

# Revitalizing *Potehi* Practice: Preservation, Innovation, and Transmission by Rumah Cinwa in Contemporary Indonesia

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**Abstract:** During Suharto’s New Order regime (1967-1998), all forms of Chinese cultural expression in Indonesia, including the Chinese glove puppetry known as *wayang potehi*, were ruthlessly suppressed. This unfavorable political atmosphere for ethnic Chinese resulted in a tremendous decline in their involvement in *wayang potehi* practice. This article examines the preservation, innovation, and transmission of *wayang potehi* in contemporary Indonesia, particularly through the various efforts of Rumah Cinwa – a generation Z, Javanese-dominated *potehi* troupe. This article argues that such efforts can be attributed to the idea of multiculturalism that is encouraged by the contemporary Indonesia democratic regime. The active participation and innovation of the members of Rumah Cinwa in a waning Chinese tradition reveals their understanding of multiculturalism as sincerely embracing all cultural others in society, and paving the way for the sustainability of the genre in the future Indonesia.

**Abstrak:** Pada masa Orde Baru Suharto (1967-1998), segala bentuk ekspresi budaya Tionghoa di Indonesia, termasuk wayang kantong (sarung tangan) Tionghoa yang dikenal dengan wayang potehi, ditindas secara kejam. Suasana politik yang tidak menguntungkan bagi etnis Tionghoa ini mengakibatkan penurunan luar biasa keterlibatan mereka dalam praktik wayang potehi. Artikel ini mengkaji pelestarian, inovasi, dan transmisi wayang potehi di Indonesia kontemporer, khususnya melalui berbagai upaya yang dilakukan oleh Rumah Cinwa – kelompok potehi yang didominasi generasi Z Jawa. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa upaya tersebut dikaitkan dengan gagasan multikulturalisme yang dianut oleh rezim demokrasi Indonesia kontemporer. Partisipasi aktif dan inovasi anggota Rumah Cinwa dalam wayang potehi, sebuah tradisi Tionghoa yang memudar, mengungkapkan pemahaman mereka

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tentang multikulturalisme yang dengan tulus merangkul semua budaya lain dalam masyarakat, dan yang membuka jalan bagi keberlanjutan genre di masa depan Indonesia.

**Keywords:** *cultural preservation, multiculturalism, Reformasi Indonesia, Rumah Cinwa, Wayang Potehi*

## Introduction

Behind a well-carved wooden stage about two to three meters tall, three young Javanese girls play the rhythmic pattern of Chinese *xiqu* (often referred to as “Chinese opera”) accompaniment by sounding the Chinese percussion instruments: *xiao luo* (small gong), *cha* (cymbal) and *tonggu* (small drum), aiming to liven up the atmosphere and invite audiences to come to the show. Suddenly, the excited percussion sound stops abruptly and is replaced by the softer melody of Sundanese plucked zither *kecapi*, while a female puppeteer chants a quatrain<sup>3</sup> in Hokkien, which is considered an essential ritual for the success of the upcoming show. After the ritual, two glove puppets, one male and one female, appear on the stage (Figure 1). The appearance of the male character puppet is recognizably in Chinese style, while the female one appears to have mixed-ethnic face and dressing fashion. The characters presenting in the show all speak and sing in *Bahasa Indonesia*, the official language of Indonesia, despite the repertoire being about a famous legend in Chinese history: *Sie Djin Kwie*<sup>4</sup>.

The form of this puppetry is known as *potehi*<sup>5</sup>, originally known as 布袋戲 (pronounced *bu-dai-xi* in Mandarin), and the show was performed by a troupe called Rumah Cinwa on Net TV’s Indonesia Morning Show in 2018. *Potehi* is generally believed to have been introduced to Southeast Asia, including the country we today call Indonesia, by the substantial influx of Chinese Fujian immigrants in the early stages of the Dutch colonization during the late sixteenth century to early seventeenth century (Kartomi, 2000, p.287; Stenberg, 2015a, pp.393-5; Purwoseputro, 2014, p.35). It serves as a crucial means for the Fujian Chinese community members to pay respect to deities and ancestors as well as to demonstrate their gratitude for success in business. The genre was regarded as a part of Indonesia’s *wayang* in the late colonial period when *wayang* was used as a term for various forms of Chinese entertainment (Stenberg, 2015a, p.393), and became a significant cultural symbol of ethnic Chinese.

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<sup>3</sup> The quatrain recited in the beginning of the show is known as *suluk*. The version of *suluk* in this show is as follows: *djiao djiao ha san lai* 悄悄下山來, *sian hwa man-ti khay* 香花滿地開, *hok lok tjai tji siu* 福路財子壽, *hui hap-cong sian lay* 惟合眾仙來, which means: We (the gods) come down from the mountain and meet here, fresh flowers bloom everywhere on the earth, bringing blessings, good luck and long life.

<sup>4</sup> The legend of *Sie Djin Kwie*, a general of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.) in ancient China, is one of the most popular *wayang potehi* repertoires. The legend is divided into two parts: *Sie Djin Kwie Ceng Tang* (*Sie Djin Kwie*’s Expedition to the East) and *Sie Djin Kwie Ceng See* (*Sie Djin Kwie*’s Expedition to the East) (Mastuti, 2014, p.87). Both are now frequently staged in Java.

<sup>5</sup> *Wayang* is a Javanese word for “shadow,” and refers to a group of human and puppet theatres (Stenberg, 2015b, p.44). The word *potehi* itself is derived from three words in Fujian Chinese dialect: ‘*po*’ meaning fabric, ‘*te*’ meaning bag, and ‘*hi*’ meaning theatre; therefore, *potehi* when literally translated means a piece of fabric made into a glove used for theatre.



Figure 1. The scene of *Sie Djin Kwie* and his wife in duet<sup>6</sup> on a *wayang potehi* show by Rumah Cinwa (Indonesia Morning Show NET, 2018).

Although the historical evidence of the transmission and developmental history of *wayang potehi* narratives are scarce and fragmented,<sup>7</sup> a common agreement among most historical texts is that this genre has flourished throughout the Indonesian archipelago and was widely appreciated by the local pluralistic society prior to President Suharto's New Order regime (1967-1998). Along with other Chinese cultural art forms, the practice of *wayang potehi* in public spaces was prohibited during the regime due to Suharto's discriminatory regulations and cultural administrative rules that sought to assimilate the ethnic Chinese into the national body. This resulted in a large number of *wayang potehi* troupes waning in membership or vanishing completely. For the few troupes that have persisted throughout the thirty-two-year-long suppression, Javanese and a handful of *peranakan*<sup>8</sup> (a term that generally refers to Javanese and Chinese mixed blood) practitioners have become the overwhelming majority of existing troupe members. The continuation of the genre is also attributed to its improvisational and acculturational nature, which allows *wayang potehi* to survive through means of strategic innovation and localization, especially when the ethnic Chinese are no longer the majority of the performers.

<sup>6</sup> The melody of the duet "*Teratai Putih*" (The white lotus) was composed by Rumah Cinwa troupe members Sekar Diah Prasistia and her troupe colleagues. They used Sundanese *kecapi* as the main accompanying instrument for the duet, on the grounds that the instrument resembles the Chinese plucked *guzheng*.

<sup>7</sup> These folk historical documents comprise a wide category of personal manuscripts, newspaper reports, the chronicle of cities and temples, colonial ethnographies, as well as active *potehi* practitioners' memories transmitted by their seniors.

<sup>8</sup> The ethnic Chinese in Indonesia are very diverse and can be identified differently in different periods and regions. Conventionally, scholars have divided them into two main groups: the *totok* refers to China-oriented, China-born newcomers, pure-blood Chinese, and Chinese dialect speakers, while the *peranakan* are the acculturated, local-born, typically mixed-blood Chinese, and Indonesian dialect speakers (Suryadinata, 1971, p.83; Coppel, 2002, p.106; Hoon, 2006, pp.156-7).

Of the four existing *wayang potehi* troupes in Java,<sup>9</sup> Rumah Cinwa is the only one with female members, established in the era of Indonesia's democratization (often known as the *Reformasi*). Founded in 2015 by a Javanese Muslim Dwi Woro Retno Mastuti<sup>10</sup> and her friend Paul Himawan in Depok, West Java, the troupe is mainly operated by a group of Indonesian youths ranging from 18 into their 20s from diverse backgrounds, with Mastuti serving as their mentor. Political democratization seemed to open up a new space for accepting *wayang potehi* as "Indonesian" but no longer "Chinese," which is apparent in Rumah Cinwa. These young troupe members not only study *wayang potehi* but also dedicate themselves to popularizing the genre with innovative performances that largely incorporate Javanese and Sundanese (the ethnicity, language, and culture of West Java) cultural elements. Additionally, the contemporary practice of *wayang potehi* in this troupe is not constrained by its original function of serving the religious rituals and moral teachings of the ethnic Chinese community, but has been integrated into Indonesia's multicultural circumstances, frequently appearing at events in shopping malls, local cultural festivals, public schools, and churches with varying degrees of localized presentation.

Given that Indonesia is on the path of democratization in which general society is expressing more tolerance towards the coexistence of cultural diversity, scholarly research in recent years has suggested that contemporary *wayang potehi* studies, particularly by Indonesian natives, set an optimistic prospect for regaining popularity and prosperity of the genre within a hybridized and acculturational format. As Mastuti claims, *wayang potehi* has adapted to local conditions and long been integrated into Indonesia's cultural diversity. Its kaleidoscopic contemporary practice reflects the various aspects of the intertwined relationships among the pluralistic population and within Indonesia's ever-changing sociopolitical context. However, the serious historical conflicts between *pribumi* (native Indonesian) and ethnic Chinese citizens over the past few centuries have resulted in feelings of prejudice against each other. *Wayang potehi* in reality thus has yet to receive national recognition in Indonesia, despite two decades of policies encouraging multiculturalist thinking in the era of *Reformasi*.

The Rumah Cinwa troupe challenges this lack of recognition by creating a syncretic form of *wayang potehi*. Grounded by the framework of the genre, the young troupe members' flourishing creativity catalyzed new styles in their performance, which they called *wayang potehi Nusantara*, namely the Indonesian archipelago's *wayang potehi*. These new styles range from the appearances of puppets, to the content of repertoire, to the music accompaniment demonstrating varying degrees of dynamism. Through these efforts, they hope that the genre in contemporary Indonesia will transform from a Chinese minority cultural practice into an entertainment for all Indonesian citizens, symbolizing that Indonesia's cultural diversity is negotiating a sense of collective belonging through appreciation, participation, and integration of a non-Indonesian native cultural form.

With this article, we argue that the embrace of Rumah Cinwa's young participants of *wayang potehi* can be attributed to the idea of multiculturalism<sup>11</sup> that is upheld by the contemporary democratized Indonesia. This idea has gradually taken root in the society and has especially effectively influenced the younger generation. Our approach to examining Rumah Cinwa's *wayang potehi* is to compare it with the practice of existing local Chinese temple troupes dating back to the Dutch colonial

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<sup>9</sup> These are: Fu He An in Gudo, Jombang, Tjoe Tik Kiong temple troupe in Tulungagung, Lima Merpati in Surabaya, and Rumah Cinwa in Depok.

<sup>10</sup> Background information on the Rumah Cinwa troupe mentioned in this article is provided by Dwi Woro Retno Mastuti in her co-authorship of this article.

<sup>11</sup> As a civic ideology in the current political era of *Reformasi*, Firdaus, Anggreta and Yasin stress that the value of Indonesia's multiculturalism lies in a mutual understanding of the diversity of cultures and other forms possessed by various ethnic groups, all of which have a parallel position (2020, p.133).

period, and to integrate this with knowledge contributions by Mastuti on the operation of Rumah Cinwa troupe during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, we draw on the first-named author's online interviews with troupe members and an analysis of the increasing exposure of *wayang potehi* performances and narratives in mass media and cyberspace.

This article examines how a group of gender- and ethnically-integrated Indonesian youths perceives *wayang potehi* and presents it in an acculturated format. This group of youths believes that their *wayang potehi* may be an alternative means of civic education in multiculturalism in a hope to serve as a moderating force that facilitates mutual understanding and counteracts long-standing ethnic antagonism in Indonesian pluralism. We begin with a brief overview of *wayang potehi* and its development within the context of the archipelago's history over the past centuries, as well as the basis for organizing a troupe. We then provide close observations of Rumah Cinwa's innovativeness, and contrast their approaches with those of other temple troupes. How these young *potehi* practitioners value Indonesia's multiculturalism will be highlighted, which also sheds light on how democratic Indonesia may achieve the goal of ethnic and religious reconciliation.

### ***Wayang potehi***

Although Chinese glove puppetry is thought by Indonesian scholarship to have been introduced to Java before the seventeenth century, the earliest documented evidence of *wayang potehi* performances in the Dutch East Indies is that in 1772 a Batavia (now Jakarta) *potehi* troupe was invited to perform at a Chinese temple Tay Kak Sie in Semarang, central Java (Purwoseputro, 2014, p.35, Stenberg, 2015a, p.396). Ethnomusicologist Margaret J. Kartomi seems to endorse this point by noting that *wayang potehi* was performed in local Chinese temples in Java from at least 1770 (2000, p.299). Historical documents indicate that by the mid-nineteenth century, both Chinese human theatre *xiqu* and *potehi* had become a part of major local festivals. At the time, it seems most *potehi* performances were invited from China (Stenberg, 2019, p.54).

In the first half of the twentieth century, *wayang potehi* was discovered across a much broader geographical range than in previous centuries. In addition to almost every major city in Java, the puppets and performances were also found and recorded in Bali, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Sumatra (Purwoseputro, 2014, p.42; Stenberg, 2019, pp.54-56). It seems appropriate to posit that *wayang potehi* was widely performed not only in Hokkien Chinese communities but also in local events throughout Java, Bali, Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Sumatra, with the range narrowing down to East and Central Java over the course of the second half of the twentieth century.

Though disrupted by Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945 and the nationalist revolution, the existence of *wayang potehi* did not decline immediately. Accounts from Surabaya report *wayang potehi* performances during the term of Sukarno (1945-1967), the first President of independent Indonesia, occurring as usual, although there was also a suggestion that the genre was losing popularity in this period. During Suharto's New Order from March 1967 to May 1998, although Chinese cultural forms were prohibited from being displayed in public by anti-Sino political legislations, *wayang potehi* practices were not completely wiped out. For instance, Kartomi witnessed *wayang potehi* performances in Malang, East Java, in 1974 (2000, p.297); van Geonendael, while conducting research in Indonesia from September 1984 to June 1986, watched *wayang potehi* at various sites, mostly for religious purposes, and even mentioned that the genre was 'highly popular' during her stay (1993, p.13). Toni Harsono, head of an existing temple troupe Fu He An<sup>12</sup> in Gudo-Jombang, also confirmed that this

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<sup>12</sup> The Fu Ho An troupe of Gudo's Hong San Kiong temple is currently one of the best known troupes in Indonesia. It is the heritage troupe of the Harsono / Tok (卓) family, and the current head of troupe is Chinese-Javanese gold merchant Toni Harsono, who is also named Tok Hok Lay (卓福來).

troupe did not stop performing at its affiliated temple during the New Order, although the frequency of performances was greatly reduced.<sup>13</sup> After the end of the Suharto's regime, the performances resumed along with other Chinese cultural forms, when all discriminatory policies against Chinese were lifted. In addition to Rumah Cinwa in West Java, the practice is currently found in three Chinese temples located in East Java: Hong San Kiong in Gudo-Jombang; Tjoe Tik Kiong in Tulungagung; and Hong Tiek Hian in Surabaya.

The show of *wayang potehi* is only possible through the cooperation of the troupe. Traditionally, a troupe comprises at least five male performers: a lead puppeteer, an assistant puppeteer, and three to four musicians. The lead puppeteer is often called 'sai-hu' in Hokkien. He is responsible for delivering the story, narrating dialogue, moving puppets, and occasionally playing musical instruments. The assistant puppeteer is called 'ji-chhiu' in Hokkien, playing a role in the troupe of preparing puppets to be staged according to the lead puppeteer's instructions and assisting in manipulating the puppets. The musicians are known as 'au-tai' in Hokkien. Each musician is responsible for playing more than two instruments; sometimes the musicians also facilitate part of the singing and narrating if necessary (Purwoseputro, 2014, p.100).

The training process of becoming a *wayang potehi* performer usually begins with practicing musical instruments and playing the accompaniment. Since music plays a pivotal role in *wayang potehi* by enlivening a variety of scenes and introducing the characters, musicians are required to have a comprehensive familiarity with the story plot, which enables them to deliver melody and tempo precisely corresponding to the storyline. The instruments used to accompany the show are traditionally Chinese. The instruments used by each troupe vary slightly, generally consisting of: *toa-chhoe* or *thua-jwee* (double reed woodwind), *di* (flute), *hian-na* (two-stringed fiddle), *ban* (wooden clappers), *tonggu* (small drum), *piak-go* (wood block), *cha* (cymbal) and *toa luo*, *xiao luo* (big and small gong) (Mastuti, 2014, pp. 105-6; Purwoseputro, 2014, pp. 116-7). The original music style accompanying the show in Indonesia can be described generally as *beiguan*, which is understood in Fujian as wind music from the North (Stenberg, 2015, p.55). This musical style is also described as *ba-yin* or *pa tim* (Tsai, 2015, p.85; Kartomi, 2000, p.286), which was transmitted to the Dutch East Indies by the Fujian diaspora to accompany *wayang potehi*, Chinese leather shadow puppetry, and Chinese opera. Unlike the narrative language that was already local, the style of music accompaniment was able to endure under Suharto's New Order.

Chinese heroism, romance and tragedy are common themes presented in the classic repertoire of *wayang potehi*. Characters depict various traits, including loyalty and betrayal as well as humor, which function as tools to present ancient Chinese philosophy, social criticism and moral teachings. During the New Order, *wayang potehi* could only be performed inside Chinese temples serving religious rituals or privately in the houses of Chinese patrons. The shows since then have been mostly narrated in Indonesian instead of a pidginized Malay language *Bahasa Melayu Pasar*<sup>14</sup> and Hokkien, due to a large number of Chinese descendent practitioners who were discouraged from engaging in performance and transmission. As a result, Javanese practitioners in the New Order were the predominant ethnicity of troupes, which has resulted in significant divergences in terms of *wayang potehi* performance.

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<sup>13</sup> Face-to-face interview with Toni Harsono by Yuan-Hsin Tung, June 2019.

<sup>14</sup> The term Bahasa Melayu Pasar, also known as Bazaar Malay or market Malay, was a lingua franca throughout insular Southeast Asia that was spoken by traders and merchants from Indonesia, Holland, China, and other Asian countries (Paauw, 2009, p.9).

## Rumah Cinwa and their *potehi*

Rumah Cinwa is the only *wayang potehi* troupe established in post-Suharto democratic Indonesia. The troupe is mainly composed of young Indonesians with diverse ethnic, religious, and educational backgrounds who mostly were born during the transition period from Suharto's *Orde Baru* to post-Suharto *Reformasi*. The spirit of diversity and inclusion is also manifested in the naming of the troupe. According to Dwi Rahmawanto,<sup>15</sup> one of the first to join the troupe, Rumah Cinwa was the abbreviation for Rumah Cina Jawa in Indonesian, which literally means the House of Javanese Chinese. But over time, the meaning of the title changed as many spectators interpreted Cinwa as "cinta wayang," meaning love puppets in Indonesian. Thus, the meaning of the troupe's name became the House of love for puppets.

One of the troupe's founders, Mastuti, believes that members of the younger generation are the best candidates to save *potehi* practice from declining in Indonesia. As a lecturer in the Javanese Studies Program at University of Indonesia in Depok, she tried to introduce puppets, stage, and musical instruments of *potehi* to her students who attended her birthday party in November 2014. "I will never forget the excitement on the face of those young friends when they first met *potehi*," said Mastuti. During the event, the college students took the initiative to pick up puppets and musical instruments, and asked how to use them correctly. "What should the puppet master say to the audiences? We don't know the story yet," asked Raisa, one of the students who attended the party that evening. Since the practice of this puppetry could be highly improvised, "feel free to tell any story you want," Mastuti replied.

About a third of the students who attended the party became the first batch of members of Rumah Cinwa, with new student members joining every subsequent year.<sup>16</sup> They gather regularly at Mastuti's garage or Kaldera park (Taman Kaldera<sup>17</sup>) for training programs to learn about classic *potehi* repertoire, puppet manipulation, music accompaniment, and brainstorming new style of practicing. Although the motivation for joining the troupe was an interest in puppetry, as the troupe became more and more successful, student members decided to dedicate their efforts to the preservation of *potehi* when they learned it could be endangered in Indonesia. For them, playing *wayang potehi* is not just about maintaining the resilience of the nation's cultural diversity, but more realistically, "if we Indonesians do not act to protect Indonesian culture, who will?"

In order to achieve this goal, the members set the troupe's mission as follows:<sup>18</sup>

- (1) to organize puppet shows on various occasions in order to introduce to the public puppet repertoire that reflects current happenings in Indonesia and around the world;
- (2) to carry out educational activities relating to Indonesia's *wayang* puppetry, especially *potehi*, in order to encourage the love of Indonesian puppetries for all generations, as it is a significant part of Indonesian cultural heritages;
- (3) to present innovative puppetry shows to engage young people, especially children;
- (4) to conduct research in *wayang* puppetry, especially *potehi*; and
- (5) to cooperate with various fields to develop and promote *wayang* puppetry as a cultural form to promote peace and social harmony.

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<sup>15</sup> Dwi Rahmawanto is currently a lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia.

<sup>16</sup> The troupe had recruited 66 members by 2022, of which 46 are currently actively participating in troupe activities.

<sup>17</sup> Taman Kaldera is a public park located in Depok, West Java, that used to belong to Mastuti's parents. Mastuti and her siblings followed their parents' wishes to use the park as a venue for community recreation and educational activities.

<sup>18</sup> Email interview with Mastuti and Rumah Cinwa troupe by Yuan-Hsin Tung, January 2022.

How does Rumah Cinwa carry out its mission? Often on weekends since 2018, the storytelling of Chinese classic legends or myths, Javanese shadow puppetry or *potehi* performances known as *Minggu Semata Wayang* (Puppetry on Sunday), and puppet painting events are held frequently by Rumah Cinwa at Kaldera park. When these activities are in process or the troupe receives an invitation to perform, troupe participants spontaneously take on respective roles serving as troupe photographers, videographers, event organizers, and social media account<sup>19</sup> managers to share information about the troupe's activities on the Internet. Internet and computer-mediated platforms in the past decade have gradually become a very prominent means of communication and source of entertainment in Indonesia, particularly for younger users. With the efforts of these young troupe members, the images and videos produced by Rumah Cinwa are flourishing in cyberspace, transcending geographic boundaries and allowing the genre to be accessible to Internet users both across the country and globally. Mastuti feels very proud of these youngsters' contribution: "they make good use of modern technology allowing Rumah Cinwa *potehi* to interact with the world." To financially support these activities, the troupe's operations are funded primarily from remuneration for public performances,<sup>20</sup> a small amount of regular sponsorships from local businesses for *Minggu Semata Wayang*, and self-funding by its founders and members.

In contrast to the Chinese theatrical performing arts genres that were introduced to the Indonesian archipelago but no longer exist in today's Indonesian *wayang* discourse, the improvised nature of *potehi* has enabled this genre to survive through means of strategic innovation and localization. This acculturation benefited mutual understanding and acceptance of differences in a highly pluralistic society of Indonesia, until the intolerance towards ethnic Chinese and *peranakan* increased, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. Especially inspired by the flexibility<sup>21</sup> of East Java temple troupes in their *wayang potehi*, Rumah Cinwa's performances attempt to expand the use of modern and local cultural elements, as can be seen from the stories they show on stage, the narrating style, the appearance of the puppets, and the music. The most notable innovation is in the gender of troupe members: Rumah Cinwa may be the first troupe with female members in the history of *potehi* in Indonesia (Figure 2).

*Wayang potehi* originally functioned as a vehicle for presenting ancient Chinese philosophy, social criticism, and moral teachings in society, thus Chinese heroism, romance and tragedy are common themes in the classic repertoire displayed in Chinese temple performances. Based on this principle, Javanese history and heroic stories, local legends, and jokes have become essential reference materials for Rumah Cinwa's *potehi* repertoire invention. New puppets used in their shows are created in the likeness of ethnic Javanese features and dress. The most diverse innovation, however, is evident in their music. In order to make *wayang potehi* more appealing, members discovered that incorporating sounds familiar to the crowd seemed to be an effective means to pique the audiences' interest. Rumah Cinwa's sonic creativities in *potehi* can be roughly categorized into three types: (1) the adaptation of

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<sup>19</sup> Rumah Cinwa's Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/rumahcinwa/>,  
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/rumahcinwa>, Blog: <https://rumahcinwa.wordpress.com/>,  
YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzU5quYoEBKgInoBnJOtmng/videos>

<sup>20</sup> According to Mastuti, the troupe has not set a fixed amount for their performance remuneration; the price is usually negotiated with the event organizers. Since it established, the troupe has received remuneration ranging from 2 to 15 million Indonesian rupiah. The troupe usually offers a special price for invitations from educational institutions, with a performance of around 2-3 million rupiah. If the invitation from shopping malls, often the troupe requests remuneration around 4-8 million rupiah for a show.

<sup>21</sup> *Wayang potehi* troupes currently in Java often have to be invited for commercial performances in public venues. Performers also often have to adapt their presentations to the entertainment purpose of the event, particularly adding local sounds to the musical accompaniment.



Indonesian traditional music or popular songs, (2) new compositions, and (3) the application of Indonesian musical instruments, such as Javanese gamelan and Sundanese drumming and *kecapi*.



Figure 2. Dwi Woro Retno Mastuti (in the center) and member of Rumah Cinwa in Kaldera park. (Photo by Agnes Katharina Amelia, 18 September 2021; used with permission).

Their creation *Damarwulan Satria Majapahit*,<sup>22</sup> which premiered at the Jakarta Salihara Theatre in 2020, can serve as an example that encompasses all their innovative efforts (Figures 3 and 4). This show was fully narrated in Indonesian, presenting the Javanese legendary hero Damarwulan and his adventure fighting for the Majapahit kingdom. The puppets in this show were dressed in Javanese costumes, such as the headdress *belangkon* and local traditional clothing *surjan* and *sarong*. Rumah Cinwa musician Muhammad Bilal Raditya<sup>23</sup> and his fellow members composed the music, drawing inspirations from classic Javanese shadow puppetry gamelan repertoire and *campursari*,<sup>24</sup> which is one of most popular genres of music in Indonesia. Javanese gamelan and Chinese percussion and string instruments were combined as the major instrumental accompaniment. The performance attracted nearly a hundred spectators. The occasional laughing and applauding from the audience throughout the entire show not only proved the viewers' appreciation for both performance and performers, but also piqued the audience's interest in *wayang potehi*.

<sup>22</sup> The script of *Damarwulan Satria Majapahit* is an adaptation by Mastuti. It tells the story of Queen Kenkana's efforts to find a warrior who can defeat her opponent, Duke Menak Jingga from Blambangan, who wants to take over her empire. Damarwulan accepts the Queen's challenge and wins the battle.

<sup>23</sup> Muhammad Bilal Raditya, 23, graduated from Javanese Studies Program at the University of Indonesia, joined Rumah Cinwa in 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Rumah Cinwa musicians composed music accompaniment for *Damarwulan Satria Majapahit* by referencing Javanese gamelan repertoire *playon srepeg pelog* from 6 to *barang*, and also the *campursari* song *Marwa Kuning*.



Figure 3: *Damarwulan Satria Majapahit* by Rumah Cinwa. (Photo by Witjak Widhi Cahya, 1 February 2020; used with permission).



Figure 4: *Damarwulan Satria Majapahit* by Rumah Cinwa. (Photo by Witjak Widhi Cahya, 1 February 2020; used with permission).

“It [*wayang potehi*] has to be understood by locals if it wants to be widely accepted,” said Mastuti. With its goal of revitalization and regaining national recognition of *wayang potehi* in the democratic Indonesia, the troupe sees localization can be a great strategy to innovate some of the visual and auditory conventions of *potehi* practice without diluting the genre’s Chinese origin. The focus of the troupe is to convey the philosophy and value system contained in the practice, which they believe will contribute to the establishment of the national ethos within society, and to good character. By introducing this new style of *potehi*, the troupe hopes to encourage the audience to perceive the genre as part of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*,<sup>25</sup> but at same time, to provide their input on the persistent issues of ethnic conflict in Indonesia’s pluralism.

### **Multiculturalism in Reformasi Indonesia**

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been a new term to motivate the world to examine cultural diversity or culturally entrenched differences, *multiculturalism*. Multiculturalism is not about difference and identity; it is about what is rooted in and sustained by culture: that is, a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people understand themselves and the world and organize their individual and collective lives (Parekh, 2000, p.3). Parekh explains that the differences do not spring from individual choices, but are culturally derived differences, which carry a measure of authority and are patterned and structured by virtue of being embedded in shared and historically inherited systems of meaning and significance. Since other kinds of differences could be welcomed but not culturally derived, and vice versa, not all advocates of the politics of recognition need, or as a historical fact sympathize with, multiculturalism.

Indonesia’s cultural diversity has its root in the long history of intercultural and interreligious contacts across the archipelago. Before Dutch colonization, the archipelago has been inhabited by various ethnicities, such as Chinese, Arabic, Persian and Indian, in addition to the natives. A plural society developed among ethnic groups, the will of the dominant ethnicity was not imposed on minorities, nor art form from one culture made to dominate others (Wasino, 2013, pp.151-2). Until the nineteenth century, Dutch colonizers brought Western culture and introduced to Indonesia a rigid social hierarchy based on race that segregates people into three categories, from high to low: Europeans, Foreign Orientals, and Natives. Chinese in this system were classified as Foreign Orientals, which allowed them to live in distinctive communities with their own legal and cultural institutions. The privileges the Chinese were given came in part from the policies of governments that found their distinctiveness useful, as it helped to buffer the conflicts between colonial government and their indigenous subjects. Since then, the distinctiveness of ethnic Chinese in cultural expression, economic, and social status, as well as their relations with people in dominant positions, have led to negative impressions against ethnic Chinese being deeply rooted in local society (Fischer, 2002, p.4; Wertheim, 1955, p.41).

Resentment towards Chinese became more obvious during the rise of nationalist consciousness in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Southeast Asia, due to a large number of new Chinese immigrants who consciously self-identified as part of the Chinese nation and didn’t appear to contribute much to Indonesia’s nationalist movement. Under President Sukarno (1949-1966), the doctrine of *Pancasila*<sup>26</sup> was perceived as a promise of democratic life for all Indonesian citizens regardless of race, but there was still racial discrimination against minority groups, including ethnic Chinese. The anti-Chinese sentiment in Indonesian society reached its peak in 1965, along with the increasing anti-Communist

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<sup>25</sup> The national motto of independent Indonesia, which means “unity in diversity.”

<sup>26</sup> A state ideology formulated by Sukarno on the principle of religious tolerance, which upheld the civic values of modern nationalism while recognizing the distinctiveness of the Indonesian archipelago.

forces. Chinese were considered major members or supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party, and thus many were massacred in the coup overthrowing the Sukarno's regime and its aftermath.

During the New Order government of the successor President Suharto, tight controls instituted by the nation over cultural identity resulted in discriminatory policies that greatly affected minority groups. Jones (2012, pp.150-1) argues that elements of Javanese culture were predominantly used to represent the culture of the New Order state. The construction of the Miniature Park (Taman Mini Indonesia Indah) during the Suharto regime is evidence that the government's tendency to separate and categorize ethnic and regional cultures. However, the representation of regional cultural variations was increasingly homogeneous, particularly for those groups that reside at a distance from Java. The cultures of non-indigenous peoples were generally ignored in this cultural policy, making it difficult for the cultures of those ethnic groups to gain national recognition (ibid, p.149). By that time, Chinese were not allowed to display any traits associated with Chineseness (Reid, 2010, p.68). After Suharto stepped down, the succeeding *Reformasi* government determined to establish a democratic nation and formulated multicultural policies in order to heal fractured inter-ethnic relationships. The immediate response was a nationwide demand for freedom of expression for various cultural identities, including Chinese.<sup>27</sup>

Since the multiculturalist policy deployed in the *Reformasi* era, the compatibility of multiculturalism with Indonesia's democratization has been examined by scholars (Hoon, 2006; Wasino, 2013; An'Amta & Mattiro, 2017; Firdaus et al., 2020). Indonesian historian Wasino (2013, p.151) explains that as an ideology, Indonesia's multiculturalist policy is rooted in the principle of respecting cultural differences among the well-established ethnic groups. In other words, citizens are expected to form a multicultural consciousness of paying respect and tolerance to cultural differences that coexist within society, since all social aspects deserve equal treatment. But in reality, the implementation of multiculturalism as policy in contemporary democratic Indonesia has encountered many challenges.

As Hoon (2006, p.153) suggests, first of all, this paradigm faced great opposition from dominant groups in society, including the Muslim majority. For instance, Chinese Indonesians are mostly Christians or Buddhists, and their ethnic, cultural, and religious minority identities are easy targets. Secondly, Indonesia's multicultural politics appear to represent minority cultures uncritically and simplistically as homogeneous entities. Taking the local Chinese community as an example again, this community can be racially divided into *totok* and *peranakan*, while culturally they can be split into pro-Fujian, pro-Guangdong and pro-Taiwan and others (Suryadinata, 1976, p.770). But through the perspective of the local public, they are rarely considered heterogeneous. In addition, Indonesia's multiculturalism seems to confuse cultural difference with cultural diversity and assumes the solution to cultural difference is the display of cultural diversity, while ignoring the significance of mutual understanding, respect, and tolerance. As Ang (2001, p.14) reminds us, the essentialist, fixed construction of cultures as mutually exclusive identities within multiculturalism enhances the reproduction of potentially antagonistic, dominant and subordinate others.

Hoon (2009) examines how Chinese cultural symbols have been reinvented, represented, commodified, and consumed by both Chinese and non-Chinese-Indonesians in the cultural, political and religious contexts of *Reformasi* Indonesia. He argues that certain local Chinese have strategically appropriated symbols of Chineseness to demonstrate government recognition of Chinese identity and equal status, seemingly unaware that such appropriation could fuel latent anti-Chinese resentment among the wider Indonesian community. That said, this increased visibility of Chinese cultural

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<sup>27</sup> The discriminatory regulations against ethnic Chinese stated in President Suharto's Instruction No.14 of 1967 were officially revoked in 2000 by President Abdurachman Wahid (Wasino, 2019, pp.220-1).

symbols should not be naively read as a new acceptance of ethnic Chinese. In fact, the sentiment against ethnic Chinese still occurs from time to time. Mastuti was at the forefront of this ongoing hatred. She began to study for a doctoral degree at the University of Indonesia in 2008, with the revitalization of *wayang potehi* as the main object of her dissertation research. But her studies on local Chinese culture led to her being denounced for not supporting Indonesia's native culture and her dissertation proposal was also rejected, preventing her from completing the degree (Kurniawan Ulung, 2020).

Though scholars warned that greater contemporary tolerance towards Chinese should not be interpreted as acceptance, the multiculturalist politics advocated by the *Reformasi* government still exert a significant influence on the reconstruction of Chinese identity. Over the past two decades, a large number of Chinese language schools and cultural institutions have bloomed across the archipelago, opening up better opportunity for the general Indonesian population to know the local Chinese people, their cultures, and their many contributions to the local society. The values of multiculturalism have also been incorporated into the civic education curriculum of Indonesia, which allows this idea to be embedded from the grassroots level and, it is expected, to eventually become a part of civic consciousness (Firdaus et al, 2020).

Law Number 5 of 2017 on Advancement of Culture (*Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 5 Tahun 2017 Tentang Pemajuan Kebudayaan*),<sup>28</sup> enacted in May 2017 by the administration of current President Joko Widodo, is a huge encouragement to Mastuti and the Rumah Cinwa troupe to preserve and promote *wayang potehi*. This law on cultural advancement clearly defines national culture as the whole process and result of the interaction between cultures that thrive and develop across Indonesia – everything that people invent, sense, intend, and create. The concept that this diversity was the basis of the founding of the sovereign nation in 1945 is also emphasized; every element of national culture thus should be considered to be well-protected, managed, and developed. In this law, it is believed that awareness of cultural diversity will ultimately affect national values, resilience, peace, and well-being, as it will be able to prevent unethical practices and mistreatment towards minorities in national development.

“We are generally optimistic about the enactment of this law as a guideline to guide the advancement of the national culture,” expressed Mastuti and the young members of Rumah Cinwa; “this is definitely a good sign for the sustainability of *wayang potehi*, since we believe in the constructive attitude of government in promoting Indonesia's cultural diversity, that can help Indonesian citizens to perceive cultural differences from the perspective of public interest. But we understand there are many hurdles in terms of enforcement of this law waiting to be overcome through more efforts. This is not an easy path, we admit it, but we choose to do our best.”

## Conclusion

*Wayang potehi* was employed in the Indonesian archipelago by members of the Chinese-Indonesian community as a symbolic means to express and highlight ethnic and cultural otherness, when the social climate from the period of the Dutch colony to the early stages of independence was more favorable to the ethnic Chinese than *pribumi* people. However, the Chinese culture, religion, ethnic identity, and very existence in Indonesia have long been shaped, manipulated, and branded by colonialists and politicians, and eventually made their existence as *masalah Cina*<sup>29</sup> (“the Chinese problem”) (Fischer, 2002, p.3; Giblin, 2003, p.5; Allen, 2005, p.1; Hoon, 2006, p.152). Given that various biases and labels

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<sup>28</sup> This is the first time in the history of Indonesia that a law specifically on national culture has been promulgated. Before this law, national culture and multiculturalism in Indonesia was not precisely defined by the government.

<sup>29</sup> The Chinese have been subjected to othering in Indonesia on account of their cultural and religious difference, their dominance in the nation's economy and their purported complicity with Communism (Allen, 2005, p.1).

have been accumulatively attached to the local Chinese, the most polemical issue surrounding this Indonesian minority is the construction of their ethnic identity, particularly during episodes of political or economic instability.

After the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, when *wayang potehi* began to be revived and taken up by Javanese and *peranakan* Chinese, the cultural significance of the genre changed. But by any measure, this puppetry genre has since been fully integrated into Indonesia's local conditions, and has become an inseparable part of the nation's multiculturalism. The question is, how to maintain its practice in Indonesia when only four troupes remain in the country? Though the genre was resumed in public soon after Suharto's New Order, the popularity of *wayang potehi* established over the past centuries was not easy to restore when competing with modern entertainment. Moreover, after thirty-two years of coerced assimilation and suppression imposed upon them, most local Chinese, including the younger generation, can no longer play or even recognize this puppetry art that was once one of the most popular cultural forms in their community. As they encountered discrimination and stereotypes, Chinese-Indonesians may find it difficult to identify a sense of national belonging in Indonesia. Such confliction, ambivalence, and predicament are revealed in the ways Chinese-Indonesians have practiced, preserved, and appreciated their cultures. Hoon's (2009) observations also suggest that for many local Chinese, the symbol of Chineseness may be more about commercial interests than the expression of identity.

Our central question for this article is: can *wayang potehi* become a symbol of multicultural conciliation in Indonesia? The emerging *potehi* troupe Rumah Cinwa in the post-Suharto period can be considered one answer. The idea of multiculturalism as civic consciousness in democratic Indonesia is polemical and does not appear to have been met with unanimous agreement. The response of the young members of Rumah Cinwa, mostly non-Chinese and Muslim, in regard to *wayang potehi* provides unique insights into how non-indigenous performing arts are utilized for the identity formation of certain nationalism in a shifting social context. Inspired by the impromptu performance presented by senior East Java practitioners, their creativities have led audiences to discover that local folktales or brand new scripts can be delivered through the format of *wayang potehi*. Audiences have been surprised to hear Javanese musical instruments and tones applied to performance accompaniment; most importantly, they are able to understand the shows, which are completely narrated in Indonesian. Through the contributions of these young *dhalang* (puppeteers) and musicians from heterogeneous backgrounds, there is no certain ethnic cultural identity deliberately highlighted or suppressed in their *wayang potehi*. For them, *wayang potehi* is truly the spirit of Indonesia's multiculturalism.

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