structures influenced the dynamics of audience engagement.

Building upon the background research, the focus shifts towards the performances and works of the troupe. The author, as an observer, delves into the daily operations of Ombak Potehi, analyzing aspects ranging from script creation processes, pre-rehearsal preparations, rehearsal methodologies, to the procedures of formal performances. It was discovered that original scripts primarily incorporate local narratives, with members engaging in collaborative creation after researching historical materials specific to Penang. When adapting classic scripts, the stories are often set in Penang, interwoven with elements from the Nanyang region, aligning with the interests of Malaysian audiences.

During rehearsals, group divisions are employed, and rehearsal methods are adjusted as needed. Given the diverse professional backgrounds of the actors, roles are tailored to fit the actors, representing a significant departure from traditional troupe practices. The experienced troupe leader acts as both a mentor and director, providing collective foundational training for the actors. Additionally, efforts are made to adopt modern teaching techniques, deconstructing and analyzing movements to facilitate easier comprehension for the actors. In essence, a more scientific and modern innovative model is employed to unite every member of the troupe.

The researchers observed the performances of Ombak Potehi troupe in various indoor venues, emphasizing their adaptation to traditional outdoor environments, the fusion

of Chinese aesthetics with Western settings, and the crucial role played by amateur troupe members in the preparation process. Potehi performances feature a portable multi-functional stage equipped with layered wooden boards and innovative projection screens, employing multilingual approaches to enhance visual and narrative storytelling. In terms of materials, the troupe utilizes durable wooden puppets to convey authenticity, collaborating with local designers to create historically accurate costumes. The vocal style inherits melodies from Hokkien opera, while the performance music undergoes rearrangement or original composition, focusing on musical details that align with the plot development.

The original works of Ombak Potehi troupe exhibit unique intercultural performance characteristics. The author selected three representative works for in-depth analysis, all of which are entirely original creations by the troupe and are frequently performed on tour. By analyzing these key works, a deeper exploration of the current transformation of traditional Malaysian Potehi and potential adaptation methods can be undertaken. Guided by intercultural performance theory, the author delves into the script, performance, and cultural background aspects of these main works. The analysis reflects a fusion of indigenous and foreign cultures, emphasizing collaboration and exchange with external cultures. It is worth noting that the selection of different intercultural performances by Ombak Potehi is not arbitrary but rather a result of deliberate choices made within contexts of cultural similarity, fusion, and progression.

As a new type of theater troupe, apart from changes in specific performance modes, its modern communication methods are also gradually transitioning to adapt to contemporary audiences. The author observed and analyzed collaborations with modern theaters, different workshop formats to promote inclusivity, and the utilization of online platforms and virtual spaces for broader outreach.

In conclusion, the objectives of this study have been achieved. The first research objective, involving data collection provided by the troupe, has been compiled by the researchers. The second research objective, based on observations, interviews, and video materials, has yielded data that serves as the research outcomes presented in Chapter 4. The final chapter also addresses the third research objective.

5.3 Suggestion for Further Research

In this study, the author primarily focuses on the strategies employed by the Ombak Potehi troupe in safeguarding the Potehi performing arts. This research centers on a specific theater troupe in a specific region at a particular moment. As mentioned earlier, being an external traditional performing art, the inheritance and continuation of Potehi face significant responsibilities. While other traditional arts in Malaysia, such as Cantonese opera and Teochew opera, hold certain practical significance for

guidance, particularly methodologically, the actual research would manifest distinct performance content. Given their common ground in Malaysian Chinese opera, future studies could systematically investigate and compare their development.

Due to the author's background, this study primarily assumes the role of an observer, focusing on the troupe's major works for analysis. In future research, researchers could take on a participatory role, engaging in participant observation. This immersive research approach would allow researchers to directly experience the troupe members' daily work routines, creative processes, and artistic practices. By actively participating, researchers can gain better insights into the cultural heritage and artistic techniques behind Potehi performances, thereby deepening their understanding and appreciation of this traditional performance form. This method of data collection could potentially fill research gaps by providing a more experiential perspective.

This study focuses on the intercultural performance of Ombak Potehi, where traditional art undergoes changes to adapt to modern audiences. In the future, research could more extensively incorporate audience studies, such as conducting audience surveys to understand different audience perspectives and experiences regarding Ombak Potehi performances. This would involve exploring their perceptions of performance forms, content, and cultural values. Additionally, it could investigate

how emerging technologies and workshops enhance audience engagement and performance experiences.

5.4 Conclusion

In Penang, there is a group of young people who have been actively striving for the continuation and preservation of traditional Chinese culture, which is where the charm of "tradition" lies. Potehi, as an intangible cultural heritage, holds significance not only in recording and preserving the historical and cultural heritage of a nation and its people but also as a "living memory" of human culture, serving as an essential component of world heritage. In the anthropological study of heritage, a theory focuses on the "identity" aspect of heritage, emphasizing the interdependence of heritage creation, development, ownership, and identification. No ethnic group would create a heritage that they do not identify with or acknowledge. Many ethnic groups demonstrate and affirm their loyalty to their ancestors through the inheritance of the heritage created and acknowledged by their forebears (Peng, 2008). Traditional Chinese Potehi performances exemplify a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging among the Chinese ethnic group. In order to revitalize and promote this art form, they are willing to engage in intercultural collaborations with local cultures and intangible cultural arts from other countries. When discussing the preservation of traditional performing arts today, it is crucial to emphasize the connection between

external forms and internal content. Preserving the cultural essence inherent in the external manifestations is the true essence of safeguarding Potehi performances as an intangible cultural heritage.

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