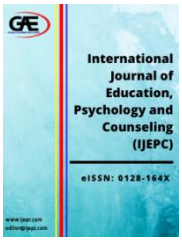
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BETWEEN CULTURAL DIFFERENCE AND SHARED VALUES: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' LEARNING THROUGH THE THEATRE PERFORMANCE OF *MALIN KUNDANG*

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Abstract:

International theatre projects provide opportunities for students to engage with cultural differences through collaborative and creative experiences. However, the presence of participants from diverse cultural backgrounds does not necessarily result in meaningful cross-cultural learning. This study explores how international students experience and deal with cultural differences while participating in collaborative theatre performances and how the staging of the Indonesian folktale Malin Kundang shapes their understanding of cultural differences and shared values. Using a basic qualitative inquiry approach, this study involved 17 students from Indonesia, Taiwan, Vietnam and India who participated in an international theatre project. Data was collected through open-ended written reflections and manually analyzed using inductive thematic analysis. Four themes were identified: (1) dealing with cultural and linguistic differences, (2) moving from anxiety to connection through adaptation, (3) interpreting culture through Malin Kundang, and (4) discovering shared values across cultural differences. Findings indicate that cross-cultural learning develops through ongoing interaction, communication adaptation, affective and relational transitions and collective interpretation of narratives rooted in a particular culture. While participants acknowledged the cultural specificity of Malin Kundang, they also identified values and emotions that could be associated with their respective cultural backgrounds. This study suggests that theatre can facilitate cross-cultural meaning-making by enabling students to identify similarities without eliminating cultural differences, thus creating space for cultural openness in international higher education.

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Introduction

Theatre is increasingly gaining attention as a learning approach that allows students to gain educational experiences through active engagement, social interaction, and interpretive processes. Different from learning that relies primarily on formal content delivery, theatre activities place students in situations that require them to communicate, play roles, interpret narratives, and construct meaning together. Such experiences make theatre not only a performance medium, but also a learning space that connects cognitive, social, and affective aspects. Previous studies have shown that educational drama has potential in the development of communication and language learning (Shang et al., 2024), value formation (Kristiawan et al., 2023), as well as understanding formed through dramatic experiences and the process of meaning-making (Xu & Tateo, 2022). In the context of higher education, this potential becomes even more significant when theatre activities involve students from different cultural and national backgrounds.

The increasingly international environment of higher education provides opportunities for students to interact with individuals who bring different languages, values, experiences, and ways of communicating. However, the presence of students from different cultures in one environment does not necessarily automatically result in cross-cultural learning. Differences in language, communication styles, social customs and ways of working can be a challenge in interactions between students. At the same time, when these differences are encountered through activities that require collaboration and joint involvement, they can be a source of learning. Drama provides such a situation because participants need to listen, respond, adapt and build understanding to produce a joint performance.

Shang et al. (2024), for example, shows the relationship between the use of drama and the development of intercultural communication skills, while Lyngstad (2025) shows the potential of drama approaches in multicultural educational processes. Thus, the international theatre experience can be understood as a space for cultural encounters where differences are not only observed but also experienced and negotiated through interaction. This dimension of learning becomes more complex when students not only work with individuals from different cultures but also engage in the performance of stories rooted in specific cultural traditions. Folktales bring with them narratives, symbols, social relations and values that were formed in the context of their original society. When the stories are transferred to an educational space and performed

by international students, participants need to understand not only the storyline, but also the cultural meanings underlying the characters' actions, conflicts and moral messages. Xu and Zhou (2021), through their study of educational drama based on Chinese folklore, show how dramatic engagement with folklore can open space for cultural interpretation.

From a broader perspective, Xu and Tateo (2022) emphasize the role of drama in the process of forming and mediating meaning. Therefore, performing folklore can be a form of experiential cultural learning, as participants encounter culture not only as knowledge to be read or explained, but as something to be interpreted, acted out, and communicated to others. Learning through theatrical experiences also has an important affective dimension. Encounters with unfamiliar individuals and cultures can produce a variety of emotional responses, including feelings of nervousness, awkwardness, uncertainty, or lack of confidence, especially in the early stages of interaction. However, the process of working together can open space for changes in the way participants relate to these differences.

Studies on educational drama have linked dramatic experiences to the development of empathy and awareness of others (Briones et al., 2022), while Mavroudis and Kondoyianni (2022) demonstrate the potential of drama in increasing acceptance of different identities in intercultural settings. Xu et al. (2022) also demonstrated the importance of affective processes in educational drama experiences. These findings suggest that cultural learning through theatre is not necessarily limited to increased knowledge of other cultures. It can also involve changes at the attitudinal and emotional levels, such as increased openness, willingness to listen, appreciation of differences, empathy and confidence in interacting with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

In this context, the Indonesian folktale *Malin Kundang* provides an interesting space to explore how cultural meaning is learned through performance between races. The story is rooted in Indonesian tradition and carries strong messages about the relationship between mother and child, respect for family, pride, regret and the consequences of one's actions. Although the narrative has a specific cultural context, the values and emotions it contains have the potential to be recognized and interpreted by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This process creates an important learning possibility: students may initially encounter the story as a representation of a culture different from their own, but through interpretation and performance, they can also identify similarities with values, family experiences or traditional stories from their own culture. Thus, cross-cultural learning through theatre can occur in a productive tension between cultural differences and shared values. Theatre in this context becomes a space for participants to not only recognize "the different" but also find common ground without eliminating the uniqueness of a culture.

Although previous studies have discussed the use of drama in education, intercultural communication, acceptance of differences, empathy, values, and cultural interpretation (Briones et al., 2022; Kristiawan et al., 2023; Mavroudis & Kondoyianni, 2022; Shang et al., 2024; Xu & Tateo, 2022; Xu et al., 2022; Xu & Zhou, 2021), there is still room for a deeper understanding of the experiences of international students when they collectively perform a folktale originating from a particular culture. Greater attention is needed to how students experience cultural differences during the process, how they interpret the values contained in the story, and how the performance experience leads to the identification of similarities and differences between cultures. The affective dimension that accompanies this process is also important because cross-cultural learning is not only related to what students know about other

cultures, but also involves how they feel, adapt, and form attitudes toward different individuals and cultures.

Accordingly, this study explores the experiences of international students involved in an international theatre project through the staging of the Indonesian folktale *Malin Kundang*. The study focuses on their experiences interacting in a cross-cultural environment and the cultural learning that results from the process of interpreting and performing the story. By examining the students' experiences from their own perspectives, this study seeks to understand how theatre can function as a learning space that connects cultural encounters, interpretations of meaning, shared values and affective development. Specifically, this study is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: How do international students experience and deal with cultural differences while participating in a collaborative theatre performance?
RQ2: How does the staging of the Indonesian folktale Malin Kundang shape international students' understanding of cultural differences and shared values?

Literature Review

This literature review discusses the conceptual and empirical foundations related to cross-cultural learning through theatre experiences. The discussion is organized around three main aspects, namely the role of theatre as a space for experiential and cross-cultural learning, the use of folklore in the formation of cultural meaning and the identification of shared values, and the affective dimensions that accompany cross-cultural learning experiences.

Theatre as a Space for Experiential and Cross-Cultural Learning

Theatre provides a learning environment that enables students to acquire knowledge through direct engagement in the creative process, social interaction and reflection on experiences. Unlike learning that relies primarily on the receipt of information, theatre activities require participants to act, communicate, make decisions and respond to individuals and situations that change throughout the performance process. In the context of higher education, this approach can create activity-based learning that connects experiences with the development of communication and interpersonal skills (Alam et al., 2023). Reflective practice in drama pedagogy also allows participants to evaluate their experiences and develop a more critical understanding of themselves and their social environment (Athiemoolam, 2022).

This learning potential becomes more significant when theatre activities involve participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Such diversity creates a situation where participants are confronted directly with differences in language, accents, communication styles, ways of thinking and forms of expression. Shang et al. (2026) show that drama can support the development of intercultural communication skills through authentic communication, collaboration and active engagement. Similarly, Lyngstad (2025) shows how drama-based approaches can be used as an alternative space in the multicultural education process. In such a context, cultural differences are not just the background of the participants but become part of the learning experience itself.

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Language also plays an important role when participants from different linguistic backgrounds need to reach a common understanding. Drama can provide a space that allows communication to develop through a combination of verbal language, expression, body language and shared action. Sanchez and Athanases (2022) emphasize the importance of drama and theatre practices that are responsive to the needs of multilingual learners, while Jacobs (2025) link the use of drama to language development and the ability to function in different cultural contexts. Therefore, communication in cross-cultural theatre projects does not necessarily depend on uniformity in language proficiency levels but can involve a process of adaptive communication to enable participants to continue to interact and collaborate.

However, the presence of participants from different cultures in space does not necessarily automatically result in cross-cultural learning. Learning requires engagement with these differences through interaction, negotiation and a willingness to understand perspectives that are not necessarily the same as one's own. Mavroudis and Kondoyianni (2022), for example, show the potential of drama in helping participants deal with identity and difference in intercultural educational environments. Thus, international theatre projects can be understood as learning spaces when participants are not only with individuals from other cultures, but need to interact, adapt and form understanding through the experience of working across differences.

Folklore, Cultural Meaning Formation and Shared Values

Folklore provides another layer to cross-cultural learning because narratives are often formed within a specific historical, social and cultural context. When folklore is used in theatre, participants not only perform plots and characters, but also confront the symbols, social relations, values and cultural assumptions embedded in the story. Xu and Zhou (2021) show how engaging with folklore through drama can be a medium for interpreting culture, thus demonstrating that traditional narratives can function as a learning resource that connects storytelling with cultural understanding.

From a meaning formation perspective, the drama experience allows participants to move from receiving stories as texts to interpreting their meanings through action, interaction i and performance. Xu and Tateo (2022) explain that drama-in-education provides a process of meaning-making that allows participants to connect dramatic experiences with their interpretations of the world. When this process occurs in an international group, a story originating from one cultural tradition can be interpreted through a variety of cultural experiences and perspectives. In such a situation, participants not only learn about the story itself, but also can see how individuals from different cultural backgrounds understand the same characters, emotions, conflicts and moral messages.

However, this cross-cultural process requires attention to cultural specificity. Culture should not be considered a homogeneous national category, and a folktale cannot be completely separated from the cultural context that shapes it. Allern et al. (2022) show the relationship between educational drama and specific cultural traditions, while Williams and Morris (2022) emphasize the importance of meaningful engagement with cultural perspectives in drama education. This shows that the use of cultural narratives requires sensitivity to how a culture is interpreted and represented. In the context of theatrical performance, costume choices, performance styles, language, symbols and character interpretations can be part of the process of participants learning about cultural specificity and considering the appropriateness of such representations.

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At the same time, folktales can also open a space for participants to identify similarities across cultures. Kristiawan et al. (2023) show that theatre can be used to engage participants with values and moral messages in an educational context. Stories rooted in a particular culture may contain themes such as family, respect, responsibility, humility or consequences of actions that can also be recognized by individuals from other cultural backgrounds. However, identifying such similarities does not mean that a value has the same form, interpretation or importance in all cultures. On the contrary, encountering folktales from other cultures can allow participants to see cultural particularity and shared values simultaneously. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Malin Kundang*, as the stories provide a space to examine how a narrative rooted in Indonesian tradition can be interpreted by international participants and how they identify similarities and differences based on their respective cultural experiences.

Affective Dimensions in Cross-Cultural Learning through Theatre

Cross-cultural learning through theatre also involves an affective dimension because encounters with unfamiliar individuals, languages and means of communication can produce a variety of emotional responses. Participants may experience uncertainty, shyness, anxiety or lack of confidence when communicating and working with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In the context of drama, the experience takes place in a space that requires repeated interaction and interdependence between participants to produce a joint performance. Therefore, affective experiences are not separate from learning but can develop alongside the process of communication and relationship building.

Xu et al. (2022) show that drama experiences have an affective dimension that is related to how participants construct and develop meaning from the experiences they experience. Briones et al. (2022) show that engagement in creative drama and forum theatre can provide space for the development of empathy and awareness of the perspectives and conflicts faced by others. In a cross-cultural context, this process is important because participants not only need to convey their own perspectives, but also deal with ways of communicating, acting and interpreting situations that may be different from their usual ones.

This affective dimension is also related to the nature of the relationships formed throughout the theatre process. Lu (2025) shows that engagement in drama can support self-awareness and mutually supportive interactions among participants. Repeated interactions, shared goals, and support among group members can help create an environment that allows participants to become more comfortable communicating and giving their views. In this context, the shift from apprehension or hesitation to comfort, confidence, and closer relationships can be understood as an effective and relational transition, rather than as a formally measured psychological change.

Therefore, the affective dimension provides an important perspective for understanding how cross-cultural learning develops through theatre experiences. Changes in comfort with interaction may be related to participants' processes of adapting communication, building trust, and becoming more open to different individuals and perspectives. However, this study does not assume that all participants will experience the same emotional trajectory or that participation in theatre automatically results in empathy, confidence, or cultural openness. Rather, the affective dimension is used as a lens to understand how apprehension, adaptation, comfort, confidence, and connection may emerge and interrelate within participants' cross-cultural experiences.

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Methodology

This study uses a basic qualitative inquiry approach to explore how international students understand and give meaning to their experiences throughout their involvement in the *Malin Kundang* theatre project. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on the experiences, interpretations and learning expressed by the participants themselves, particularly in relation to cross-cultural interactions, understanding of cultural values and affective experiences resulting from their involvement in the project. Qualitative analysis involves a systematic process of interpretation to identify the meaning contained in the experiences and words of the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In this approach, interpretation is not simply summarizing the participants' responses but involves trying to understand the meaning they give to an experience. This approach is in line with the purpose of the study which does not aim to test hypotheses or measure psychological change, but to understand how participants interpret their experiences in the context of cross-cultural learning.

Context of the Study and Participants

This study was conducted in the context of an international theatre project involving the staging of the Indonesian folktale, *Malin Kundang*. The project brought together students from several countries to collaborate in the preparation and staging of the theatre. The use of folklore rooted in Indonesian culture provides a learning context that allows participants to not only interact with peers from different cultural backgrounds but also interpret and present a narrative that carries specific cultural values and meanings.

A total of 17 international students were involved as study participants, consisting of eight Indonesian students, seven Taiwanese students, one Vietnamese student and one Indian student. Participants were selected based on their direct involvement in the theatre project. This direct experience is important because the focus of the study is on how participants themselves understand cross-cultural interaction and learning that occurs through the process of working and performing together.

Data Collection

Data was collected through written reflections in the form of open-ended questions that participants completed after their involvement in the theatre project. This method provides space for participants to describe the experience using their own words and reflect on the cross-cultural experience they have had. The use of written responses also allows participants to provide a longer description of their experiences, interpretations and learning without limiting their responses to the set answer choices.

This paper focuses on participants' responses to two reflective questions that are directly related to the research questions:

1. "Describe your experience working with students from different countries during the theatre project."
2. "What did you learn about different cultures while performing the Indonesian folktale Malin Kundang with international students?"

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Participants were asked to write at least 200 words for each question. The instructions were intended to encourage more detailed reflective responses than short answers. All responses to both questions formed the main data corpus for the analysis of this study.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed manually using thematic analysis based on an inductive coding process. The analysis began with repeated readings of the entire response to allow the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data and understand each participant's experience. At the initial stage, attention was given to words, phrases and parts of text that described experiences of dealing with cultural differences, the process of adaptation, cultural learning, identification of values, emotional responses and attitude changes.

Next, parts of the data that contained relevant meaning were given initial codes. Coding in qualitative analysis involves assigning concepts to the data to represent the meanings interpreted from the participants' experiences. Comparisons between parts of the data also help identify similarities and differences in the experiences reported (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Codes that have conceptual relationships are then grouped into broader categories. In qualitative analysis, categories allow lower-level concepts that have related meanings or characteristics to be combined with higher-level concepts and thus aid in the formation of themes.

The analysis process is carried out iteratively by repeatedly moving between the original responses, codes, categories and emerging themes. Themes are not predetermined based on a theoretical framework; instead, significant patterns are identified inductively from the data. This approach is important so that elements such as empathy, openness, beliefs or affective changes are not considered as findings until they are supported by the participants' experiences. Final themes are formed based on patterns that recur across responses, while maintaining attention to variations and experiences that do not entirely align with the dominant pattern.

Reliability and Rigor of the Study

Several steps are used to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. First, the entire participant response to both questions is included in the analysis process and attention is not only given to data that support the dominant pattern. Second, continuous comparisons are made between participant responses and between the two sets of questions to assess whether the interpretations formed are consistently supported by the data. Comparisons between cases and attention to data that do not align with the main pattern are among the strategies that can strengthen the credibility of qualitative interpretations.

Third, an audit trail is maintained through records of initial codes, category groupings, and decisions made during theme formation. This process allows the progression from the original data to the final interpretation to be systematically tracked. Fourth, verbatim participant quotes are used in reporting findings to maintain a clear connection between the researcher's interpretation and the participant's voice. Throughout the analysis process, interpretations were reviewed against the original data and refined or rejected when insufficient support was obtained. This approach is consistent with the principle that interpretations in qualitative research should be based on data and constantly re-examined against empirical evidence.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were incorporated into the data collection process through a consent statement given to participants before they submitted written reflections. Participants were informed that their responses would be used for program evaluation and academic research purposes. The statement also stated that participants wished to remain anonymous if their responses were quoted, to ensure their confidentiality.

Accordingly, no personal identifiable information was reported in this study. During the analysis and reporting process, each participant was assigned an identification code such as P1, P2, and so on, and all verbatim quotes were reported anonymously. Data were handled confidentially and used in accordance with the evaluation and academic research purposes that were stated to the participants.

Findings

Analysis of the written reflections of 17 participants showed that cross-cultural learning developed through an interconnected process, starting with the experience of encountering cultural and linguistic differences, followed by a process of adaptation and relationship building, before developing into an understanding of cultural meaning and shared values. Four main themes were identified, namely (1) encountering cultural and linguistic differences, (2) from apprehension to connection through adaptation, (3) interpreting culture through Malin Kundang, and (4) discovering shared values across cultural differences.

Encountering Cultural and Linguistic Differences

The first theme describes how participation in a theatre project brought participants face-to-face with differences in language, communication styles, ways of thinking and cultural practices. For some participants, these differences initially created uncertainty, shyness and concerns about their ability to communicate and work together effectively.

Language differences were among the most significant experiences. Although English was used as the language of common communication, participants had different levels of proficiency, pronunciation and accent. P2, for example, described her initial apprehensions when joining a group of students from different countries:

"At the very beginning, I must admit I felt quite nervous and shy. We all came from completely different countries, which meant we brought different cultures, daily habits, lifestyles, and English accents to the team."

For this participant, the differences found were not limited to language but also involved daily habits and lifestyles, indicating that cross-cultural encounters were experienced in various aspects of daily interaction. Language concerns were also expressed by P3, who was concerned about whether his English would be understood and whether he himself would be able to interpret the way international colleagues communicated accurately.

A similar experience emerged in P12's reflections. This participant specifically stated that at the beginning he was less confident in speaking to international students because he was afraid that language differences would cause misunderstandings:

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"At first, I didn't dare to talk much with my foreign classmates, fearing that language issues might cause misunderstandings."

P12 also mentioned difficulty understanding certain accents and admitted that his listening skills still needed to be improved. This finding suggests that language in cross-cultural experiences is not simply a medium of communication. It also influences the extent to which a participant feels confident in initiating interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

However, the differences experienced by participants extend beyond linguistic aspects. Participants also notice differences in the way they communicate ideas, make decisions and express themselves. P11, for example, observed that some group members were more expressive, while others were more reserved but reflective. Differences of opinion also occur, causing participants to have to deal with ways of thinking that are not necessarily the same as their own approaches. Similarly, P5 stated that the group had different ideas about acting, stage movement and how a scene should be presented.

These differences become more apparent because theatre requires participants to do something together, not just be in the same multicultural space. Tasks such as acting, costume management, preparing subtitles and stage coordination create interdependencies between participants. For example, a participant responsible for Chinese subtitles had to ask the international actors to slow down or pause so that the audience had time to read the subtitles. This situation initially raised concerns that his request might be perceived as too urgent.

The data also showed that encountering differences does not necessarily start with a negative experience. P16, for example, describes feeling happy and excited when hearing different languages, accents and expressions from international colleagues. For him, the experience opened his awareness of the vastness and diversity of the world and showed that each participant brought his own way of acting, storytelling and problem solving. This showed that there was variation in the participants' initial responses: while some experienced anxiety or hesitation, others saw differences as something interesting from the start.

Overall, this theme showed that cultural and linguistic differences were the starting point for cross-cultural learning, not just obstacles to overcome. Participants began to realize that working in an international group involved encountering accents, language proficiency levels, communication styles, ways of thinking and approaches to different creatives. Importantly, this awareness of differences provides the basis for the next process, as participants begin to find ways to adapt, communicate and build relationships across these differences.

From Apprehension to Connection through Adaptation

The second theme suggests that encounters with cultural and linguistic differences do not remain a source of discomfort throughout the project. Through repeated practice and interaction, participants gradually develop adaptation strategies that help them move from apprehension and hesitation to comfort, confidence, trust and closer relationships.

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In the early stages, several participants described their experiences using terms such as nervousness, shy, hesitation, anxiety and worry. However, these experiences changed as they began to spend more time together. P2, for example, described a clear shift from worry to comfort:

"However, when we started practicing together every day, all my worries went away quickly."

The change did not happen spontaneously. Participants had to adapt their communication to deal with differences in English proficiency and accents. Among the strategies used were speaking more slowly and clearly, using simple language, repeating explanations and using body language, facial expressions and hand gestures. For P2, non-verbal strategies were an important way to maintain communication when verbal language was not enough:

"To fix this and move forward, we learned to use a lot of body language, hand gestures, and funny facial expressions."

P3 also described the use of simple English, body language and even laughter as ways to achieve understanding. Interestingly, participants did not see the difficulties solely as communication problems. On the contrary, the joint efforts to overcome them were seen as something that ultimately strengthened the relationship between group members. In his reflection, P3 stated that *"those small struggles actually made our teamwork stronger"*, before explaining that at the end of the project he no longer saw other participants as just teammates but as friends.

Adaptation also involved changes in the way participants listened, responded and accepted the perspectives of others. P8, for example, stated that when there was a misunderstanding, group members did not act in frustration but took the time to re-explain the intended meaning. The experience taught him to listen more carefully, appreciate different points of view and adapt his working style when necessary. Adaptation in this context is therefore not only linguistic but also involves patience, active listening, flexibility and willingness to adjust.

One of the most obvious patterns in the data is the shift from scepticism to confidence. P7, who was responsible for handling Chinese subtitles, was initially concerned that his request for the actors to slow down might be perceived as annoying or too urgent. However, the open and supportive responses of his international colleagues changed his perception of the interaction:

"Thanks to this friendly atmosphere, I became much more confident in expressing my technical needs."

This experience shows that increased confidence does not occur in isolation within individuals but develops through a supportive interpersonal environment. The willingness of group members to listen, ask questions and adjust their performances creates a space where participants feel safer to speak up and communicate their needs.

A more pronounced affective change can be seen in P9's reflections. At the beginning of the project, this participant described the existence of *"an invisible, daunting barrier"* caused by cultural differences and language proficiency. However, joint training and the goal of producing a meaningful performance gradually reduced this distance. P9 described the outcome of the process clearly:

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"By the time we were ready for the stage, we were no longer just a group of strangers from different parts of the world, but a tightly knit, unified team."

For this participant, the common goal became a meeting point that allowed cultural differences to change from something that separated to something that enriched the group experience. Patience, humility and mutual respect were identified as the basis for the change in the relationship.

The strangers-to-friends pattern also emerged in the responses of other participants. P14 reported that communication at the beginning of the training was somewhat difficult, but that the friendly, patient and helpful attitude reduced his anxiety about making mistakes. By the end of the project, their relationship had developed from mere group members to closer friends. P16 described the transformation of the relationship more strongly when he stated that they *"started as strangers from across the globe" but ended the project as "a tight-knit, international family."*

However, the data did not indicate that all challenges disappeared completely. P12, for example, still acknowledged difficulty understanding certain accents and the need to improve English listening skills. This experience is important because it shows that cross-cultural learning does not necessarily result in the removal of all barriers. Instead, participants learned to function, communicate and build relationships despite the differences that still existed.

Overall, this theme showed a significant affective and relational shift in the participants' experiences: from anxiety to comfort, from doubt to confidence, and from relationships as strangers to friendship and mutual trust. Adaptation through flexible communication, patience, support and openness enabled participants to not only work across differences, but to build relationships that made cross-cultural encounters more meaningful.

Interpreting Culture through Malin Kundang

The third theme shows that *Malin Kundang* functions as more than just a script to be performed. Through the process of understanding the characters, storyline, costumes and message of the story, participants are confronted with a narrative rooted in Indonesian culture and begin to interpret the meaning of that culture from their own perspective.

For non-Indonesian participants, this story staging opens a space to get to know Indonesian culture through more direct experience. They do not just hear or read about the culture but need to understand the story enough to translate it into acting and performance. P1, for example, explained that at first he did not know much about Malin Kundang. Discussions with Indonesian group members helped him understand the background of the story, characters and the message he wanted to convey.

The process makes theatre a form of cultural exchange, when knowledge about the story is built through interaction with individuals who are closer to the traditions of that culture. The staging also encourages participants to see that a story originating from a particular culture can be interpreted differently by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. P4, an Indonesian participant, found the experience of performing Indonesian folktales with international students quite unusual but interesting because each participant brought their own accents, interpretations, and perspectives:

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"Performing an Indonesian folktale with an international group felt a bit strange at first, but in a good way. Everyone brought different accents, interpretations, and perspectives.

What is significant is that the Indonesian participants themselves do not necessarily remain the ones who only "teach" their culture to others. When a familiar story is performed with international participants, the interpretation from outsiders allows the story to be seen from a different perspective. Thus, cultural exchange occurs in two ways: the international participants learn about Indonesian culture, while the Indonesian participants gain new perspectives on their own cultural narrative.

This interpretation process also occurs through character building and emotional expression. P13, for example, stated that discussions with participants from other countries produced different interpretations of emotions such as sadness and anger. These differences led participants to see that emotions in the same story can be expressed in different ways depending on one's experience and perspective:

"Their interpretations of grief, anger, and other emotions brought fresh perspectives that I had never considered."

For P13, the experience broadened the way he saw the performance and showed that the process of understanding a story is not limited to a fixed interpretation. In this context, theatre provides a space for participants to compare, negotiate and construct meaning, rather than simply reproduce the story as it was previously known.

Another interesting aspect is the awareness that *"Indonesian culture"* itself is not necessarily homogeneous. P15's reflections show awareness of the use of Balinese costumes in the performance of *Malin Kundang*. The participant realized that *Malin Kundang* originated from West Sumatra, while Balinese costumes represent different cultural traditions in the Indonesian context. This observation shows that theatre experiences can trigger awareness of cultural specificity, namely the need to understand that symbols, clothing and traditions from a country cannot necessarily be considered representative of the entire culture of that country.

This finding is important because it shows the development from a general understanding of culture at the national level to a more nuanced understanding. *"Indonesian culture"* is no longer seen as a single category, but as something that has internal diversity and a specific cultural context. In this case, the performance became a space for participants to question how a culture is represented to an international audience.

The experience with *Malin Kundang* also encouraged participants to connect the story with their own cultural knowledge. P3, for example, stated that group members compared *Malin Kundang* with folktales from their respective countries and found certain similarities in themes and moral teachings. P4 also observed that folktales from several cultures have elements such as family relationships, children who disobey their parents, the consequences of one's actions and the importance of respecting family. The comparison shows that participants interpret new cultures by relating them to cultural frameworks that they already know.

Overall, this theme shows that *Malin Kundang* functions as a cultural text that allows participants to explore culture through the act of interpreting and presenting it. The process not only introduced participants to an Indonesian folktale but also encouraged them to see the same

story through different cultural perspectives, consider the accuracy of cultural representation and connect the narrative to their own cultural experiences. Thus, cross-cultural learning occurred not simply through the encounter between individuals from different countries, but through collective meaning-making around a culturally situated story.

Discovering Shared Values across Cultural Differences

The fourth theme showed that the staging of *Malin Kundang* led participants to recognize that cultural differences do not necessarily prevent the formation of shared meaning. Although participants recognized that each culture has its own traditions, ways of expression and interpretation, they also identified the values of family, respect, humility, gratitude and responsibility as values that resonate across cultures.

This realization was very clear in P1's reflection. As an Indonesian participant, he initially thought that Malin Kundang might only be deeply understood by Indonesian people because the story was rooted in Indonesian traditions and family values. However, the experience of presenting it with international students changed that perception:

"At first, I thought that Malin Kundang might only be deeply understood by Indonesian people... However, after working with international students, I realized that the moral message of the story can be understood by people from many cultures."

P1 found that respect for parents is not a value exclusive to Indonesian culture. Although the way these values are expressed may differ between cultures, international participants were still able to understand the message of gratitude, humility, and respect for family contained in the story. Thus, cross-cultural experiences do not eliminate differences but help participants identify common moral ground within cultural difference.

Recognition of shared values also emerged strongly in the reflections of non-Indonesian participants. P7, a Taiwanese participant, initially perceived the emphasis on filial piety as something primarily associated with Asian or Taiwanese culture. Her encounter with Malin Kundang challenged that perception:

"It really showed me that core human values about family, respect, and gratitude are actually quite universal, no matter where you come from or what language you speak."

For P7, the similarities did not mean that Indonesian and Taiwanese cultures were the same. On the contrary, the discovery that stories from other traditions also emphasized the parent-child relationship allowed him to recognize a common ground behind the cultural differences. The same pattern was seen when participants compared Malin Kundang with folktales from other countries. P3 found that although each culture has its own way of telling stories, many folktales carry lessons related to respect, honesty, humility and loyalty to family. He summarized his experience by stating:

"Even though cultures are different, the moral lessons they pass down are often universal."

P4 was also surprised to find that folktales from other countries contained almost the same themes related to family relationships, moral lessons and the consequences of actions. In this regard, the participant admitted that he had never really thought about the extent to which

themes like these appear in different cultures. More interestingly, the conversation later aroused his interest in learning about folktales from other countries and at the same time gave him a new perspective on stories from his own culture.

The recognition of commonalities also extends beyond moral values to human emotions. P2 stated that even though the participants had different languages, customs and backgrounds, they still shared basic human feelings. Similarly, P17 found that emotions such as love, regret, sadness and forgiveness in Malin Kundang could be understood by all group members:

"Even though the story is rooted in Indonesian culture, the emotions such as love, regret, sadness, and forgiveness were understood by everyone in the group."

This finding suggests that the participants found common ground not because they had a uniform culture, but because narratives specific to one culture contained emotional experiences that could be recognized by individuals from other cultural backgrounds.

However, the recognition of common values did not lead participants to consider all cultures as the same. P16 provided a more nuanced reflection when she stated that the concept of family may be universal, but expectations for children and family responsibilities can vary significantly across cultures. In a discussion about Malin's actions towards her mother, participants realized that group members brought different views on individual freedom and obligations towards family. P16 summarized the observation:

"It taught me that while the concept of family is universal, the expectations placed on children vary drastically across borders."

This observation is important because it shows that cross-cultural learning that occurs is not simply a search for similarities. Participants can identify shared values while simultaneously acknowledging different cultural expressions and expectations. In other words, similarities are not used to eliminate differences; both can be understood simultaneously.

This awareness ultimately relates to a change in the way participants view other cultures. Several participants stated that the project experience made them more open-minded, more appreciative of diversity and more willing to understand a perspective without directly judging it based on their own cultural framework. P14, for example, explained that the experience not only increased their understanding of other cultures but also prompted them to rethink their own cultural assumptions. P3 summed up the experience with a very powerful metaphor:

"The project showed me that culture is not a barrier but a bridge."

Overall, this theme suggests that cross-cultural learning in the *Malin Kundang* project is developed through participants' ability to simultaneously maintain two understandings: that cultures have their own specificities and differences, but that humans can also share values, emotions and experiences that transcend cultural boundaries. This recognition broadened participants' perspectives on other cultures and, for some participants, prompted a re-reflection on their own culture. Therefore, the main value of this experience is not that participants end up seeing all cultures as similar, but that they learn to recognize commonality without erasing difference.

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Discussion

The findings of the study show that cross-cultural learning through theatre projects develops from an experience of dealing with differences to a process of adaptation, cultural meaning formation and ultimately recognition of shared values. This discussion focuses on three processes that explain how the experience of performing Malin Kundang develops into cross-cultural learning involving linguistic, relational, cultural and affective dimensions.

From Cultural Difference to Intercultural Learning

The findings of the study show that cultural and linguistic differences are important starting points in the participants' cross-cultural learning experiences. Differences in accents, levels of English proficiency, communication styles and ways of expressing ideas initially create uncertainty, shyness and anxiety among some participants. However, diversity does not automatically produce cross-cultural learning. Instead, learning develops when participants need to interact repeatedly, adapt their communication and work together to achieve the shared performance goals. The participants' experiences show that the use of simpler language, slower speech, body language, facial expressions, active listening and patience are practical strategies for bridging linguistic and communication differences. The participants' own data show how the use of simple language, gestures and even laughter helped them overcome communication challenges and ultimately strengthen their relationships as a team.

This finding is in line with Shang et al. (2024), who show that drama provides a space for authentic communication, collaboration and the development of intercultural communication skills. In the context of this project, cross-cultural communication is not simply an exchange of information, but a process of mutual adaptation. Participants learn how to communicate more clearly, listen more carefully and change the way they interact when normal communication strategies are not sufficient. This shows that theatre can create a learning situation that requires participants to navigate differences rather than merely encounter it. In other words, the educational value of diversity does not lie solely in the presence of participants from different countries, but in the effort required to function together across these differences. The process also shows a clear affective and relational dimension. In the early stages, some participants described their experiences using terms such as nervousness, shy, hesitation and anxiety, especially when faced with differences in language and communication styles. However, through repeated training and support from group members, some of these concerns gradually changed to comfort, confidence, trust and closer relationships. One participant, for example, described how initial barriers between students from different countries were reduced when they shared a common performance goal, and the group was eventually seen as a unified team. This finding also supports Lu (2025), who showed that involvement in drama can contribute to self-awareness and mutually supportive interactions among participants.

However, these changes should not be interpreted as uniform psychological changes or as an automatic result of theatre participation. Participants' experiences showed variation; for example, some participants still reported difficulty understanding certain accents despite being involved in the project. Therefore, these findings are more accurately understood as an affective and relational transition that can develop through cross-cultural interaction, rather than as a measured psychological outcome. In this study, the process can be described as the movement from apprehension → adaptation → comfort → confidence → connection. This suggests that openness to others does not necessarily exist before the cross-cultural experience begins; rather,

it can develop through the process of adapting, facing discomfort and building relationships in pursuit of shared goals.

Theatre as a Space for Cross-Cultural Meaning-Making

In addition to learning that occurs through interaction between participants, the findings of the study show that *Malin Kundang* itself plays an important role as a cultural text that enables the process of meaning-making to occur. The story is not just a script to be performed, but becomes a medium that encourages participants to discuss, interpret and compare cultural perspectives. An Indonesian participant, for example, explained that some international students were initially unfamiliar with the *Malin Kundang* story. The explanation of the story's setting, characters, and moral message then opened space for questions and interpretations from other participants. The interaction not only helped international students understand the Indonesian story but also allowed participants who were already familiar with the story to see it from a different perspective. This pattern was also evident when participants compared *Malin Kundang* with folktales from their respective countries and identified similar themes despite the different stories and cultural contexts.

This finding broadened the understanding of theatre as a space for cross-cultural learning because participants not only learned with people from other cultures but also learned through collectively interpreting a story from another cultural tradition. This perspective is in line with Xu and Tateo (2022), who saw drama as a space for meaning making through a process of interpretation and mediation. In this study, meaning making occurred when participants brought their own cultural experiences, knowledge, and perspectives to the process of understanding a story rooted in Indonesian tradition. Differences in interpretation of emotions, characters, and story messages did not necessarily hinder the performance; on the contrary, they produced new perspectives that enriched the way the story was understood. One participant, for example, stated that the international partner's interpretation of emotions such as sadness and anger brought perspectives that he had never considered before.

At the same time, cross-cultural meaning-making does not mean ignoring the cultural specificity of the story. One significant experience involved a discussion about the costumes used in the performance. Participants realized that the use of clothing associated with one Indonesian cultural tradition was not necessarily appropriate to represent the cultural setting of Malin Kundang. The discussion prompted participants to consider that artistic choices such as costumes are not just visual elements, but can carry meanings related to history, identity, and cultural representation. The experience also reminded them that "Indonesian culture" should not be considered a homogeneous category; rather, there is a diversity of cultures and traditions that need to be considered when a particular story is presented.

This awareness of the specificity of cultural representation has similarities with Williams and Morris (2022), who emphasize the importance of meaningful engagement with cultural perspectives in drama education. In this study, the issue of representation emerged organically when participants themselves began to question the appropriateness of costume choices with the cultural setting of the story being presented. The process demonstrated that cultural learning does not only occur when one acquires information about another culture, but also when participants begin to consider how a culture is represented, who has knowledge of that context, and why certain representational choices need to be sensitively evaluated.

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Thus, the staging of *Malin Kundang* creates a form of collective cross-cultural meaning-making that moves beyond descriptive learning about culture. Participants learn about a story from a particular cultural tradition, see the story through multiple international perspectives and, at the same time, reassess their own understanding of culture and representation. Theatre in this context becomes a space for the encounter between cultural specificity and multiple cultural perspectives. This encounter provides the basis for the next finding: that after recognizing and interpreting cultural differences, participants also begin to identify values and emotions that they believe can be shared across those differences.

Cultural Particularity and Shared Human Values

The most significant finding was the participants' ability to identify shared values without concluding that all cultures are the same. Although *Malin Kundang* is a story rooted in Indonesian tradition, participants linked themes of family, respect for parents, humility, gratitude and consequences of actions to experiences and stories from other cultures. Several participants compared *Malin Kundang* with folktales from their own countries and identified similarities in themes of family and moral teachings. Other participants directly connected the experience to values such as respect, family and humility.

This finding is like Kristiawan et al. (2023), which shows the potential of readers theatre as a space to engage participants with values in an educational context. However, this study shows something more specific in a cross-cultural context: shared values were discovered through difference rather than in the absence of difference. Participants recognize commonalities because they are first confronted with stories, perspectives, and ways of expression that are not necessarily the same as their own cultural experiences.

At the same time, the identification of shared values should not be interpreted as evidence that these values have a uniform form or meaning across all cultures. The findings more accurately indicate that participants perceived some of the values and emotions in the stories as something that can be shared across cultures. Therefore, the learning that occurs can be understood as the ability to recognize commonality without erasing cultural difference. This perspective is important because meaningful cross-cultural learning does not require cultural differences to be erased for connections to be formed. Instead, similarities and differences can be understood simultaneously.

Overall, the relationships between the four themes indicate a learning trajectory that moves from cultural and linguistic difference → adaptation and affective transition → cross-cultural meaning-making → recognition of shared values → cultural openness. This model is not intended as a fixed or universal developmental sequence, but rather as a conceptual synthesis of the patterns that emerged from the participants' experiences in this project. The process is formulated in Figure 1 as the Emergent Conceptual Model of Cross-Cultural Learning through the *Malin Kundang* Theatre Experience.

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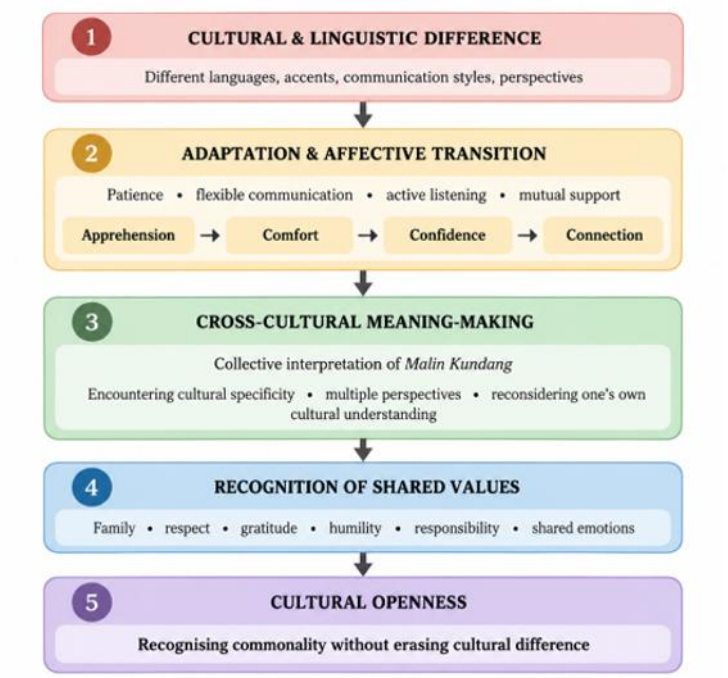


Figure 1: Emergent Conceptual Model of Cross-cultural Learning through the *Malin Kundang* Theatre Experience

Conclusion

This study explores how international students experience cross-cultural learning through participation in a theatre project that presents the Indonesian folktale, *Malin Kundang*. Based on the written reflections of 17 participants from Indonesia, Taiwan, Vietnam and India, the findings indicate that cross-cultural learning does not occur simply because participants from different cultural backgrounds are placed in a project. Instead, learning develops through ongoing interaction, adaptation to linguistic and cultural differences, collective interpretation of the story, and reflection on values discovered throughout the process.

Four themes identified show interrelated developments: encountering cultural and linguistic differences; from apprehension to connection through adaptation; interpreting culture through *Malin Kundang*; and discovering shared values across cultural differences. The participants' experiences show that initial challenges such as differences in accents, communication styles and uncertainty in interaction can become part of the learning process when participants are given space to adapt to communication, listen to different perspectives and work together towards a common goal. At the same time, *Malin Kundang* functions not only as a performance script, but also as a cultural text that allows participants to interpret, compare and discuss cultural meanings from multiple perspectives.

The main contribution of this study lies in the understanding that cross-cultural learning through theatre can develop at the intersection of cultural particularity and shared human values. Participants were able to identify similarities in values such as family, respect, humility, gratitude and responsibility, but at the same time realized that these values can be understood and expressed differently according to cultural context. Therefore, the resulting cross-cultural learning is not a process of erasing differences to find similarities, but a process of recognizing commonality without erasing cultural difference.

Overall, this study shows that international theatre projects have the potential to become meaningful educational spaces when students not only work with individuals from other cultures but also learn through the process of interpreting a cultural story together. The emergent conceptual model produced from this study offers a way to understand the process as a journey from encountering differences to adaptation, meaning-making, recognition of shared values and ultimately cultural openness.

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