

# Celebrating the Right to be Hybrid: *Sie Jin Kwie*

*A Play by Indonesian Group, Teater Koma*

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**Talha Bachmid** discusses how a theatre group in Indonesia uses dialogism to create a hybrid spectacle, and at the same time manipulates all kinds of theatrical forms to celebrate the right to be different.

## Introduction

**A**s a multi-ethnic country, it is a given reality that various cultures live together in Indonesia. However, problems, such as conflicts between ethnic groups and pressures asserted by communities on one another, arise from time to time, causing an imbalance. Conflicting situations within pluralism are also reflected in artistic forms, for example in theatrical performances. Teater Koma, under Nano Riantiarno, is well known as a theatre group that often makes use of various ethnic characteristics in their performances, such as combining Javanese theatrical conventions with other conventions. In addition, their productions always foreground social issues as their themes. In March 2010, a play entitled *Sie Jin Kwie* once again offered a fusion of various theatrical conventions, from Java, China, and the modern musical. The plot is taken from an ancient Sino-Javanese puppet show *Wayang Potehi*, but recreated as a contemporary play that actually transforms into a hybrid performance. This show corresponds to the group's desire to celebrate the diversity of ethnic groups, and to showcase the richness of a hybrid society. In order to do so, the different conventions mentioned above were made to confront/interact with one another, and create a particular form of performance which is, according to Bakhtin's concept, carnivalesque. Thus, in celebrating hybridity, Teater Koma seems to indicate that even contradictory forms and different cultures can live together and produce harmony.

As a nation consisting of many ethnic groups, Indonesia is acutely aware of this reality and, hence, determined to adopt “Unity in Diversity” as a national motto. However, in the nation’s history, many events have occurred to challenge the integrity of such ideals. From time to time, riots among ethnic groups have broken out because of different cultures and beliefs among them, but efforts to create peace by combining different cultures may still succeed. Sometimes, goodwill alone is not sufficient, and fear and anxiety arise because of the power of certain dominant communities, which may lead to the important question concerning Indonesia as a nation, such as the nation has experienced during various phases in its history.

One of the problems in the development of Indonesia is the multitude of conflicts involving its Chinese community, reaching a critical stage during the socio-political upheaval in 1965, to which thousands of members of various ethnic groups fell victim. Another crisis occurred in 1998 before the fall of President Suharto’s regime (1967-1998), during which certain laws forbade Chinese cultural practices. It was forbidden to publish anything using Chinese characters (newspapers such as *Sin Po* were banned), and religious expressions and activities such as Buddhist ceremonies or celebrations were also prohibited. When Abdurahman Wahid became president (1999-2001), there came about a change in the political climate. The ban on Chinese cultural and religious expressions was lifted, and freedom for the community was guaranteed. Many Chinese customs, related to various aspects of their life (including religion, cultural shows, etc.), suddenly reappeared, and even the Lunar Year has now been declared as a national holiday, which is celebrated openly with spectacles such as the dragon show (*barongsay*).

One would expect that this kind of freedom would eradicate problems relating to cultural differences and pluralism, and it is true that the variety of cultural aspects does add to the richness of the country’s culture in general. However, problems of ethnicity persist to emerge, mostly kindled by intolerance and pressures exercised by certain communities. Many social conflicts, riots between ethnic groups, and attacks on communities of different beliefs, continue to occur while the government fails to anticipate them.

This social condition is reflected in artistic forms i.e. theatrical performances. One of Indonesia's famous groups, Teater Koma, created and staged plays linked to the culture of the minority Chinese. The group was founded in 1973, under the leadership of Nano Riantiarno. In 1989, Riantiarno wrote and staged *Sam Pek Eng Thay* which was banned by the regime in power, and recreated in 2005. In 2010, a play called *Sie Jin Kwie* was performed and, as expected, reaped success. Taken from the repertoire of an old Sino-Javanese puppet show known as *wayang potehi*, which was famous in Central Java in the 1950s, Teater Koma adapted the dramatic text of *Sie Jin Kwie* (created by Tio Keng Jian and Lo Koan Chung, and turned it into a theatrical performance). With the intention of producing a trilogy, a year thereafter a sequel was staged, followed by the third sequel. Each part was a long spectacle – taking approximately three hours and 30 minutes – but the group had its faithful followers, and each part of the trilogy was staged for at least three weeks.

Ever since its early productions, Koma has often been adapting its performances by using various sources, domestic as well as foreign texts. Its productions, adaptations of Chinese works as well as those introducing political themes, have always foregrounded social problems as its main theme which has often resulted in protest and sharp criticism from the authorities, especially during Suharto's regime. Political themes such as tyranny, which is another trademark of Koma, caused serious problems with the authorities of that time. However, since 2000 Koma's productions no longer faced any resistance, and in line with the development of freedom of expression in the country, the social criticism in the performances has become more explicit. They have also developed humorous ways of criticizing social discrepancies, and this has become the forte of Koma.

In *Si Jin Kwie*, one can still find social criticism but this time Koma uses various theatrical conventions, and the exuberance sometimes conceals the critic. Apart from that, this play also represents an effort to combine various theatrical conventions in expressing the freedom to create arts that arouse the pride in being hybrid. Hence, this production is rich in many interesting aspects which are each equally interesting, but the aspect chosen to be discussed here is how issues of pluralism and its challenges are still present despite the many theatrical forms used. In this production, Koma uses a number of theatrical conventions, such as the

Javanese *wayang kulit* (the shadow play), Chinese puppet show, Chinese Peking Opera, and modern conventions such as the Broadway musical. Although these varieties of conventions seem incompatible, in the end they finally contribute to creating a unified performance that supports the idea of hybridity.

This performance corresponds to Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque, where contradictory elements are present, such as fantasy and realism, facts and fiction, rationality and irrationality (Danow, 1995: 142), in a kind of dialogism. By forwarding this aspect, Koma tries to show how established social values can often be reversed and still be accepted by society.

## **The Battle of Conflicting Forces**

The plot, in relation to the narrative, consists of complex episodes, and is played out in various theatrical forms. The core of the conflict is shown in one third of the play, while the remaining part is about the battle between two forces, good and evil. The conflict arises from the struggles of the hero (Sie Jin Kwie) during his life. He first appears in the dream of emperor Lisibin as the only hero who can rescue the kingdom from its enemy, the kingdom of Kolekok. Lisibin is a Chinese emperor from the Tang dynasty in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The hero's task is indeed not easy, for during the entire performance all kinds of obstacles come his way in different forms, and thus creating a complex plot.

Besides introducing the major conflict and the main hero, the dream device is used to depict two contradictory aspects in the performance: the dream as a fantasy and the reality represented by conflicts. These two aspects are present all through the performance: fantastic and realistic scenes to create a dialogue that prove to be difficult, and generate multiple aspects. Each aspect is dealt in various theatrical forms that are sometimes pushed to the extreme. Fantastic scenes may appear as extravagant, whereas the realistic sometimes touches the border of the fantastic aspect of the spectacle.

So, the emperor is determined to find Sie Jin Kwie, but other dignitaries within the emperor's circle are equally ambitious about fulfilling the emperor's wish, and so they become rivals. The emperor's uncle is especially offended by the way things are going, and discusses the matter with his

family. His wife, with the help of their two children, hatches an evil plan with the goal of eliminating the hero. In reality, the evil plans come from the women in the family, since the father, as the head of the family, takes no visible action, and submits to his wife's decisions. This also indicates the presence of a battle of the sexes, and clearly shows that the female elements are powerful, with the complexity of the performance enhanced by the actions of the female characters.

The obstacles posed by the emperor's uncle and his family are handled peacefully by Sie Jin Kwie. He tries to enter the imperial circle several times as an officer recruit but is constantly rejected; and since he fails to be appointed as the commander of the emperor's army, and is instead put to work in the kitchen, he builds his own troop of cooks and fights the kingdom's enemy. His success in the battlefield constitutes the victory of the centripetal force: to conquer an evil force, non-violence here represented by the cooks can be a convincing force.

The hardest struggle centres on Sie Jin Kwie's dealings with Kolekok's leaders. Here, he seems to have lost his power, while simultaneously the struggle inside the kingdom with the uncle's family continues. The battle is at its most crucial, and lasts until near the end of the performance. Help to the hero comes in the person of the goddess Kwan Im herself who delivers the ultimate weapons to the hero, who then uses them to kill the enemies. This supernatural element corresponds to the fantastic side of the performance, and to Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque, which is based on the boundaries between reality and fantasy (Danow, 1995: 142).

It seems that in the narrative aspect, the battle between good and evil forces may be considered as a conclusion. Three parties are involved in this battle with two of them representing the evil forces. The centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart (Bakhtin, 1981: 272, 273) are represented by the forces with many frightful faces that the hero has to conquer; whereas the centripetal forces, which strive to make things cohere, is represented only by the hero. Despite the fact of having to fight these forces alone, the hero conjures many "tricks" to counter evil forces; he uses humour, perseverance and determination as tools of non-violence. Although a goddess assists the hero to achieve his goal, the assistance is supposed to have happened in a dream, since Sie Jin Kwie is meditating in a cave when the goddess appears to him in an aura of supernatural surroundings.

The characters, as complex as the plot, are presented on stage in a complex way. Every side is filled with many aspects even if it is possible to determine the two categories of good and evil. Significantly, the hero himself – even if he appears on stage from childhood to adulthood – maintains his unchanging ‘personality’ throughout the performance. He is and remains a ‘candid’ character, and does not undergo any change. He reminds us of a folkloric character, and corresponds to what Bakhtin affirms about heroes: complete and unchanging (1986: 52). The other numerous characters represent ‘complex designs of people, generations, epochs, nations, and social groups’ (1986: 25) – all of them constitute and represent the multifaceted world we live in.

This complex narrative aspect of the performance is expressed in various forms. As is the case in Javanese shadow play or *wayang kulit*, the performance begins with a narrator who introduces the story and the characters wearing Chinese costume and make-up. The appearance of the hero, Sie Jin Kwie (commencing from childhood), behind a screen is similar in form to a Chinese puppet show, and is hence seen by the audience as a shadow play. This particular form is introduced by Koma through the narrator, called Tavip, the creator of the puppets, who narrates the story using a mixture of Javanese and Indonesian languages – this form is called *wayang Tavip*. The humorous manner used by Tavip in his narration adds to the carnivalesque aspect of the performance. Later, this form is used to depict some violent scenes, such as the death of the enemies.

The wedding scene may be seen as a symbol fusing the different cultures, with the stage set in spaces that clearly represent social spaces. For example, the curtain that isolates the family circle shows the intimate space in society (see Figure 1). The couple appears on stage, and after going through the rituals of the Chinese community, they go to the table – which represents the shrine – and pay homage to their ancestors. This scene would be a solemn scene if, within the same space, the ‘event organiser’ present was not dressed as an angel, an occidental influence. A touch of irony and humor is present in this serious event: the two opposing aspects contribute to the hybridization of the spectacle.



Figure 1: The couple appears before the shrine to pay homage to the ancestors

As Ubersfeld mentioned, scenic space represents social space in real life, with its values, whether historical or merely contextual (1978: 144). The wedding scene refers to the sacred ceremony in society which continues to be practised, a rite that has always been an important phase in social life. The social values here are not merely contextual to the performance in that it is connected to a rite of passage in the hero's life, but it is essential as it is one of the most important parts of *Koma's* discourse of hybridization. The intimate space is also pure, far from other spaces wherein conflicts are developing. This is the space where hope for an ideal life seems possible.



Figure 2: Paying homage to the parents

In the wedding ceremony, not only is the Chinese custom represented but also the Javanese custom known as *sungkem* (see Figure 2) in which the couple are obliged to seek forgiveness by paying homage to their parents. This part of the ceremony is obligatory in every wedding in Indonesia's cities, although it may not be the custom in some regions. This can be seen as an irony as it demonstrates how dominating Javanese culture is. On the other hand, this scene shows a touch of humour, since the

parents act like puppets – a convention adopted by Koma from the Sino-Javanese puppet show known as *wayang potehi*. The mechanic gestures of the characters also insinuate the degradation of sacred values as the ceremony becomes a mechanic event.

The fusion of different cultures illustrates two different faces of the social event: a space free of conflicts, full of tolerance, but simultaneously at great risk of being a mere formality and lacking in substantial social values.



*Figure 3: General Kosiabun and his wife of Kolekok*

In a scene which depicts the kingdom of Kolekok on stage, the kingdom is represented by the commander of the army and his wife (nicknamed Centipede King and Queen) who appear in an exaggerated manner (see Figure 3). Representing the forces of violence, both characters wield weapons indicating that they are ready to fight. They appear on stage as two monsters, and their death (by beheading) is thus permitted as evil power has to be destroyed. However, it can be interpreted that Koma makes an effort to push the centrifugal force to its extreme, and hence, the two characters appear as caricatures. Even so, sometimes the excessive



humour with which they are presented, can be regarded as deliberate to offset the fear that these two characters might evoke, and the evil force that they represent.



Figure 4: The female warrior of KOLEKOK

The couple who represents the centrifugal force, as has been mentioned before, consists of two different elements, male and female. Obviously, the female element evokes more power and violence, as the general's wife expresses her intentions by singing, whereas the general does not say much. Her song expresses her determined character, ready as ever to destroy her enemies. At the same time, her facial make-up visualizes violence through very bright colours, and the dagger that she holds and points at the audience (Figure 4).

Multiple forms of performance in this play are adapted from different genres and styles: classical conventions such as *wayang* from Java and Peking Opera, are combined with contemporary performances, Broadway musicals, for example. Each of these styles has different aspects which sometimes melt into a hybrid scene (e.g. the wedding scene), and the organisation of the stage represents modern performances where various stage properties connote modern urban life (the bridesmaid dressed as an angel).

The intention to foreground the idea of pluralism is also expressed on stage in the many symbols which refer to various cultures. Besides the clothes and face make-up, the mythical Chinese animals such as the dragon, the tiger, and the phoenix are used as stage setting. Dragons decorate the setting of Lisibin's palace, whereas a tiger decorates the palace of the emperor's uncle. The two animals represent the two conflicting forces within the country. The phoenix, however, is multi-functional. It appears as the backdrop for the wedding scene, and represents sacred social values, which include the survival of mankind, since the phoenix represents immortality. This symbol, however, also accompanies the general of KOLEKOK and his wife (see Figure 3), thus implying the continuation of conflicting forces in the world. Indonesian culture is symbolized, among others, by the narrator who manipulates a rhythmic instrument (known

as *kecrek*) when opening the show, and also when he appears on stage to narrate or sometimes to direct the characters' acting. He is at the same time narrator and director, and sometimes he surpasses his role to prove the tyrannical power of one man.

## **Dialogism, hybridization**

While the stage is the representation of social spaces, the performance is a dialogue of the various social spaces. Social groups, even in conflict, and complementing each other, fill the stage and are involved in the act of either dominating or communicating. As the social groups involved in this play are numerous, many different spaces are present. Intimate or domestic spaces such as the family (e.g. wedding scene and the house of dignitaries), offer different aspects: the space of the hero's family may be the only 'peaceful' place where idealism is shown, whereas conflicting aspects with the will to dominate fill the other families. Open spaces are versatile, from the woods to the battlefields where Sie Jin Kwie meets the tiger and robbers that he conquers, and who join him as members of his troop. Each of them presents its own characteristic but within a dialogue, and this creates a universe of rich cultures.

Some spaces function as the agent of fear and terror, for example when the Centipede King and Queen appear on stage or when the robbers in the woods attack people. Even inside the family, menace can be a part of the space because of evil plans and the determination to attack those who obstruct their way to obtain power. Women here can also be the agent of terror or at least threaten other characters.

In every space, there are always two contrasting aspects: terror is balanced by excessive humour, either in the form of physical appearances (e.g., the Centipede Queen), or gestures (the tiger is transgender), and the language spoken is filled with jokes. Hence, dialogism appears to be a tool of hybridization, which according to Bakhtin is the result of many voices in a text (1981: 358).

Terror and menace are balanced by the representation of the social values of perseverance and determination that the hero demonstrates in dealing with the different kinds of ordeals he faces. In every challenge he takes on, the determination to remain the same character persists. Another

different aspect of the hero that is demonstrated in this play as a positive value is the fact that he uses violence only as a means of defending the ideal values such as independence or freedom. The play demonstrates many times that the hero is able to maintain his candid side amidst the corruptive elements.

One of the hero's positive features can be seen in the dialogues with the transgender tiger in the woods. In a scene in which one of the dignitaries from Lisibin's kingdom is attacked by the tiger in the woods, the corrupted dignitary is saved by Sie Jin Kwie who has the ability to talk to animals. The tiger admits that its attack on the dignitary was caused by the concession he received from the government to exploit the forest, and which destroyed the forest. This is a message for the environmental ecology which is, at the same time, delivered with the right to be hybrid (transgender).

The two faces of humankind are always present, and one of the spaces that symbolizes the ideal space is the cave where Sie Jin Kwie meets the goddess Kwan Im who gives superpower to the hero as well as the five weapons to defeat Kolekok (see Figure 5).



*Figure 5: Sie Jin Kwie meets the Goddess Kwan Im*

She appears before him with the two contradictory elements: darkness and light. On the one hand, the hero now is well equipped for his ultimate task after so many ordeals, and he truly deserves to be. On the other hand, seemingly the goddess does not merely symbolize the good elements as she is supposed to. In Chinese culture, Kwan Im is usually worshipped by women who wish to bear children or to keep their family safe. In this play, though, she has other capacities which include granting superpower as well as weapons. This can be seen as a form of dialogism of contradictory elements, but at the same time as a characteristic of a folkloric type in which case the hero requires superpowers, and obtains it.

Dialogism functions as means to build a discourse of celebrating the right to be hybrid. Here, monoculture is rejected in spite of the many forces of pressure, whether political or social. Political forces sometimes create social injustice, and end up in ethnic riots. This play which presents various forms of differences clearly show the conflicting forces even if social injustice does not appear explicitly. Only one scene in the play depicts how methods to obstruct the domination of another party is rejected, and become obstacles for the right people to occupy certain positions. The privileges of some parties create a monopoly in social life (Sie Jin Kwie has to struggle hard to achieve the role of commander in the army).

The issues that this performance raises, from the narrative level as well as the theatrical forms, are conflicting forces in society that cause fear and terror. The performance also proposes, in an implicit manner, some counter aspects to balance the situation, which is dialogism between many aspects of realism and fantasy. The contradictory elements should be tolerated because of the necessity to live and accept this reality, in order to create a society where people can live, maybe not happily but at least without fear.

## **Conclusion**

An extensive experience in elaborating its characteristics in the performing art has made Koma a successful group with a faithful following. As the result of presenting diverse contradictory elements within a dialogue, the group has created a highly exuberant performance. In the end, the proposed message is that in this era harmony can result from the co-existence of different cultures: in fact, each particular culture needs other

cultures to complete the whole 'universe'. By putting all multitudes of different elements in the performance, Koma seems to affirm that each of us has the right to be different, and that people have the right not to side with the unique category forced upon us.

The presence of various contradictory aspects in cultures and customs represents contemporary Indonesia, where some problems, such as the repression of some minority communities by the dominant group, continue to emerge. It is a challenge to promote tolerance in a plural country in the context of the extreme ways favoured and chosen here, a challenge that Koma has embraced in expressing these anxieties through the arts, rejecting uniformity, and celebrating hybridity.

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Images contributed by the author

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**Dr. Talha Bachmid** (bachmidtalha@yahoo.fr) graduated from the Faculty of Letters (renamed the Faculty of Humanities since 2004), Universitas Indonesia in 1972, in the French Study Programme, majoring in French modern literature. Since receiving a doctoral degree in 1990, with a thesis on the comparison of an Indonesian play (Kapai Kapai by Arifin C. Noer) with Eugene Ionesco's play Rhinoceros, Dr. Bachmid has produced articles, particularly in the drama and theatre domain, and is currently interested in oral traditions (researching on Moluccas' oral tradition).