



Analysis of Chinese Culture in the Film *I Am What I Am* (2021) by Sun Haipeng Using Semiotic Roland Barthes

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Abstract

This article discusses the analysis of Chinese culture in the film *I Am What I Am* (2021) directed by Sun Haipeng, using semiotic Roland Barthes. The aim of this research is to uncover the cultural meanings conveyed through visual and narrative symbols in the film. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method, in which data is collected through observation of scenes that contain elements of Chinese culture such as the lion dance, salted fish, lanterns, and others. The analysis is carried out through three levels of meaning according to Barthes: denotation (literal meaning), connotation (cultural meaning), and myth (ideological meaning).

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INTRODUCTION

Language and culture are two interrelated elements that cannot be separated in human life. Language serves as the primary tool for communication and for expressing ideas, thoughts, and emotions, while culture reflects the values, norms, and lifestyle patterns adopted by a society (Pattiasina & Aziz, 2025). Edward Sapir (1884–1939), an American linguist, stated that language and culture have a very close connection. He emphasized that the two are deeply intertwined and inseparable, meaning that to understand one, a person must also be familiar with the other (Chairunnisa & Yuniati, 2018). This indicates that understanding a foreign language cannot be separated from understanding the culture of its speakers.

In the context of Mandarin language learning, understanding Chinese culture is a crucial aspect that supports language competence. Mandarin contains numerous expressions rich in cultural meaning, ranging from idioms and proverbs to symbolic phrases that cannot be interpreted literally (Mardasari et al., 2025). Mastering Mandarin without an understanding of Chinese culture may lead to misinterpretation, as many aspects of communication can only be understood through a cultural lens (Fong et al., 2018). Therefore, Mandarin language learning should not only focus on linguistic aspects but also include cultural elements that underpin the way of thinking and behavior of the Chinese people.

However, in the practice of Mandarin language learning in Indonesia, cultural aspects are often treated merely as supplementary or incidental material. Textbooks and teaching processes generally focus on grammatical structures and vocabulary memorization, while cultural values are delivered only theoretically and lack contextual depth. As a result, students often struggle to understand the social context of communication or the cultural meaning of expressions, especially in everyday interactions (Sutami, 2007).

To address this issue, a contextual learning approach is needed, one that involves media capable of authentically and engagingly representing culture. One such medium that can be effectively used to introduce foreign cultures is film. Film is an audio-visual medium that has the power to portray various cultural aspects comprehensively through narrative, dialogue, setting, costumes, visual symbols, and social expressions (Putra et al., 2020). Thus, film can bring students closer to the social and cultural practices of native speakers, as they are able to directly observe how the language is used in real-life contexts.

Film as a learning medium not only enhances cultural understanding but also increases motivation and learning interest (Junianti et al., 2024). The use of media such as film can create a more engaging and

interactive learning atmosphere, as well as improve students' absorption of both cultural and language material. Moreover, film provides a contextual and emotional learning experience that is not always available in conventional textbooks (Widyahening et al., 2024).

One film that represents Chinese cultural values is *I Am What I Am (2021)* by Sun Haipeng, an animated film that tells the story of a village teenager named Ah Juan. One day, Ah Juan becomes inspired by the lion dance and decides to form a team with his two close friends, Mao and Gou. They begin training under the guidance of Qiang, a former lion dance champion. Despite facing numerous challenges, including family issues and physical limitations, Ah Juan perseveres in his efforts to compete in the national lion dance competition. At the climax of the story, he proves his abilities by performing the legendary move known as the "Sky Pillar," which leads his team to victory. This film portrays a young man's struggle to pursue his dreams and emphasizes values such as friendship, perseverance, and the preservation of Chinese culture through traditional arts.

The film *I Am What I Am (2021)* presents Chinese culture in a touching and engaging way. Elements such as the lion dance, strong values of family and friendship, belief in luck, and the use of the color red as a symbol of spirit and hope are all portrayed comprehensively. Although delivered in a modern animated format to appeal to an international audience, the film remains faithful to the roots of Chinese tradition. Its story and visuals not only entertain but also serve as a means of preserving culture while introducing it to younger generations and global audiences.

In analyzing the elements of Chinese culture represented in the film **I Am What I Am** (2021), the semiotic approach serves as a relevant and effective tool to uncover the cultural meanings hidden behind the visual and verbal signs within the film. Semiotics is the study of signs and how these signs convey meaning in human life (Kusuma & Nurhayati, 2017). Signs can take many forms, such as words, images, colors, or objects. Roland Barthes, one of the key figures in semiotic theory, argues that signs do not merely convey direct meaning, but also carry deeper meanings often embedded in culture and social life. Barthes divides meaning into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth (Yuliyanti et al., 2017).

The first level is denotation, which refers to the basic or literal meaning of a sign. This is the meaning that can be found in a dictionary or the meaning that is clearly visible when we observe something (Haryono & Putra, 2017). Denotation is the easiest meaning to recognize because it aligns with the apparent reality.

Next is connotation, connotation refers to the additional meaning that arises from a sign, shaped by the experiences, emotions, values, and cultural background surrounding it. Connotation is often subjective, as its interpretation may vary depending on the individual and the cultural context from which they come

(Haryono & Putra, 2017). In connotation, we do not merely observe what is visible, but also feel and comprehend the hidden meaning behind it.

The deepest level is myth, which refers to meanings that have become so deeply ingrained in society that they are perceived as natural and self-evident. In the context of Barthes' semiotics, myth is not a fictional story like those found in fairy tales, but rather a collection of values, beliefs, or ideologies that are disseminated through various cultural symbols. Myths are formed from connotations that are repeatedly presented in different media and social practices, eventually making us unaware that they are merely cultural constructs (Haryono & Putra, 2017).

Using semiotic Barthes, the film *I Am What I Am (2021)* can be seen as a cultural text rich in signs, where every visual and verbal element can be interpreted to reveal hidden cultural values. This approach aligns with the objective of the research, which is to uncover Chinese cultural values that are not only explicitly presented, but also implicitly conveyed through symbols, rituals, myths, and social practices depicted in the film.

METHOD

This research is a descriptive qualitative study. As explained by Sugiyono (2018), qualitative research aims to understand phenomena in depth and comprehensively by collecting data from natural settings, emphasizing the meaning behind behavior, values, symbols, and social interactions (Sugiyono, 2018).

This descriptive qualitative research focuses on describing and analyzing Chinese cultural values depicted in the film *I Am What I Am (2021)* using a semiotic approach. Semiotic research aims to examine signs and the meanings constructed from those signs (Panuluh et al., 2025). In this context, the researcher applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which divides the analysis of meaning into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of the film *I Am What I Am (2021)*, several scenes reflect elements of Chinese culture through a semiotic approach, encompassing three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth.

1. Lion Dance (Barongsai)



Figure 1. Lion Dance (Barongsai)

(Source: screenshot of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021))

The lion dance is a traditional Chinese performing art presented by wearing a lion-shaped costume and imitating the animal's movements. Denotatively, this dance is a physical performance that demands unity, agility, and coordination between the lion's head and tail performers. However, beyond mere performance, the lion dance connotatively symbolizes the spirit of perseverance, bravery, and the importance of teamwork. In Chinese belief, the lion dance also holds mythological significance as a ritual to ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune, especially during important moments such as the Lunar New Year (Irwan, 2019). In the film *I Am What I Am*, the lion dance is not merely a complementary cultural element, but plays a crucial role as a symbol of the protagonist's struggle. For the characters, lion dancing represents their determination to rise above limitations, seek recognition, and uphold their dignity. It is not just visual entertainment, but a profound emblem of hope, honor, and cultural identity that they carry through every step of their journey.

2. Salted Fish



Figure 2. Qiang Sells Salted Fish

(Source: screenshot of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021))

In the film *I Am What I Am* (2021), there is a scene where Qiang, who was once a lion dance athlete, now works as a salted fish vendor. Denotatively, this scene depicts a common daily activity, selling dried, salt-preserved fish to customers. However, connotatively, this profession reflects Qiang's current state of life, which is far from his former glory. The salted fish in this context signifies a life filled with limitations and hardships, portraying the bitter reality he must endure. On the level of myth, salted fish symbolizes a person who has lost the spirit to live, ultimately becoming idle and unmotivated. Although fish (鱼, yú)

in Chinese culture is typically associated with prosperity, once it transforms into salted fish, it conveys the opposite meaning, sorrow and misfortune (Alysa, 2025).

3. Chinese Character 福 (Fú)



Gambar 3. The Character 福 (fú) on the Wall

(Source: screenshot of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021))

In the film *I Am What I Am* (2021), the character 福 (fú) displayed in the main character's home serves as a culturally rich symbol in Chinese tradition. Denotatively, the character 福 (fú) means “good fortune” or “blessing” and is commonly placed on doors or walls in Chinese households. Connotatively, this symbol reflects the family's hope, despite living under difficult circumstances, that good fortune and a change in destiny will come their way. Even in economic hardship, the family holds firmly to traditional values and a spirit of optimism. On the mythological level, the character 福 (fú) represents the belief in Chinese culture that fortune can be invited through meaningful symbols, adherence to tradition, and spiritually significant actions (Yuliani, 2023). Within the context of the film, the 福 (fú) symbol is not merely a cultural backdrop, but a representation of hope, inner strength, and cultural identity, providing the protagonist with motivation to persevere and believe that destiny can be transformed through effort and loyalty to ancestral heritage.

4. Lantern



Figure 4. Lantern Hanging in Front of the House

(Source: screenshot of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021))

In the film *I Am What I Am* (2021), there are scenes showing red lanterns hanging in front of people's homes. Denotatively, red lanterns are decorative objects, typically round or oval in shape, usually made of paper

or thin fabric with a light source inside, and are commonly seen hanging in front of houses during festive occasions. Connotatively, red lanterns carry the meaning of happiness, hope, and the desire to bring good fortune and joy to the household. In Chinese culture, the color red symbolizes vitality, good luck, and protection from evil. On the myth level, red lanterns represent the community's belief that bright lights and vibrant colors can attract good fortune while warding off negative energy (Salim, 2015).

5. Sky Pillar



Figure 5. The Lion Dance Protagonist Gazes at the Sky Pillar
(Source: screenshot of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021))

In the film *I Am What I Am* (2021), there is a deeply meaningful scene in which the lion dance character gazes up at the sky pillar, a tall post used in lion dance performances. Denotatively, the sky pillar is a vertical structure used as a tool in the performance, typically made of metal or wood, standing firm and towering high. However, at the connotative level, the gaze toward this pillar reflects grand dreams, the spirit to achieve high aspirations, and the anxiety surrounding the challenges that must be faced. The sky pillar becomes a representation of ambitions that seem difficult to attain, yet it ignites determination and courage to try. This gaze symbolizes an emotional conflict between fear and a strong desire to prove oneself. Mythologically, the sky pillar signifies a journey toward a better life, a symbol of striving to ascend both socially and spiritually through hard work, perseverance, and an unyielding spirit. In the context of Chinese culture, where honor, struggle, and achievement are highly valued, the sky pillar serves as a metaphor for the process of self-affirmation and the determination to break free from limitations in order to reach higher accomplishments, both personally and culturally (Yohana & Ridn, 2015).

6. The Main Character Transforms into a Lion

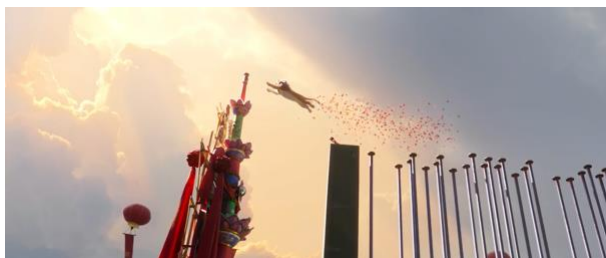


Figure 6. The Main Character Transforms into a Lion
(Source: screenshot of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021))

In the film *I Am What I Am* (2021), there is a transformative scene in which the main character, Juan, leaps onto the sky pillar and visually transforms into a lion. Denotatively, this is an animated scene depicting an acrobatic leap during a lion dance, where Juan's body symbolically shifts into the form of a lion. However, on a connotative level, this transformation reflects his courage, inner strength, and emotional triumph after a long struggle. The lion in this context is not merely a part of the performance, but a symbol of an identity that has been hard-earned, a manifestation of selfhood forged through pain, perseverance, and belief. This transformation indicates that Juan is no longer just imitating the lion dance; he has become the lion itself, a person who is strong, brave, and dignified. On the level of myth, the lion is a spiritual guardian figure in Chinese culture, a protective symbol believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune (Andriyanto, 2024). Thus, Juan's transformation into a lion symbolizes a rebirth of courage and self-worth.

CONCLUSION

Based on an analysis of the film *I Am What I Am* (2021) using semiotic Roland Barthes, it can be concluded that the film represents various Chinese cultural values through meaningful visual, verbal, and symbolic signs, ranging from denotation and connotation to myth. Elements such as the lion dance, salted fish, the character 福 (fú), lanterns, the sky pillar, and the scene where Juan transforms into a lion are not merely aesthetic complements in the film, but also carry profound cultural meanings related to family, tradition, belief, and identity. The semiotic approach demonstrates that cultural meanings in film are not always explicit, but are often embedded within a system of signs that shape the ideology and worldview of Chinese society.

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