

ADAPTING TRADITIONS: REVIEWING THEORIES OF ADAPTATION IN MALAYSIAN PERFORMING ARTS

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(Received 02nd July 2026; revised 06th August 2026; accepted 12th August 2026)

Abstract. Traditional performing arts in Malaysia, including Wayang Kulit and Chinese Hokkien Potehi, face declining audiences, weakened intergenerational transmission, cultural erosion, and shifting sociopolitical and technological contexts. Treating these traditions only as heritage objects to be preserved can obscure the transformations through which they have remained viable. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, this paper conceptualises adaptation as creative reinterpretation, recontextualisation, and 'repetition without replication' rather than fidelity to an original form. Using Malaysian Wayang Kulit traditions and Hokkien Potehi puppetry as comparative cases, and integrating literature with symposium observations on shadow puppetry and ethnographic Potehi fieldwork in Penang and Johor, Malaysia, the analysis identifies localisation, multilingualism, intercultural exchange, technological mediation, and shifts in audience and performance settings as adaptive processes. The paper argues that these practices represent different degrees of adaptive change, but both demonstrate that continuity in living heritage depends on negotiated transformation rather than cultural stasis.

Keywords: *adaptation theory, performing arts, Malaysian Hokkien Potehi, glove puppetry, cultural rejuvenation, Wayang Kulit*

Introduction

Traditional performing arts in Malaysia face existential threats from globalisation, urbanisation, and shifting cultural preferences. Chinese Hokkien Potehi, a glove puppet theatre form originating from southern Fujian and introduced to Malaysia via migration in the 19th century, exemplifies this (Filmer, 2026). Historically, potehi, which was a widely enjoyed and affordable entertainment option for temple celebrations and small events, as it demanded less preparation and fewer performers than a full-scale opera troupe (Filmer, 2026), has declined due to language shifts and modern entertainment. Yet, initiatives like Ombak Potehi [Ombak Potehi is a collective of young, multiethnic artists based in Penang, Malaysia, committed to reviving the endangered Potehi glove puppet theatre. They trained under the Beng Geok Hong Puppet Show, where they learned the skills of puppetry, storytelling, and musical performance] from Penang, Malaysia, demonstrate revival through adaptive strategies (George Town World Heritage Incorporated, 2021). Adaptation theory provides a lens to understand such transformations. Linda Hutcheon's framework views adaptation as "repetition with variation", a palimpsest where old and new layers coexist, involving processes of interpretation and creation (Hutcheon, 2013). This review synthesises global adaptation theories, their limited application in non-Western contexts, and their relevance to Malaysian performing arts, using Potehi as a focal case.

The challenge is especially significant for intangible cultural heritage because its continuity cannot be secured through physical conservation alone. Performing traditions depend on repeated practice, social participation, transmission of embodied knowledge, and the continued willingness of communities to recognise them as meaningful.

UNESCO (2003) describes intangible cultural heritage as practices that are constantly recreated by communities in response to their environment, history, and social conditions. From this perspective, change is not necessarily evidence of cultural decline. It may instead be part of the process through which a living tradition remains socially intelligible across generations. This distinction is important for Malaysian performing arts, where multicultural exchange, urbanisation, language change, and new media have continuously reshaped the contexts in which traditional performances are produced and received. Potehi provides a particularly useful case for examining this relationship between continuity and transformation. Originating in southern Fujian and travelling to Southeast Asia through migration, the form became embedded in local Chinese religious and community life, particularly through temple celebrations and ritual occasions. In Malaysia, Potehi developed within multicultural environments in which Hokkien-speaking communities interacted with Malay, English, Mandarin, and other linguistic and cultural influences. Its contemporary survival therefore cannot be assessed only by asking whether present-day performances reproduce an earlier Fujianese form. A more productive question is how practitioners retain recognisable cultural foundations while adjusting language, performance settings, narrative presentation, institutional partnerships, and audience engagement to local circumstances. This analytical shift reflects Hutcheon (2013) insistence that adaptation is a process of reinterpretation rather than simple reproduction.

Adaptation in performing arts has also increasingly shifted from a notion of textual transformation to a broader conceptualisation of cultural translation and performative recontextualisation. Hutcheon (2013) conceptualises adaptation as both process and product, emphasising that adapted works are autonomous reinterpretations shaped by context rather than derivative reproductions. In performance studies, Fischer-Lichte (2008) further highlights performance as an event of meaning-making, where significance emerges through embodied interaction. In Southeast Asia, adaptation is particularly significant due to centuries of Maritime Silk Route exchanges, migration, and religious circulation, resulting in hybrid performance traditions that integrate Malay, Indian, Chinese, and regional influences (Yusof, 2015; Lo and Gilbert, 2002; Bhabha, 1994). Malaysian performing arts, especially Wayang Kulit traditions and Chinese Hokkien Potehi puppetry have provided a critical lens for examining adaptation as a sustained cultural logic rather than a one-time transformation (Fusion Wayang Kulit 2026; Yusof, 2015; Stenberg, 2015).

Literature review

Adaptation theory in contemporary scholarship extends beyond fidelity discourse to include reinterpretation, cultural negotiation, and hybridity. Hutcheon (2013) defines adaptation as repetition without replication, where meaning is generated through contextual transformation. Lo and Gilbert (2002) propose intercultural performance as a field where theatrical systems emerge through cultural encounter rather than isolation. Meanwhile, Bhabha (1994) introduces hybridity as a “third space” where new cultural meanings are produced through negotiation. Together, these frameworks position adaptation as a dynamic cultural process rather than a static representational shift. Wayang Kulit represents a syncretic performance system shaped by Hindu-Buddhist epics and Malay-Islamic cultural frameworks. Yusof (2015) demonstrates that Ramayana adaptations across Southeast Asia vary significantly in narrative structure and moral interpretation, reflecting localisation processes. Wayang Kulit functions as a

moral and spiritual medium that adapts to shifting religious and ideological environments. Meanwhile, Chinese Hokkien Potehi puppetry originated in Fujian and was transmitted to Southeast Asia through migration. Stenberg (2015) highlights its role in expressing Sino-diasporic identity in Indonesia, while Kuardhani (2018) notes linguistic shifts from Hokkien to Malay/Indonesian while retaining ritual and symbolic elements. These changes reflect adaptation as a diasporic survival strategy through cultural hybridity.

A central issue in adaptation scholarship is the movement away from fidelity as the principal measure of value. Hutcheon (2013) argues that an adaptation is simultaneously connected to a prior form and autonomous in its new context. This formulation is particularly relevant to performance because theatrical meaning is produced not only through narrative content but also through bodies, voices, space, rhythm, audience interaction, and the material conditions of staging. Fischer-Lichte (2008) similarly emphasises performance as an event in which meaning emerges through embodied and relational processes. Consequently, a traditional performance may preserve a familiar story while substantially changing its social function, audience relationship, language, or mode of presentation. Conversely, it may introduce a new narrative while retaining recognisable aesthetic, ritual, and performative conventions. Adaptation in performing arts therefore needs to be analysed across several dimensions rather than reduced to textual alteration.

Heritage scholarship reinforces this argument by distinguishing living cultural practice from static preservation. Smith and Akagawa (2009) describe intangible heritage as a social process in which communities continually negotiate meaning, identity, and value. This position aligns with UNESCO (2003) emphasis on safeguarding as ensuring viability through transmission and revitalisation rather than simply freezing a cultural form at a selected historical point. For traditional performing arts, sustainability therefore depends on a functioning cultural ecology: practitioners must have opportunities to perform, audiences must be able to interpret the work, institutions must provide spaces and resources, and younger participants must have pathways into the tradition. Adaptation becomes significant because it mediates between inherited conventions and these changing conditions of practice.

The literature on Wayang Kulit demonstrates this layered process clearly. Yousof (2015) shows that Ramayana traditions across Southeast Asia vary in narrative organisation, characterisation, and moral emphasis, reflecting adaptation to different cultural and religious environments. Contemporary Malaysian practices extend this logic by placing shadow-puppetry aesthetics in dialogue with global popular culture and multimedia staging. Such work intensifies hybridity, but it also preserves recognisable visual and performative conventions that allow audiences to identify the form as Wayang Kulit. Adaptation here can therefore involve substantial reconfiguration without requiring the abandonment of tradition.

On the other hand, Potehi demonstrates a different pattern. Kuardhani (2018) and Stenberg (2015) show that glove puppetry in Southeast Asian diasporic settings has negotiated questions of language, identity, ritual continuity, and local cultural belonging. In Malaysia, these negotiations are visible in selective code-switching, multilingual scripts, local references, educational outreach, festival presentations, and performance settings beyond temples. The key analytical point is that change does not occur uniformly. Some components, such as ritual associations, puppet manipulation, or classical narrative repertoires, may remain comparatively stable, while other

components, including language, pacing, audience explanation, or institutional setting, change more readily. This unevenness suggests that adaptation is better understood as selective and stratified rather than total.

Theoretical framework: Adaptation in performing arts

Adaptation is not mere replication but a creative act of cultural translation. Hutcheon (2013) identifies three modes: product (the adapted work), process (adaptation as telling/receiving in new ways), and reception (audience expectations of fidelity vs. pleasure). She categorises adaptations as transpositions (direct transfer), commentary (critical reworking), or analogy (loose inspiration). In theatre, adaptation involves embodiment, space, and audience interaction, differing from textual media. Postcolonial critiques highlight how adaptations resist or negotiate dominant cultures (e.g., localising Western classics like Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Malaysia). Malaysian scholarship applies these to hybrid forms: e.g., adaptations of Malay folklore to online theatres post-COVID, or animation retellings of classic films. Dance and theatre studies explore multicultural integration and digital shifts. For the present analysis, Hutcheon's framework is operationalised through three interrelated questions. First, adaptation as product asks what recognisable changes appear in the performed form: for example, revised narratives, new characters, altered staging, multilingual dialogue, or multimedia components. Second, adaptation as process asks how practitioners make decisions about what to retain, translate, localise, combine, or omit in response to changing circumstances. Third, adaptation as reception asks how audience expectations shape those decisions. In traditional performing arts, these dimensions are inseparable because a modified performance is simultaneously the outcome of creative choices and a response to particular audiences, institutions, and cultural environments.

This paper further treats adaptation as multidimensional. Linguistic adaptation concerns the choice and mixing of Hokkien, Malay, Mandarin, English, or other languages in ways that affect accessibility and cultural recognition. Narrative adaptation concerns the retention, rearrangement, localisation, or replacement of inherited stories. Technological adaptation concerns the use of amplification, projection, digital documentation, multimedia, and other production tools. Spatial and institutional adaptation concerns movement between temple compounds, theatres, festivals, museums, educational settings, and creative-industry platforms. Audience adaptation concerns changes in explanation, humour, pacing, visual references, and outreach strategies. These dimensions provide a structured basis for comparing Wayang Kulit and Hokkien Potehi without assuming that one model of change should apply to both. The framework also distinguishes adaptation from unrestricted innovation. If every departure from an earlier practice were treated as adaptation, the concept would lose analytical precision. Hutcheon's notion of recognisable repetition is therefore essential: an adapted form remains intelligible in relation to inherited conventions even as it is reworked. In living heritage, this recognisability may be carried by visual aesthetics, performance techniques, ritual functions, narrative motifs, musical structures, or community memory rather than by a single source text. Authenticity is consequently approached here as a negotiated relationship between continuity and relevance, not as exact historical replication.

This conceptualisation is particularly useful for comparing transformative fusion with selective continuity. Transformative fusion describes cases in which inherited conventions are deliberately recombined with highly visible external references,

producing a pronounced change in narrative or aesthetic form. Selective continuity describes cases in which the core repertoire and cultural identity remain comparatively stable while adjustments are made around language, context, audience communication, or staging. These are not mutually exclusive categories or fixed labels. They represent positions on an adaptive spectrum that help explain differences in the intensity, visibility, and location of change.

Materials and Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, combining literature-based analysis with two complementary sources of primary material. For Wayang Kulit, the analysis draws principally on observations from the symposium *Shadows of Heritage: A Symposium on Malaysian Shadow Puppetry*, which involved academic discussions, practitioner insights, and case-based presentations on Wayang Kulit Kelantan, Wayang Gedek, and Javanese Wayang in Johor. As the symposium focused predominantly on Malaysian shadow puppetry, its contribution to Potehi is treated as contextual rather than as the principal empirical source. Symposium material was thematically organised under three categories aligned with adaptation theory: (1) translocality and cultural mobility; (2) political and ideological adaptation; and (3) authenticity, innovation, and sustainability. For Hokkien Potehi, primary evidence was drawn from ethnographic fieldwork undertaken by the first author in Penang and Johor as part of a broader doctoral study. Data collection combined semi-structured interviews, participant observation, visual ethnography, and document analysis. Participants were selected purposively and through snowball referrals, and included Potehi practitioners, temple representatives, cultural organisations, scholars and heritage experts, and community members. Field engagement covered temple festivals, Potehi performances in temple and theatre settings, cultural events, exhibitions, community activities, backstage preparations, and ritual contexts. Field notes and visual records documented performance practices, language use, audience interactions, ritual arrangements, institutional relationships, and shifts in performance settings.

The analytical procedure treated the two case traditions as supported by related but distinct evidence bases. First, literature on adaptation, intercultural performance, hybridity, Wayang Kulit, and Potehi was read comparatively to identify concepts relevant to continuity and transformation. Second, symposium observations were organised under the three principal categories above and used primarily to interpret Wayang Kulit. Third, Potehi interview, observational, visual, and documentary material was thematically read for patterns of narrative and linguistic adaptation, technological mediation, audience orientation, spatial movement, and institutional framing. Triangulation across published scholarship and these primary sources was used to identify convergence and contextual differences and to avoid treating any single interview, observation, or symposium statement as standalone evidence.

Results and Discussion

A comparative reading of both traditions reveals two dominant adaptation orientations: transformative fusion and selective continuity. Wayang Kulit in Malaysia, particularly through contemporary interventions such as Fusion Wayang Kulit [Fusion Wayang Kulit is a Malaysian performance collective that revitalises traditional wayang

kulit (shadow puppetry) by blending it with contemporary pop culture narratives and multimedia elements, aiming to preserve and reintroduce the art form to modern audiences], demonstrates a strong tendency toward transformative fusion. Traditional narrative structures are reconfigured through the incorporation of global popular culture, including superhero narratives and cinematic universes, thereby repositioning the form within a transnational visual economy. This aligns with Hutcheon (2013) argument that adaptation is not replication but creative “re-visioning,” where new cultural meanings are produced through recombination of existing semiotic materials.

In contrast, Hokkien Potehi puppetry in Malaysia reflects a model of selective continuity, where adaptation occurs primarily through incremental modification rather than structural transformation. Classical Chinese mythological and historical narratives remain central, while localisation is achieved through language mixing, cultural contextualisation, and performance situational shifts within Malaysian multicultural settings. This demonstrates what Hutcheon (2013) describes as indigenisation, whereby imported cultural forms are absorbed into local contexts without erasing their genealogical roots (*Table 1* and *Figure 1*).

Table 1. *Comparative analysis between the adaptation conducted by Wayang Kulit and Hokkien Potehi in Malaysia.*

Dimension	Wayang Kulit	Hokkien Potehi	Analytical Insight
Narrative strategy	Fusion of traditional epics with global pop culture franchises	Retention of classical Chinese narratives with contextual localisation	Differentiates transformative vs. conservative adaptation logics
Cultural orientation	High hybridity with Western/global media references	Diasporic continuity with selective Malay/Malaysian integration	Both exhibit hybridity, but with different degrees of external incorporation
Language practice	Increasing use of Malay and multilingual narration	Predominantly Hokkien with limited code-switching	Language functions as a key site of cultural negotiation
Technological mediation	High use of multimedia, projection, digital staging	Moderate adoption of amplification and documentation tools	Technology as a marker of adaptation intensity
Audience strategy	Youth-oriented, pop-culture and global audiences	Community-based, heritage and festival audiences	Differentiated audience imaginaries shape adaptation direction
Institutional framing	Creative industry and contemporary performance art	Intangible cultural heritage and preservation discourse	Institutional logic conditions permissible innovation



Figure 1. Left: Batman is localised in Fusion Wayang Kulit by reimagining the Western superhero within the visual and performance style of traditional wayang kulit. Fusion Wayang Kulit. Right: The characters Kassim, Chew Boo Seng, and Lim Ah Ghee reflect localisation through their blend of Malay and Chinese identities within the Hokkien puppet tradition.

The distinction between these orientations becomes clearer when adaptation is examined by dimension. At the level of narrative, contemporary Wayang Kulit projects may visibly replace or combine inherited epic material with characters drawn from global popular culture. The adaptive intervention is therefore immediately legible to audiences as a fusion of different narrative worlds. Potehi, by comparison, more often retains Chinese historical, legendary, and mythological repertoires while modifying how those stories are communicated. Localisation may appear through explanatory framing, inserted humour, character interactions, or references that make the performance intelligible within Malaysian social contexts. In this sense, the difference is not between an ‘adaptive’ Wayang Kulit and an ‘unchanged’ Potehi; both adapt, but the locus and intensity of transformation differ. Language is one of the clearest sites of selective adaptation in Potehi. The historical association of the form with Hokkien gives language an important role in cultural memory and diasporic identity, yet exclusive reliance on older linguistic registers can narrow contemporary accessibility. The use of Malay, Mandarin, English, or localised varieties of Hokkien allows performers to address younger and multi-ethnic audiences while retaining selected Hokkien expressions, songs, ritual phrases, or character voices. Kuardhani (2018) discussion of Indonesian Potehi similarly demonstrates that shifts toward Malay/Indonesian can coexist with continued use of Hokkien in ritual and poetic elements. Language therefore functions not simply as a communication tool but as a negotiated boundary between continuity and accessibility.

Performance space and institutional framing also shape what kinds of adaptation become possible. A temple-based performance is embedded in ritual calendars, patronage relationships, religious expectations, and community memory. These conditions can privilege continuity because the performance has obligations beyond entertainment. By contrast, festivals, museums, theatres, educational programmes, and contemporary arts platforms often invite explanation, experimentation, shorter formats, intercultural collaboration, and new production technologies. The movement of a traditional form across these spaces does not merely change the venue; it changes the relationship among performers, audiences, funders, cultural authorities, and the meanings attached to performance. Spatial relocation is therefore itself an adaptive process. Technological mediation produces a similar tension. Contemporary Wayang

Kulit may incorporate projection, digital scenography, amplified sound, and media imagery as visible elements of the performance aesthetic. Potehi has generally shown a more moderate technological shift, with amplification, documentation, digital circulation, and occasional contemporary staging used to support rather than displace embodied puppetry. The contrast is important because technology should not be treated as a universal measure of modernisation. Its significance depends on how it is incorporated into the performance ecology. Digital tools can expand visibility and documentation, but the live dimensions of manipulation, vocalisation, improvisation, ritual etiquette, and audience interaction remain central to the meaning of traditional puppetry.

Figure 1 visually illustrates the contrast between the two adaptive orientations. The Batman figure demonstrates an explicit transposition of a Western superhero into the silhouette, craftsmanship, and performance vocabulary of Wayang Kulit. The adaptive gesture is conspicuous and depends on the audience recognising both cultural frames at once. The Potehi characters Kassim, Chew Boo Seng, and Lim Ah Ghee illustrate a subtler form of localisation in which Malaysian social identities and interethnic references are incorporated within a recognisable Hokkien puppet tradition. Both examples are hybrid, but they differ in how much of the inherited narrative and aesthetic structure is reconfigured. This comparison also complicates conventional ideas of authenticity. If authenticity is defined solely as fidelity to an imagined original, both traditions risk being judged according to standards that overlook their historical mobility. Wayang Kulit has long circulated through religious, linguistic, and regional transformations, while Potehi itself is a diasporic form whose Malaysian history is inseparable from migration and localisation. A living tradition cannot remain entirely outside social change because its practitioners, audiences, institutions, and performance environments are themselves changing. Authenticity is therefore better understood as culturally recognised continuity: the capacity of a community and its audiences to perceive meaningful connections between contemporary practice and inherited forms.

From this perspective, adaptation in Malaysian traditional performing arts is ecosystemic. What changes is not only a script or a visual form but also the institutional setting, audience composition, circulation pathway, technological environment, and social function of performance. This broader understanding is consistent with the broader observation that living traditions persist through interactions among cultural practice, institutional support, social participation, and adaptive capacity. Applied to the present article, it explains why two traditions can display different visible levels of innovation while still relying on the same underlying principle: continuity is actively produced through negotiated responses to changing environments. In line with Hutcheon (2013) conception of adaptation as a process of reinterpretation, relocation, and recontextualisation, the Malaysian cases of Wayang Kulit and Hokkien Potehi puppetry demonstrate that traditional performing arts evolve through differentiated but structurally comparable adaptation logics. Rather than existing as fixed heritage artefacts, both traditions function as dynamic cultural systems that continuously negotiate continuity and change across narrative, linguistic, technological, social, and institutional dimensions. The patterns shown in *Table 1* indicate that adaptation in Malaysian traditional performing arts is not uniform but stratified according to cultural positioning, audience ecology, and institutional framing. Wayang Kulit demonstrates a more radical reconfiguration of narrative and aesthetic boundaries, reflecting a strategy of survival through reinvention. Hokkien Potehi, however, maintains continuity through

calibrated adjustments that preserve its diasporic identity while sustaining cultural relevance within Malaysia's multicultural environment.

Importantly, both forms challenge essentialist assumptions of authenticity. Rather than being measured solely by fidelity to an 'original' form, authenticity emerges through sustained performative relevance and the capacity to remain meaningful across shifting sociocultural contexts. This supports Hutcheon (2013) assertion that adaptation is fundamentally a process of survival through transformation, where cultural forms persist precisely because they are capable of change rather than resistant to it. In this sense, Malaysian traditional performing arts can be understood as adaptive cultural ecologies. Wayang Kulit and Hokkien Potehi puppetry represent different positions on an adaptive spectrum; one privileging reinvention through fusion, the other sustaining continuity through selective localization, yet both affirm the same principle: tradition in Malaysia survives not in stasis, but in motion.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that adaptation in Malaysian performing arts is not merely aesthetic transformation but a multidimensional cultural process involving translocality, hybridity, and ideological negotiation. Integrating theoretical frameworks with symposium observations and ethnographic Potehi fieldwork reveals that Wayang Kulit and Potehi survive not by resisting change, but by continuously adapting to it. Ultimately, adaptation should be understood as the defining condition of traditional performing arts in Malaysia, ensuring their continuity within shifting cultural, political, and technological landscapes. The comparison further shows that adaptation should not be treated as a single universal pathway. Wayang Kulit's transformative fusion and Potehi's selective continuity represent different positions on an adaptive spectrum shaped by cultural history, ritual obligations, audience ecology, institutional framing, and available technologies. In both traditions, language, narrative, space, technology, and audience reception operate as interconnected sites of negotiation. The analytical implication is that cultural sustainability cannot be measured only by how much a tradition changes or how closely it resembles an earlier form. It must also consider whether the conditions for meaningful practice, transmission, recognition, and participation remain viable. For heritage practice, this supports an approach that safeguards cultural knowledge while allowing communities and practitioners room to reinterpret tradition. Preservation and adaptation should therefore be understood as complementary rather than opposing strategies. Future research could deepen the comparative design through sustained ethnographic observation of Wayang Kulit and Potehi practitioners and audiences across temple, festival, educational, and digital settings, alongside closer attention to how different generations evaluate authenticity and innovation. Such work would further clarify how adaptive strategies become socially accepted, institutionally supported, and culturally sustainable over time.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to express sincere appreciation to Dr. Welyne Jeffrey Jehom for her invaluable guidance, critical insights, and continuous support throughout the development of this article. Special thanks are extended to Tintoy Chuo for his creative perspectives and practice-based insights that enriched the discussion on contemporary

adaptations of Malaysian shadow puppetry. Deep gratitude is also extended to Marcus Lim and Prof. Dr. Tan Sooi Beng, founders of Ombak Potehi, for their efforts in reviving Chinese glove puppetry in Penang and for generously sharing their knowledge. The author is also grateful to the experts and panelists of the “Shadows of Heritage: A Symposium on Malaysian Shadow Puppetry” conducted on April 12, 2025, hosted by the Sunway Centre for Digital Humanities and Cultural Heritage at Sunway University for their valuable scholarly contributions and exchanges.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involving any parties in this research study.

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