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AFTER INDONESIAN PRESIDENTIAL INSTRUCTION NUMBER 14 OF 1967: WAYANG POTEHI PRESERVATION AND PUBLIC OWNERSHIP

Dika Sri Pandanari [1], Muhammad Reza Alfasina[1]*

[1] Character Building Development Center, Bina Nusantara University, Malang, Indonesia

[*] Corresponding author: dika.sri@binus.ac.id

Abstract *Wayang Potehi is a Chinese-Indonesian cultural heritage that has undergone centuries of acculturation in the Indonesian archipelago. Its existence is seriously threatened following the enactment of Presidential Instruction (Inpres) No. 14 of 1967, which restricted Chinese-Indonesian cultural expression in public spaces. This qualitative case study examines the current state of the Wayang Potehi tradition in Jombang, East Java, where a performance troupe still exists with a comprehensive and growing collection of wayang puppets. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with puppeteers (dalang), troupe managers, Chinese community leaders, and academics, and document analysis. Findings indicate that formal and ceremonial preservation efforts have not been effective in revitalizing public appreciation for Wayang Potehi, although community groups such as the INTI Association and Gusdurian have provided sporadic support. Factors contributing to the decline in interest include generational trauma resulting from discriminatory policies, transformations in entertainment consumption patterns, language barriers, the scarcity of puppeteer regeneration, and impaired social function. A paradigm shift towards inclusive, participatory, and contextual revitalization strategies that involve diverse community stakeholders is necessary to preserve this unique cultural tradition.*

Keyword:

Wayang Potehi, cultural preservation, Chinese-Indonesian acculturation, revitalization, community-based

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1. Introduction

Wayang Potehi is a traditional hand-held puppet theater originating from Southern Fujian, China, that has existed in the Indonesian archipelago since the 16th century (Suryadinata, 2018). The term is derived from po (cloth), te (bag), and hi (puppet), describing the glove-style puppetry technique (Tan,2020). Over centuries of cultural contact, this art form has undergone deep acculturation with local Javanese and Indonesian cultures. The dialogue, originally delivered in Hokkien, was gradually adapted into Javanese and Indonesian, while its repertoire expanded from classical Chinese tales to include local narratives such as Geger Pacinan, along with timeless classics such as Sam Kok (Three Kingdoms), Sun Go Kong (Monkey King), and Shi Jin Kwie (Xue Rengui) (Susilowati, 2015).

Historically, Wayang Potehi served as a ritual medium in temples (klenteng), folk entertainment, and a means of cultural communication between Chinese and indigenous communities (Wibowo, 2018). At its early-20th-century peak, performances were integral to Cap Go Meh, temple anniversaries, and community festivities across Java. Several prominent troupes were recorded, including Wie Beng Tong and Hong Tay Hien in Surabaya, Hong San Kiong in Jombang, and Boen Tek Bio in Tangerang (Pratama, 2016). These troupes performed regularly, often for weeks at a time, attracting audiences from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Pratiwi, 2018). Wayang Potehi also exists in Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan; however, the fundamental characteristics of the puppet figures and the nature of the stories differ substantially across these regions (Liu, 2019). Pratiwi (2018) emphasizes that the level of cultural hybridity observed in Indonesian Wayang Potehi is not found elsewhere. Liu (2019) and Tan (2020) confirm that the Indonesian variant, incorporating Javanese gamelan, local legends such as Jaka Tarub, and a distinctive performance aesthetic and represents the most acculturated form in Southeast Asia (Wardhani, 2022). Indonesian Wayang Potehi is thus not simply an imported product but a distinctly Indonesian cultural form.

Despite its rich historical roots, the existence of Wayang Potehi in Indonesia has faced significant challenges. One of the most significant turning points was the issuance of Presidential Instruction No. Law No. 14 of 1967 concerning Chinese Religion, Beliefs, and Customs, issued in the complex political climate following the 1965 tragedy (Setiono, 2008). This policy effectively banned public expressions of Chinese religion, beliefs, and customs, with consequences extending to the arts and culture (Coppel, 2006). Wayang Potehi performances, once widespread in public spaces, were restricted to temple complexes and permitted only in the context of religious rituals (Pratama, 2016). For over three decades, this tradition persisted in a limited and marginalized state, hidden from the wider public sphere.

The most damaging impact of this policy was the disruption of the chain of cultural transmission. Younger generations of Chinese Indonesians who grew up during the New Order era had little or no access to their ancestral traditions, including Wayang Potehi (Anggraeni, 2020). As a result, a substantial cultural gap emerged between the older generation, who still understood and practiced these traditions, and the younger generation, largely disconnected from their cultural heritage. Nugroho (2018) documented the psychosocial impact of these discriminatory policies on the Chinese-Indonesian community, while Hadiwijaya (2019) identified cultural trauma as one of the long-term legacies of the New Order era. This gap is a key factor explaining why, even after the repeal of discriminatory policies following the 1998 Reformation through Presidential Instruction No. 26 of 1998 and Presidential Decree No. 6 of 2000, interest in Wayang Potehi did not immediately recover (Hartono, 2020).

After the Reformation era, efforts to preserve Wayang Potehi in the past two decades have largely been conducted through academic channels and government activities. Kurniawan (2019), Widodo (2021), and Rahardjo (2022) have documented various revitalization initiatives, and local governments have incorporated Wayang Potehi into cultural festivals (Purnama, 2022). However, Santoso (2021b) argues that such academic and ceremonial preservation distances the tradition from its folk performance context, alienating it from its supporting communities (Hendrawan, 2021). An interesting exception to the general pattern of decline is found in Jombang, East Java. Unlike in many other cities where Wayang Potehi is strictly enforced within temple grounds, groups in Jombang continue to perform outside of temple grounds due to the very high level of community tolerance (Ardiansyah, 2021). This unique socio-cultural environment has contributed to the survival of Wayang Potehi groups in Jombang, where performances continue and the extensive wayang collection is actively maintained and

developed. Community-based support networks, including civil society organizations such as the INTI (Indonesian Chinese) Association and the Gusdurian community, have provided forms of sponsorship and advocacy that complement formal preservation channels (Zulkarnain, 2021). However, these support mechanisms remain sporadic and have not yet been integrated into a systematic preservation strategy capable of reversing the trend of declining broader public engagement. The survival of Wayang Potehi in Jombang raises broader questions about how these minority cultural forms in Jombang negotiate visibility and sustainability after decades of state oppression. Referring to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2004) conceptualization of heritage as metacultural production, this heritage emerges from a process in which cultural practices are not simply inherited but actively produced through contemporary intervention or valorization. In this study, the preservation channels surrounding Wayang Potehi not only protect existing traditions but actively reshape their meaning for those who originally owned them. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) argues that heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that refers to the past, a formulation crucial for understanding traditions disrupted by political oppression and then reshaped through new institutional frameworks. Similarly, Appadurai's (1996) work has been influential in social life. For example, in cultural forms, it provides us with insights into how Wayang Potehi survives through various value regimes, particularly those shaped by governmental societies. Appadurai's (1996) concept of "landscape" and the global cultural economy explains how local cultural practices are transformed as they enter new eras, whether through scholarly publications, government-sponsored festivals, or social media platforms. By analyzing how Wayang Potehi has been positioned alternately as an object of scholarly documentation, a symbol of multicultural tolerance, a tourist attraction, and a community ritual, this study seeks to contribute to an understanding of the complex negotiations in which minority cultural expressions navigate the transition from state-imposed obscurity to conditional public presence.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the growing literature on post-conflict cultural revival and the challenges inherent in revitalizing traditions that have experienced prolonged state suppression. While considerable scholarship addresses the political and legal dimensions of Chinese-Indonesian identity after Reformasi, relatively little research has examined the lived experiences of cultural practitioners and grassroots dynamics of cultural survival (Puspita, 2021). By focusing on specific locations where the tradition has maintained some degree of continuity, this research aims to illuminate the micro-level processes by which cultural resilience is maintained, challenged, or eroded (Susanto 2020). These findings are expected to provide relevant insights not only for Indonesian cultural policy but also for broader discussions on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage in post-authoritarian societies.

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative case study design (Miles, 2020) to provide an in-depth understanding of the Wayang Potehi tradition within its specific geographic and cultural context. The primary focus of this research is the Wayang Potehi tradition in Jombang Regency, East Java, Indonesia. From a case selection perspective, Jombang represents what Flyvbjerg (2006) calls a critical case, a site whose strategic importance stems not from its representation as a cultural locus that still exists elsewhere, but from its potential as the only cultural locus that allows for explaining the conditions under which cultural survival is possible, which do not exist in other cities or regions, where the environment is, unexpectedly, supportive of such culture. Jombang was chosen for its sustained performance activity during three decades of state repression, multi-generational practitioner lineages, a comprehensive puppet collection maintained through

marginalization, and informal networks that sustain the tradition when formal support is withdrawn. Unlike many other regions where Wayang Potehi performances ceased entirely under the restrictions of Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, the tradition in Jombang continues to develop a unique dynamic characterized by resilience and ongoing challenges.

Data were collected through three primary techniques over the several-month research period. First, participant observation was conducted at Wayang Potehi performances in the Gudo district of Jombang, at the Hong San Kiong Temple and the adjacent museum and rehearsal facilities. Observations focused on performance practices, audience composition and behavior, and the physical infrastructure supporting the tradition. Detailed field notes were maintained throughout the observation period, documenting contextual details, the duration of the performance, and the nature of interactions between performers and audience members.

Second, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including a currently active puppeteer (dalang), the manager and founder of the Wayang Potehi group and museum, Mr. Toni, members of the Chinese Indonesian community in Jombang, academics who have researched Wayang Potehi at local universities, and representatives of civil society organizations involved in cultural preservation activities. The interviews explored the informants' personal histories with the tradition, their perceptions of the challenges facing Wayang Potehi, their assessments of the effectiveness of various preservation strategies, and their views on the future of this cultural form. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian and Javanese, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Third, documentary analysis was conducted using archival materials, historical photographs, recordings of past performances, news articles, and relevant academic publications. This documentary component provided historical depth to the research and allowed for triangulation with interview and observational data. Documentary analysis is crucial for reconstructing the conditions of Wayang Potehi in the period before 1967, where living witnesses are increasingly scarce. Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Miles, 2020), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, and abstracting raw data collected through observations, interviews, and documents. Data display organized the condensed information into matrices, networks, and narrative descriptions to facilitate pattern recognition and analytical reasoning. Conclusion drawing and verification involved identifying patterns, explanations, causal relationships, and propositions emerging from the displayed data, with ongoing verification throughout the analysis process.

Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, comparing information obtained from various categories of informants (masterminds, group managers, community leaders, and academics), and method triangulation, cross-referencing findings from observations, interviews, and document analysis. Member checking was conducted by presenting initial findings to key informants, including Mr. Toni and the main mastermind, to verify the accuracy and fairness of the interpretations. Ethical considerations were considered throughout the research process. All participants provided informed consent before being interviewed, and their anonymity was protected through the use of role-based identifiers rather than personal names when requested. The research protocol was reviewed and approved in accordance with institutional ethics guidelines.

A major limitation of this study relates to limited access to performance documentation from the period before and immediately after Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, as many archives from that era were lost or never systematically documented. This limitation was partially addressed through oral history interviews with elderly informants whose recollections

provided insights into the earlier period. A further limitation concerns the generalizability of findings derived from a single case. Although the Jombang case was chosen for its distinctive characteristics that make it theoretically informative, the findings may not be directly applicable to other regions where different historical, demographic, and socio-cultural conditions prevail.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Condition of Wayang Potehi in Jombang

A major limitation of this study relates to limited access to performance documentation from the period before and immediately after Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967, as many archives from that era were lost or never systematically documented. This limitation was partially addressed through oral history interviews with elderly informants whose recollections provided insights into the earlier period. A further limitation concerns the generalizability of findings derived from a single case. Although the Jombang case was chosen for its distinctive characteristics that make it theoretically informative, the findings may not be directly applicable to other regions where different historical, demographic, and socio-cultural conditions prevail

3.2 Community Support and Social Networks

In Jombang Regency, Wayang Potehi can still be found at the Hong San Kiong Temple, located in the Gudo district of Jombang. Hong San Kiong Temple serves not only as a place of worship but also as a cultural center for the Chinese Indonesian community in the region. Adjacent to the temple, a museum and practice facility dedicated to Wayang Potehi has been established, founded by Mr. Toni, whose personal history is deeply intertwined with this tradition. Mr. Toni chose the location adjacent to the temple because it was there that he first witnessed a Wayang Potehi performance as a child, a performance led by his grandfather, who served as a puppeteer. His father was both a temple caretaker and a Wayang Potehi puppeteer, representing a lineage of practitioners spanning generations (Ardiansyah, 2021).

This museum-practical facility houses an extensive collection of Wayang Potehi puppets, musical instruments, and historical archives documenting the tradition in Jombang. The collection of wayang puppets remains complete and continues to grow, a testament to the ongoing commitment to preservation. Based on observations, performances are held on temple anniversaries and at special occasions, extending beyond temple grounds to the city center and residential neighborhoods for community events or rituals, a mobility that distinguishes the Jombang group from others geographically confined (Pratama, 2016). The Chinese Indonesian community in Jombang is internally differentiated along several axes that directly influence its engagement with Wayang Potehi. In terms of religious affiliation, the community is dominated by Christians, Confucians, and Muslims, each with distinct institutional networks, liturgical calendars, and cultural priorities that do not uniformly favor temple-based performance traditions. Social organization is further structured by ethnic subgroup (*suku*) and clan (*marga*) affiliations, as well as membership in civil society organizations such as the INTI Association and PSMTI (Paguyuban Sosial Marga Tionghoa Indonesia), in addition to temple-based social foundations, each possessing distinct resources and pursuing distinct organizational agendas. Economically, the majority of Chinese Indonesians in Jombang are from merchant and business families, a class position that has significant implications for cultural engagement. The demands of commercial livelihoods tend to subordinate cultural activities to economic priorities; among segments of the merchant community, there is a clear tendency to deprioritize cultural traditions in favor of business activities. However, this pattern is not uniform. Some business families, most notably the family of Mr. Toni, founder of the Wayang Potehi museum and practice facility in

Gudo, have actively supported cultural activities alongside their commercial ventures, demonstrating that economic standing and cultural commitment are not necessarily at odds. Generational stratification introduces a further dimension of internal diversity. Community members over the age of approximately 45 generally retain some level of competence in the Hokkien dialect that forms the bulk of Wayang Potehi's linguistic repertoire, allowing at least partial access to the performance's narrative content. In contrast, the majority of younger Chinese Indonesians in Jombang are less proficient in Hokkien, a linguistic gap exacerbated by the broader decline of Chinese language education during the New Order period. This intergenerational linguistic divide has direct consequences for audience formation as it means the tradition's primary linguistic medium is increasingly inaccessible to the demographic whose engagement would be necessary for intergenerational transmission. The combined effects of religious heterogeneity, organizational fragmentation, the economic orientation of the merchant class, and intergenerational language loss result in a community that does not speak with one voice regarding Wayang Potehi, and its support for the tradition varies widely across religious, organizational, socioeconomic, and generational lines.

However, despite the group's relative mobility and the presence of institutional infrastructure, audience numbers remain very limited. Observations recorded during several performances consistently indicate attendance numbers ranging from 15 to 30 people, mostly elderly members of the temple congregation attending out of religious or communal obligation rather than as active spectators seeking entertainment. The contrast is particularly striking when viewed from the tradition's historical peak in the early 20th century, when performances would draw crowds large enough to fill the surrounding streets. The situation in Jombang stands in stark contrast to other cities that must actively invite Jombang-based groups to perform at their events or temples, demonstrating that Jombang groups have achieved regional reputation and serve as cultural resources for the wider geographic region (Susanto, 2020). This dynamic creates an interesting paradox, which is Jombang groups are valued enough to be invited to perform elsewhere, yet locally, their performances fail to attract large audiences. This paradox is emblematic of the broader challenge facing Wayang Potehi that it is simultaneously revered as a cultural artifact and neglected as a living performance tradition.

A revealing perspective on the current state of the tradition comes from a master puppeteer in Jombang, who shared his concerns in an interview:

> “Back when I was a child, my grandfather's Wayang Potehi performances were limited to Jombang. Some cities were still too afraid to hold public performances. Only a few temples could Wayang Potehi be performed. Now, things are somewhat better because various regions are no longer afraid to invite Wayang (Potehi), but the audience is often only a handful. Young people are not very interested in Wayang. Only a few children, including those studying in Jombang, are willing to watch. I worry that Wayang Potehi will not only lack successors but will eventually lose its audience altogether. Perhaps all of this has been eclipsed by Korean dramas, Chinese dramas, or mobile phone comics.”

This description reveals several interrelated dimensions of the current dilemma. It highlights the shift from a period of overt political repression, where performances were banned or severely restricted, to a period of relative openness where performances are permitted but fail to attract audiences. The dalang's comparison of past political fears with present-day audience indifference is crucial which is the removal of formal restrictions has not translated into renewed public engagement. His mention of Korean dramas, Chinese dramas, and mobile comics as competitors for audience attention points to a transnational entertainment landscape that has

fundamentally altered leisure time and cultural consumption patterns among Indonesia's younger generation.

These concerns reflect broader patterns. In many cities, no systematic regeneration of dalang or Wayang Potehi groups is occurring (Santoso, 2021b); existing dalang are aging, and the profession is no longer economically viable. Santoso (2021b) notes that the dalang profession has lost its economic appeal, while Rahardjo (2022) adds that educational institutions have not created spaces for the regeneration of traditional artists. Economic uncertainty exacerbates cultural marginalization like the skills required to become a competent puppeteer are demanding, requiring years of apprenticeship, yet the financial rewards are insufficient to sustain a living (Kurniawan 2019). Amid declining audiences, community support and social networks have emerged as an alternative preservation sector. Rahmadani (2022) and Fitriani (2022) argue that community-based preservation offers a socially sustainable alternative when market and state mechanisms are insufficient. In Jombang, local activists document performances, promote schedules via social media, and bridge dalang with younger generations, connecting the group with government agencies, academics, schools, and even foreign consulates.

First, the puppeteer expresses a distinctive form of nostalgia that contrasts political fear and contemporary indifference. The puppeteer's recollection of a period when "some cities were still too afraid to hold public performances" evokes what might be called a reflective nostalgia for the rift between past and present while acknowledging the impossibility of recovery. The nostalgia contrasts an earlier period when the threat was identifiable and external such as state prohibition, with the current threat of audience indifference, which is internal, diffuse, and more demoralizing because it lacks a clear external antagonist. Second, the puppeteer constructs an image of the "audience" that reveals an implicit theory of cultural transmission. In his account, the audience is simultaneously present (the performance is still going on, people are still attending, albeit in small numbers) and absent (those who attend do not form the kind of engaged, multigenerational public that has historically sustained the tradition). The distinction between physical presence and genuine cultural engagement is analytically significant. Dalang implicitly distinguishes between elderly temple congregants, who attend out of religious or communal obligation, and the type of audience that signifies vitality where young people, families, and community members who attend out of choice rather than obligation. His observation that "young people aren't particularly interested in Wayang" suggests a generational divide that quantitative attendance figures alone cannot capture.

Third, dalang's interpretation of decline oscillates between narratives of cultural loss and narratives of inevitable social change. On the one hand, his language of fear and worry frames the situation as a loss to be mourned and, if possible, reversed. On the other hand, his reference to "Korean dramas, Chinese dramas, or mobile phone comics" as competitors for attention suggests an implicit recognition that the transformation is structural. The entertainment landscape has been reconfigured in ways that cannot easily be undone. This oscillation reflects what Harrison (2013) describes as the tension between heritage as loss and heritage as transformation, a tension the dalang does not fully resolve. Fourth, the puppeteer draws an implicit moral contrast between traditional Wayang Potehi and the commercial forms of entertainment he identifies as competitors. Korean dramas, Chinese dramas, and mobile comics are presented not simply as alternative entertainment options, but as qualitatively different and, implicitly, less culturally valuable modes of engagement. This contrast reflects broader cultural anxieties about the perceived shallowness of globalized popular culture compared to the depth and authenticity of traditional arts.

Additional support comes from the journalistic community, which has produced numerous publications about Wayang Potehi groups in Jombang, including information sharing among journalists on important aspects of the tradition (Handayani 2021). Publications generated by journalists have expanded the group's visibility beyond its local context, attracting the attention of cultural activists in Jakarta and even international audiences. Indonesian cultural activist groups have also provided numerous opportunities for the group to present itself in the capital and internationally, serving as cultural intermediaries, translating the value of Wayang Potehi to audiences who might otherwise be unaware of its existence.

Support also flows through a network of temple communities across Java. Temples in Surabaya, Mojokerto, and Malang regularly invite puppeteers from Jombang to perform at religious celebrations, creating a performance circuit that sustains practitioners on a limited scale (Pratama, 2016). The role of civil society organizations is also significant. The INTI (Indonesian Chinese) Association and the Gusdurian community in Jombang have drawn attention to the preservation of Wayang Potehi. INTI facilitates performances at its cultural events (Anggraeni, 2020), while Gusdurian promotes Wayang Potehi as a symbol of acculturation and cultural tolerance. Wibowo (2018) and Pratiwi (2018) emphasize the role of community leaders and Wayang Potehi's potential for intercultural dialogue and acculturation. Several pesantren in the area have invited the group, exemplifying local cross-cultural engagement (Lestari, 2021). However, this community support remains sporadic and has not been integrated into a systematic conservation strategy. Contributions tend to be reactive, responding to specific invitations or occasions, rather than proactively developing long-term programs for regeneration and audience development (Santoso 2021b). The absence of institutionalized mechanisms to coordinate, fund, and evaluate community-based conservation efforts means they remain vulnerable to changes in the interests and capacities of individual actors and organizations. Without sustained and coordinated intervention, these contributions, while valuable, are insufficient to reverse the trend of decline.

3.3 Predicted Causes of Declining Public Interest

Based on an analysis of data collected during research in Jombang, several interrelated factors can be identified that simultaneously contributed to the decline in public interest in Wayang Potehi. Based on Alexander et al.'s (2004) theoretical framework, cultural trauma is understood here not as a natural or automatic psychological response to a detrimental event, but as a socially mediated process in which a collective defines an experience as fundamentally wounding its identity. Alexander et al. (2004) argued that the event itself does not create collective trauma. Trauma is constructed through narrative processes, carried by specific social groups, and institutionalized through various news media and statements by various organizations. In the Indonesian context, the traumatic impact of Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 was shaped not only by the formal restrictions it imposed but also by the broader cultural narrative it legitimized through narratives in which Chinese cultural expressions were framed as threats to national identity and social order.

Alexander et al. concept of the "trauma process" is relevant as the transmission of cultural trauma occurs not through direct experience but through narrative construction, public commemoration, and institutional mediation as all severely restricted for Chinese Indonesians during the New Order. The prohibition on public expression meant that the trauma could not be addressed collectively, and it was left to fester in private memories and informal transmission within families, where it took on forms that proved resistant to formal policy reforms during the Reformasi era. From a cultural trauma perspective, the reluctance of Chinese Indonesian families

to engage with tradition was not simply a rational calculation of risk but reflected the deep internalization of a stigmatized identity that had been generated and maintained for decades. As Alexander et al. (2004) suggest, reparations for cultural trauma require not only policy changes but also the construction of new collective narratives that can reframe the meaning of the traumatic past and rebuild the moral standing of the affected group. The resilience of cultural trauma in the absence of such repair narrative work helps explain why the formal repeal of discriminatory policies has not been sufficient to restore the vitality of traditions like Wayang Potehi.

The Impact of Inpres No. 14/1967 causes restrictions on Chinese cultural expression for more than three decades created profound cultural trauma, the effects of which are still felt today. The generation that grew up during the New Order era not only lost access to their traditions but also internalized the stigma that Chinese culture was dangerous for public expression. Nugroho (2018) documented the psychosocial impact of this discriminatory policy, while Hadiwijaya (2019) identified mechanisms for the transmission of trauma between generations. This trauma continues to shape attitudes and behavior even after the discriminatory policy has been repealed (Hartono 2020). The impact is evident in the reluctance of some Chinese Indonesian families to actively engage with cultural traditions perceived as potentially stigmatizing, even in today's climate of greater openness (Anggraeni 2020).

Transformation of Entertainment Consumption Patterns and Language Barriers as contemporary society, particularly the younger generation, has undergone a fundamental transformation in entertainment consumption patterns. The dominance of digital media, streaming platforms, social media, and online games provides a variety of entertainment options that are more accessible and more in line with contemporary tastes than traditional performance forms (Saraswati 2020). Wayang Potehi, with its long duration, reliance on specialized knowledge of story cycles, and traditional presentation methods, struggles to compete in this entertainment landscape (Handayani 2021). This problem is compounded by language barriers, as Wayang Potehi traditionally uses a mix of Hokkien and Javanese dialects. Although some adaptations have been made, the use of Hokkien vocabulary and specific Chinese terminology remains dominant (Wijaya 2017). Audiences who do not understand these languages, including younger generations of Chinese Indonesians who are no longer fluent in Hokkien, find it difficult to follow and appreciate the performances (Liu 2019). The combination of unfamiliar linguistic codes and culturally distant narrative content creates a significant barrier to the formation of new audiences.

Scarcity of Dalang Regeneration while, learning to become a Wayang Potehi puppeteer requires extraordinary dedication, mastering puppet manipulation techniques, memorizing a wide repertoire of stories, understanding the accompanying music, and acquiring proficiency in Hokkien (Pratama 2016). Kurniawan (2019) emphasizes that the lack of systematic documentation and standardized training further weakens the appeal of this regeneration process. This complexity, coupled with the lack of adequate economic incentives, makes the puppeteering profession less attractive to younger Indonesians seeking a stable career path. In Jombang, active puppeteers are over 55 years old, although one teenage student currently undergoing training is a fragile sign of potential sustainability (Ningsih 2021). Economic factors are a primary consideration. Being a puppeteer is not a financially rewarding profession, especially when compared to other, more stable careers. This reality is reflected in the experience of key informant Toni, who ran a retail business before finally being able to financially support the Wayang Potehi group. The decision to operate a separate business demonstrates that the Wayang group's survival depends on external sources of income distinct from the performing

arts itself. Without the guarantee of a sustainable income, the profession of puppeteer is increasingly being abandoned by the younger generation (Mulyani 2022).

Disruption of Social Function found in these phenomena as historically, Wayang Potehi served an integral social function as a ritual medium, a form of communal entertainment, and a vehicle for conveying moral and cultural values (Pratiwi 2018). Today, these functions have been substantially compromised. Temples are no longer the centers of social life for the Chinese Indonesian community as they once were (Wibowo 2018). Purnama (2022) observes that the commercialization of tourism has displaced temples' original role as cultural spaces, transforming them into heritage sites where performances can take place but where the organic connection between community life and performing traditions has weakened. Efforts to package Wayang Potehi as a cultural tourism product have also been superficial and ceremonial. Performances in festival contexts are often drastically shortened from their original evening-long duration to just one or two hours, thereby losing their narrative coherence and cultural depth (Santoso 2021b). Susanto (2020) adds that cultural festivals often prioritize visual documentation and photo opportunities over genuine audience engagement with the substance of the performance. The result, as Hendrawan (2021) notes, is artistic degradation without increased popular appeal as a hollowing out of the art form's essential character rather than a productive hybridization.

3.4 Evaluation of Academic and Formal Preservation Channels

Analysis of preservation efforts revealed two main channels through which support for Wayang Potehi flows, each with its own strengths and limitations. Table 1 summarizes the evaluation of preservation efforts based on field data analysis.

Table 1. Evaluation of Preservation Channels for Wayang Potehi

No	Preservation Channel	Advantages	Disadvantages
1	Academic Preservation	1. Costs are covered by the organizers, and Wayang groups don't incur excessive costs. 2. Better organized with a structured schedule. 3. Produce more tangible outputs such as books, journal articles, and documentaries. 4. Has an effective distribution reach, especially among students and scholars.	1. Temporary and project-based 2. Academics sometimes have different perspectives than cultural practitioners and can sometimes be overbearing. 3. Risk of imposing theory or bureaucracy on traditional practices.
2	Formal Preservation	1. Generates direct financial benefits for	1. Temporary and rarely scheduled.

		Wayang Potehi practitioners. 2. A broad network, including international reach.	2. Activities that are ceremonial rather than appreciative limit substantial cultural engagement.

An evaluation of the two main preservation channels indicates that, while each offers distinct contributions, neither has proven sufficient to generate sustained public interest in Wayang Potehi. Academic preservation provides documentation and scholarly legitimacy but tends to operate within a limited timeframe and targets specialist audiences rather than the wider public. Formal preservation channels, including government-sponsored festivals and events, provide financial benefits and visibility but are inherently disjointed and often prioritize ceremonial displays over substantive engagement with the art form. The fundamental gap, as the evaluation demonstrates, is the absence of a systematic and sustainable strategy for audience development that would bridge the gap between the tradition and potential new audiences.

A closer examination reveals that these factors form a mutually reinforcing system of decline of intergenerational trauma reduces practitioners and audiences, diminishing economic viability, deterring new entrants, and reducing performance opportunities, which in turn reinforces perceptions of irrelevance. Yulianti (2022) describes this as a "cycle of cultural atrophy" in which each dimension of decline accelerates the others. Breaking this cycle requires interventions at multiple points simultaneously as to addressing economic incentives for practitioners, expanding the accessibility of performances to new audiences, and building institutional infrastructure for systematic training and transmission. Partial interventions addressing only one dimension are unlikely to reverse the trajectory. The community-based support emerging in Jombang represents a partial but incomplete response requiring strategic coordination (Hidayat, 2022). This gap can be understood through critical heritage studies. Harrison (2013) argues that heritage is not a pre-existing object but is actively produced through social, political, and institutional processes. Drawing on Harrison's (2013) critical framework, the preservation of Wayang Potehi can be seen not as a neutral act of safeguarding, but as a contested field in which different actors (academics, government officials, cultural activists, temple communities, and the practitioners) themselves are involved. These differences produce differing versions of what the tradition is and what should be done in its preservation. Institutional recognition through academic documentation or government-sponsored events may generate official visibility and scholarly output, but this form of recognition does not automatically translate into the kind of embedded, everyday cultural engagement that sustains a living tradition. As Harrison (2013) notes, official heritage practices often operate according to a logic that differs from, and is sometimes incompatible with, the informal, community-based processes through which cultural traditions reproduce themselves.

A further dimension of this dynamic concerns how the various actors involved in the preservation of Wayang Potehi negotiate cultural authority over the tradition. De Cesari's (2012) concept of heritage regimes describes the institutional and discursive arrangements through which heritage is regulated, contested, and legitimized. This concept can provide a productive framework for analyzing the relationships among three categories of actors which are state institutions (including government cultural institutions), communities (including temple networks, civil society organizations, and journalist networks), and practitioners (puppeteers and group managers). The heritage regime perspective reveals how they are entangled in

ongoing negotiations over who has the right to define what Wayang Potehi is, what its value is, and how it should be preserved. De Cesari (2012) demonstrates that cultural heritage governance is never simply a matter of top-down policy implementation, but involves complex processes of contestation, appropriation, and accommodation among actors with differing interests, resources, and sources of legitimacy.

Academic researchers bring scholarly authority and produce documentation valued in policy discussions but are sometimes perceived by practitioners as disconnected from practical realities. Government agencies control access to funding, festival platforms, and official recognition, but their involvement is episodic and their priorities may not align with the long-term needs of the tradition. Community organizations such as INTI and Gusdurian derive legitimacy from civil society embeddedness, but their involvement often depends on individual leaders and is vulnerable to organizational turnover. Puppeteers and group managers possess the deepest practical knowledge of the tradition, yet their cultural authority is often the most fragile, dependent on performance opportunities controlled by other actors. De Cesari's (2012) analysis suggests that the sustainability of heritage depends not only on the intentions or capacities of individual actors but also on the quality of relationships and the distribution of authority among them. This insight helps explain why decades of academic research and numerous government-sponsored cultural events have not reversed the downward trajectory of audience numbers in Jombang which is the recognition provided by institutional channels treats traditions as objects of documentation or display rather than as lived practices requiring active participation.



Figure 1. Toni Harsono The Initiator of The Museum and Preserver of Potehi Puppets



Figure 2. Ki Widodo Santoso, Puppeteer who Performs Potehi Puppets From Gudo

The fate of Wayang Potehi cannot be understood separately from the broader trajectory of Chinese-Indonesian identity negotiations in the post-Reformasi era. Since 1998, Chinese-Indonesians have navigated the complex terrain of increased cultural visibility alongside persistent structural vulnerabilities, as public expressions of Chinese culture, from lion dance

performances to Mandarin language education to Chinese New Year celebrations, have been alternately celebrated as markers of multicultural tolerance and scrutinized as signs of unresolved ethnic tensions (Santoso, 2021a). Wayang Potehi occupies a unique position within this landscape. Unlike public Chinese New Year celebrations or Mandarin-language media, which have experienced post-Reformasi revival, Wayang Potehi has not benefited from the same dynamics. Its trajectory demonstrates that the revival of Chinese-Indonesian cultural expression has been uneven, shaped by each form's accessibility to younger generations, compatibility with contemporary media, and ability to attract audiences beyond ethnic boundaries. The factors that once made Wayang Potehi a vehicle for acculturation such as linguistic hybridity, ritual function, extended formats as now place it at a disadvantage in a field oriented toward shorter, linguistically accessible, digitally mediated expression.

It is important to avoid treating declining audience numbers as an unambiguous measure of cultural decline; the relationship between audience size and cultural vitality is more complex than quantitative metrics suggest. Several possible interpretations need to be considered. First, the composition of the audience may be changing; for example, the elderly temple congregation that forms the core of today's audience represents a different mode of engagement than the multigenerational audience of earlier periods. But this does not mean that engagement is absent. Observational data indicate that audiences of 15 to 30 in Jombang often demonstrate sustained attention and emotional engagement, suggesting small audiences are not necessarily disengaged. Second, online viewing may complement or partially replace physical attendance in ways not captured by on-site observations. Although systematic data on online engagement with Wayang Potehi content is unavailable, community activists' efforts to document and share performances through social media platforms demonstrate digitally mediated forms of engagement that may not be captured by traditional measures of audience attendance. Third, the social meaning of attendance suggests that communal entertainment may now function more as a ritual observance, a marker of cultural identity, or an expression of solidarity with an endangered tradition. Attending a Wayang Potehi performance today may signify something different than it did in the early 20th century, and the decline in audience numbers may coincide with an increase in meaning for those who attend. These considerations caution against reductionist interpretations equating quantitative decline with cultural demise.

4. Conclusion

Wayang Potehi represents a distinctive cultural heritage that embodies a long history of Chinese-Indonesian acculturation. However, this tradition now faces a serious existential threat. Presidential Instruction No. 14 of 1967 created a cultural discontinuity whose impact continues to be felt, even though the discriminatory policy was officially repealed more than two decades ago. Research conducted in Jombang confirms that Wayang Potehi is still performed, particularly in temple environments, and supported by groups with extensive and growing collections of wayang. However, the physical presence of the performances is disproportionate to the presence of audiences. Interviews with master puppeteers reveal a trajectory from overt political repression, when performances were feared, to the current, relatively open situation where performances are permitted but largely ignored by the wider community.

This phenomenon is the result of a combination of interrelated factors which are generational trauma stemming from decades of discriminatory policies, the transformation of entertainment consumption patterns in the digital age, persistent language barriers that limit accessibility, a scarcity of puppeteer regeneration exacerbated by economic hardship, and the disruption of the social functions that once sustained the tradition. Positive dynamics do exist,

including support from community groups, intercity temple networks, and civil society organizations such as the INTI Association and Gusdurian, but this support remains sporadic, reactive, and not integrated into a coherent strategic framework.

Preservation efforts through academic research and formal government activities have proven insufficient to foster public interest. A paradigm shift is needed from preservation focused on producing performances and documentation for niche audiences to one centered on fostering sustainable public appreciation. Digitizing performances through high-quality video and distribution via YouTube and social media can significantly expand audience reach. Integrating Wayang Potehi into school curricula can foster appreciation from an early age. Contextual artistic innovations and shorter formats, linguistically inclusive presentations, and collaborations with contemporary artists that can broaden relevance without sacrificing the tradition's essence. Incentive-based regeneration programs, including scholarships for young apprentices, can address the scarcity of new practitioners. Finally, strategic partnerships with the creative industry, tech startups, and the tourism sector can bring new perspectives, resources, and audiences to revitalization efforts. These partnerships require careful design to prevent the authenticity of the tradition from being compromised by commercial pressures (Hidayat, 2022). Without coordinated strategic intervention, Wayang Potehi will continue its decline until it ceases to exist as a living tradition, surviving only in archives and documentation. Indonesia may lose one of its most distinctive cultural heritages as existing concerns have not yet manifested in forms capable of sustaining a living tradition in a rapidly changing social and cultural environment (Wahyuni, 2021). The lesson from Jombang is that survival depends not only on the dedication of individual practitioners and their immediate supporters, but also on building an institutional framework that can connect tradition with audiences, practitioners with livelihoods, and cultural heritage with contemporary relevance. This requires a coordinated approach in which academic documentation, community advocacy, government policy, and private sector involvement align in pursuit of a shared vision of cultural sustainability (Utami, 2022).

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