

Costume Semiotics and Cultural Construction in East Asian Historical War Films: A Comparative Analysis of Roaring Currents, Red Cliff, and Ran

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Abstract: This study explores the semiotic dimensions of costume in East Asian historical war films, focusing on the Korean film *Roaring Currents* (2014), the Chinese film *Red Cliff* (2008), and the Japanese film *Ran* (1985). By integrating Barthes' "signifier–signified" model with Peirce's triadic semiotic framework of iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity, the research examines how costumes function as visual signs that mediate identity, power, and cultural values.

The analysis demonstrates that in *Roaring Currents*, costumes highlight the tension between practicality and heroism, reinforcing narratives of national resistance and collective sacrifice. In *Red Cliff*, costume design balances historical accuracy and artistic stylization, visually articulating political power structures and cultural identities among the Three Kingdoms. In *Ran*, the symbolic use of armor and color coding conveys themes of fatalism, clan disintegration, and philosophical reflection, transforming costumes into theatrical metaphors.

Comparative findings reveal that costume semiotics operates across three key dimensions: (1) identity construction through differentiation of rank, class, and gender; (2) representation of power via materiality, ornamentation, and hierarchical design; and (3) cultural signification through color systems, symbolic motifs, and ideological codes. While each national cinema emphasizes distinct thematic priorities—heroic resistance in Korea, political-military order in China, and fatalistic aesthetics in Japan—all three employ costume as a multilayered semiotic system that transcends mere historical reproduction.

This research contributes theoretically by positioning film costume as a core subject of cultural studies rather than a subsidiary of visual art, expanding semiotic analysis into the interdisciplinary field of costume studies. Practically, it underscores the role of costume in shaping national identity, collective memory, and cultural discourse, demonstrating its value as a medium of aesthetic expression and soft power.

Keywords: Film Costume; Semiotics; Historical War Films; Identity; Power; Cultural Symbolism; East Asia

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1.Introduction

In the genre of historical war films, costume has long functioned not merely as a tool for reproducing historical reality but as a complex visual language that embodies cultural symbolism, political attitudes, and national sentiments. The color, structure, texture, hierarchy, and combination of costumes construct characters' social status, factional affiliation, and values, while simultaneously delivering visual signals to the audience such as "who holds power" and "who is the other." Furthermore,

costume design in war films reinforces the historical atmosphere and spatial perception, moving beyond surface-level reproduction to foster emotional identification and the projection of values among viewers.

In East Asian countries, historical war films often bear a dual mission as both “national epics” and “cultural narratives.” For example, Korea’s *Roaring Currents* (2014), China’s *Red Cliff* (2008), and Japan’s *Ran* (1985) are representative war epics that not only reconstruct the horrors and tragic grandeur of war through monumental scenes but also articulate aesthetic imaginations of power, identity, order, and national spirit through the semiotic system of costume imagery. In this way, film costumes transcend historical accuracy and become deeply inscribed with cultural codes, aesthetic traditions, and national narrative logics, forming an essential stratum of visual language. Therefore, examining the semiotic mechanisms and cultural construction of costumes in these three films from the perspectives of semiotics and visual culture holds significant academic and practical value.

The title of this study is “Costume Semiotics and Cultural Construction in East Asian Historical War Films: Focusing on Korea’s *Roaring Currents*, China’s *Red Cliff*, and Japan’s *Ran*.” It focuses on three representative East Asian war films, analyzing the visual semiotic systems and cultural implications embedded in costume expressions and comparing them across cultures. These films serve as key visual texts of national and ethnic histories, illustrating typical modes of constructing war imagery within dominant cultural memory. At the same time, they combine high levels of historical verisimilitude with distinct semiotic differences, making them highly suitable cases for comparative study.

The purpose of this study is to explore how costumes, as a visual language, contribute to the construction of character identity, the formation of national identity, and the development of narrative progression. Particular attention is paid to how costumes embody a balance between “authenticity” and “visuality,” as well as between “historical reproduction” and “artistic staging.” Based on this perspective, the study poses the following three research questions:

How do costumes encode characters’ status and power relations through color, material, structure, and hierarchy?

In distinguishing factions and transmitting cultural values, what similarities and differences emerge among the three films’ costumes?

Within the tension between “historical verification” and “artistic stylization,” how do costumes perform narrative and symbolic functions?

In Korean scholarship, research on war representation and film costumes has been carried out from diverse angles. Kim (2012) argued, through a genre analysis of war films, that war imagery reflects not merely the battlefield but also social structures and ideologies. Lee and Kang (2016) examined late-1930s Korean films and revealed how women’s costumes were shaped within specific historical contexts. Ryu and Noh (2013) established a classification framework that divided film costume studies into textual analysis, contextual analysis, and dress-related fields, while pointing out the lack of research on education and production systems. Shin and Kim (2014), after reviewing studies from 1996 to 2013, found that qualitative approaches centered largely on Korean and American films, with a predominant focus on symbolic meanings of characters. Other case studies include Lee et al. (2002), who analyzed *Gone with the Wind* and identified close connections between costume design and character personality, and Kim (2014), who applied fantasy literature theory to categorize the modes of fantasy expressed through costumes in *Alice in Wonderland*. Overall, previous Korean research has laid the groundwork for understanding the relationship between costume, character, narrative, and social context, but systematic studies of war/historical films, cross-cultural comparisons, and digital methodologies remain underdeveloped.

In China, scholarship has mainly focused on historical and classical films. Jin (2024) analyzed *Red Cliff*, highlighting the role of costume design in shaping character imagery, while Ni (2009) examined costume techniques and the interplay of history and literature. Zhou (2016) analyzed female costume art in Ye Yanyan’s classic films, emphasizing the influence of designers’ personal styles on cinematic aesthetics. Tian (2024) extended research into early Chinese films, exploring the formation of costume forms and concepts. Xie (2015) argued that costumes function not as mere decoration but as a medium of visual communication that engages audience reception and cultural transmission.

Japanese scholarship has tended to focus on the interactions between film, society, and literature. Tang (2018) studied Akira Kurosawa’s Shakespeare adaptations, pointing out the visual symbolism of costume in cross-cultural reinterpretation. Harada

et al. (2001) analyzed films from the 1960s to the 1980s, identifying costumes as a representation of social transformation. In summary, both Chinese and Japanese scholarship recognizes the critical role of costume in character construction, narrative development, and cultural representation. Chinese studies emphasize artistic and aesthetic values, while Japanese studies focus more on social contexts and cross-cultural adaptation. However, across East Asia as a whole, comparative studies between nations and the application of digital restoration methodologies remain insufficient—an area for further research development.

Although prior research has addressed the political, narrative, and cultural dimensions of costume, most studies are confined to a single nation or individual text. Cross-cultural comparative research that takes costume as a central medium remains scarce. Moreover, issues such as the interaction between costume and cinematography, or the mechanisms through which costume conveys national sentiment, have not yet been systematically analyzed. To address these gaps, this study constructs a triadic analytical framework of “visuality–narrative–culture.”

Methodologically, this study adopts four approaches.

First, a literature review, which systematically synthesizes Korean, Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholarship to establish a theoretical foundation, particularly integrating cross-disciplinary insights from film studies, semiotics, and costume studies.

Second, film costume analysis, which treats cinematic images as texts to examine how costumes function in character construction, scene atmosphere, and narrative progression, as well as their interaction with narrative structures.

Third, semiotic analysis, which applies Barthes’ signifier–signified model and Peirce’s triadic sign classification to explore how costumes operate as visual mediators within meaning-making systems.

Fourth, a cross-cultural comparison, which juxtaposes the three films within the East Asian cultural context to reveal the cultural logics, historical thought, and visual discourses embedded in costume representation.

Through these methods, the study seeks to explore the intersection between film visual culture and costume semiotics and to propose a new paradigm of cross-cultural analysis that demonstrates both interpretive depth and practical applicability.

2.Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Semiotic Theory and Film Costume Studies

Semiotics provides a fundamental methodological foundation for the study of film costume (Barthes, 1977; Peirce, 1998; Gunggi & Lee, 2015). This research simultaneously adopts Barthes’ (1977) model of the signifier–signified structure and Peirce’s (1998) triadic division of iconicity–indexicality–symbolicity. The former clarifies how costumes function as mechanisms of meaning production between signifier and signified, while the latter subdivides the concrete pathways through which costumes are manifested on the visual level. By combining the two, the semiotic analysis of costumes enables the identification of meaning-construction logic at a macro level and the interpretation of specific visual expressions at a micro level.

In historical war films, costume functions as the “skin of an era.” At the level of signifier, it appears through colors (black, red, white), materials (metal, leather, textiles), and forms (armor, robes, cloaks). At the level of signified, it embodies social hierarchy, power relations, and ethnic characteristics as the “surface of discourse.” Through the selection and combination of such visual elements, costumes complete the visible encoding of identity and power, organizing the perceptual and emotional pathways of the audience (Honeycutt, 2021).

The diverse theoretical trends of semiotics offer multilayered interpretations for costume studies. Iconicity reproduces the forms of historical dress, providing the basis of “historical authenticity” as perceived by audiences. Indexicality reveals the brutality of the war environment and the bodily experiences of characters through traces such as battle damage, bloodstains, smoke, and water marks. Symbolicity is realized through color systems, heraldic motifs, and decorative styles, linking deeper cultural oppositions such as loyalty and betrayal, order and collapse, honor and disgrace.

2.2 Genre Characteristics of Historical War Films

Historical war films take major historical events as the axis of narrative, possessing both factual record and artistic fabrication. From a genre perspective, war films are not merely narrative types but mechanisms for producing cultural discourse and collective memory. In other words, they organize fragmentary historical events into “visualized national epics”

and construct cultural identity for audiences through heroic character portrayals and scenes of collective confrontation (Joo, 2012).

Within this framework, costume functions to mediate the tension between “authenticity” and “stylization.” On one hand, historically verified and functional attire, such as armor designs adapted to tactical needs, guarantees the authenticity and sense of historical time. On the other hand, directors, art directors, and costume designers externalize power relations and ethical themes into visual orders through color systems and stylized forms of dress.

Specifically, in the case films analyzed in this study:

Red Cliff adopts a dual strategy of “authenticity–aestheticization,” simultaneously implementing grand narrative and character differentiation.

Roaring Currents contrasts the “concise and pragmatic” battle attire of the Joseon navy with the “ornate and complex” armor of Japanese warriors, reinforcing the binary opposition of “resilience vs. coercion.” It also highlights the specific functional requirements of costume in naval combat and conveys the bodily experiences of the characters.

Ran establishes a theatricalized visual system through color-coding of clans and factions, rendering visible its thematic drivers of “collapse of order” and “fatalism” through the “surface signs” of costume.

Thus, costume in historical war films plays dual roles in genre construction: as a device of “narrative differentiation” (identification of status, faction, class) and as a mechanism of “aesthetic organization” (integration of color, material, style). It functions as a mediating apparatus along the spectrum of “historical authenticity–artistic style.”

2.3 Semiotic Meanings of Costume

From a multidimensional perspective, costumes in historical war films are not mere visual elements of form but semiotic systems with complex cultural implications (Vojković, 2020).

First, at the functional level, costumes serve as instruments of combat and protection, responding to geographic environments and tactical requirements. For example, in naval warfare, lightness and mobility are emphasized, while in land battles, weight and defensiveness are prioritized. This indicates that costume symbolizes not only practical functionality but also adaptation to environment and strategic implications.

Second, at the status level, costume functions as a visible apparatus of social differentiation and hierarchical order. Through differences in color, form, and ornamentation, it distinguishes generals from soldiers, rulers from advisors, and allies from enemies. This operates as more than cognitive identification; it serves as a visual system that externalizes power structures and organizational order.

Third, at the cultural level, costume embodies ethnicity, gender culture, and ritual, serving as a mediator of historical memory and collective imagination. This is not only the reproduction of traditional culture in contemporary visual media but also a visualization of social ethics and cultural values through representations of gender roles and supporting characters. Furthermore, the semiotic encoding of costume expands into philosophical and aesthetic metaphors, reflecting deeper themes such as regime change and the transience of human fate (Annala, 2014).

In summary, costume in historical war films is not simply a device of representation but a critical channel for understanding narrative mechanisms, power discourses, and cultural identities.

3. Semiotic Analysis of Costumes in the Korean Historical War Film *Roaring Currents*

3.1 Historical Context and Formal System

3.1.1 Armor and Costume System of the Joseon Navy

The 2014 film *Roaring Currents* reconstructs the attire of the Joseon navy during the Battle of Myeongnyang in the Imjin War. The basic armor was made of iron plates reinforced with thick leather, ensuring lightness and water resistance suitable for naval combat. Soldiers typically wore dark blue or black robes under leather armor and simple leather helmets, emphasizing mobility and practicality (Figure 1).

By contrast, Japanese warriors wore lacquered iron armor adorned with intricate patterns on shoulder plates and helmets. These decorations conveyed not only the dignity of the samurai but also signified social rank and clan affiliation (Figure 2). The differences between the costumes of the Joseon navy and the Japanese samurai extend beyond military technology,

reflecting divergent cultural orientations: Joseon emphasized pragmatism and restraint, while Japan highlighted decorum and aesthetics.

Figure 1. Costume style of the Joseon navy

Source: <https://blog.naver.com/sunnsky99/220081218480>



Figure 2. Lacquered iron armor of Japanese warriors

Source: <https://blog.naver.com/mimininikaka/220081921453>



3.1.2 Materials and Forms of Commanders' and Soldiers' Costumes

Admiral Yi Sun-sin's attire sharply contrasts with that of his soldiers. He is depicted wearing a deep red or brown robe overlaid with iron armor, with additional protection on the shoulders and chest, symbolizing both command authority and a spirit of sacrifice. Soldiers, by contrast, wore modest robes and leather armor with almost no decoration, expressing collective uniformity. This differentiation visually reinforces the hierarchical order within the army, while simultaneously semiotically encoding Yi Sun-sin as a national hero whose costume serves as a visual metaphor for leadership and patriotic spirit.

3.1.3 Costume Colors and the Semiotic Meaning of the Naval Narrative

In *Roaring Currents*, color functions as a crucial narrative device. Joseon naval costumes, dominated by blue and black, harmonize with the sea while symbolizing composure and resilience. These colors also reduce the enemy's visibility and create a solemn atmosphere. By contrast, Japanese costumes employ vivid hues of red, gold, and black to emphasize power and authority, exerting psychological pressure.

From a semiotic perspective, dark tones are encoded as symbols of “sacrifice and national solidarity,” while bright colors signify “power and ceremonial authority.” This chromatic contrast generates visual tension between enmity and cultural difference.

A comparison of semiotic meanings between Joseon and Japanese naval costumes in *Roaring Currents* is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Semiotic Comparison of Joseon and Japanese Naval Costumes in Roaring Currents

Category	Joseon Navy (Roaring Currents)	Japanese Navy (Roaring Currents)	Semiotic Meaning
Armor type	Light armor of iron plates + thick leather, functional and pragmatic	Heavy lacquered iron armor, ornate and decorative	Function vs. dignity: light armor → "pragmatism/adaptation"; heavy armor → "power/oppression"
Costume weight	Lightweight, emphasizing mobility and efficiency	Heavyweight, emphasizing dignity and rituality	Tactical sign: light → "agility"; heavy → "stability/domination"
Costume colors	Dark blue/black, low saturation, blending with the sea	Red/gold/black, high saturation, ornate emphasis	Color contrast: dark → "sobriety/sacrifice/national solidarity"; bright → "power/honor/ceremony"
Headgear	Simple leather caps, pragmatic	Decorative helmets with family crests	Power sign: simplicity → "survival/pragmatism"; elaboration → "authority/samurai spirit"
Commander costume	Yi Sun-sin: deep red/brown robe + iron armor, with protective reinforcements	Samurai commanders: elaborate armor, bright colors	Hierarchical sign: Yi → "sacrifice/leadership/national hero"; samurai → "clan honor/aesthetic power"
Strategic values	Emphasis on lightness, waterproofing, mobility; restraint and functionality	Emphasis on dignity, aesthetics, clan symbolism	Cultural semiotics: Joseon → "resilience/restraint"; Japan → "aestheticized power/decorum"

3.2 Costume Semiotics of Identity and Power

In *Roaring Currents*, identity and power relations are highly encoded through costume. Admiral Yi's armor is thick and majestic, with chest plates reinforced by iron studs and collars and sleeves decorated with fur or leather, symbolizing both protection and command authority. Sub-commanders' armor was more refined than that of common soldiers but still modest, using leather and iron plates, reflecting simplicity. This gradation visually materialized the hierarchy of “general–subcommander–soldier.” Soldiers wore dark robes topped with lightweight leather armor, almost devoid of decoration, emphasizing discipline, uniformity, and interchangeability.

Collectively, the Joseon military contrasted starkly with the Japanese warriors. Japanese armor was lavishly constructed with multiple layers of iron and lacquered leather, adorned with clan crests on helmets and protective gear. These crests represented not only social status but also the aesthetics of bushido and personal honor. In cinematic depictions, when Japanese warriors appeared en masse under sunlight, the gleam of their armor created an overwhelming visual effect, strongly contrasting with the Joseon soldiers' plain and dark attire. This visual opposition foregrounded the clash of two cultural values: “personal honor” versus “collective sacrifice.”

Special characters also gained symbolic meaning through costume. Spies typically wore gray or brown garments, hinting at ambiguous identities. Traitors were shown in more ornate attire than common soldiers, symbolizing the pursuit of power and personal desire. By contrast, civilians who voluntarily joined the fight appeared in worn and ragged clothing, expressing tragic determination and helplessness. These costumes of marginal characters visually intensified the contrast between individual fate and collective struggle, reinforcing narrative tension.

3.3 Battlefield Context and Narrative Function

The naval battle scenes in *Roaring Currents* present an extreme environment of waves, gunpowder, and smoke. Within this context, the Joseon soldiers' lightweight robes and leather armor symbolize not only practicality, waterproofing, and mobility but also a national character of resilience and pragmatism. Though visually modest, these costumes established a visual order of "collective uniformity," enabling audiences to perceive the intensity of national mobilization.

The film particularly highlights the narrative function of damaged armor and bloodstains. Bloodstains symbolize sacrifice and devotion, while cracked armor reveals the brutality of war and the vulnerability of warriors. Such details not only enhance realism but also function as significant semiotic devices, intensifying emotional resonance. Through damaged and stained armor, the audience directly perceives the cost of war and the fragility of life, sharing in the tragic experience.

The ultimate theme of the film is national resistance and the spirit of sacrifice. Admiral Yi's majestic armor symbolizes the national hero, resonating with the soldiers' uniform and plain attire to convey the historical miracle of "triumph of the weak over the strong." In the climax, costume transcends its role as combat equipment and is sublimated into a visual sign that embodies national spirit, amplifying both the tragedy of war and the dignity of the nation.

4. Semiotic Analysis of Costumes in the Chinese Historical War Film *Red Cliff*

4.1 Historical Context and Formal System

4.1.1 Reproduction of Armor and Military Attire in the Three Kingdoms Period

The 2008 film *Red Cliff* depicts the Battle of Red Cliffs, pursuing both "historical authenticity" and "aesthetic recreation" in its costume design. The production team consulted historical texts such as *Records of the Three Kingdoms* and *Book of the Later Han*, as well as archaeological evidence including Han dynasty stone carvings, pottery figurines, and bronze motifs, to reconstruct the basic attire of generals and soldiers. Costumes typically consisted of long robes (jiao ling you ren chang yi) belted at the waist, with armor composed of iron plates reinforced with leather to ensure both sturdiness and practicality.

Yet the film does not confine itself to archaeological reproduction; artistic stylization was also employed according to narrative needs. The armor of Cao Cao's army appears heavier, with emphasized decorations on shoulders and chest, generating a sense of intimidation, while the troops of Wu are dressed in lighter robes and armor to highlight agility in naval combat. Thus, costume functions not only as historical reproduction but also as a visual semiotic device for distinguishing factions and reinforcing narrative tension.

4.1.2 Differentiation between Generals' and Soldiers' Costumes

Costume design in *Red Cliff* also underscores social hierarchy and symbolic power. Generals' attire is highly stylized. Cao Cao wears a black, heavy, and solemn robe over armor adorned with metal studs, paired with a tall crown to signify authority and majesty (Figure 3). By contrast, Zhou Yu dons a light blue-and-white robe with lighter armor, expressing elegance and balance between civil and martial qualities (Figure 4).

Figure 3. Costume of Cao Cao

Source: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/371715380>



Ordinary soldiers' costumes emphasize uniformity and practicality. Troops under Cao Cao wear dark-colored robes with leather armor or simple iron plating, signifying discipline and mass collectivity. Soldiers of Wu are dressed in lighter-colored robes and lighter armor, reinforcing agility required for naval battles. Such differentiation not only allows audiences to recognize characters and ranks quickly but also visually represents the hierarchical structure and organizational order of the Three Kingdoms' armies.

Figure 4. Costume of Zhou Yu

Source: https://k.sina.com.cn/article_6482181285_1825e3ca500100epgp.html



4.1.3 Costume Colors and Factional Symbolism

In *Red Cliff*, color functions as the most immediate costume sign. Cao Cao's forces are dominated by black, gray, and dark brown, forming a heavy and unyielding momentum of "iron torrents." By contrast, Zhou Yu and Sun Quan's armies wear blue, cyan, and white, corresponding with the water environment of the Yangtze region, symbolizing agility, wisdom, and legitimacy. Liu Bei's army, though less prominent in the film, is characterized by earth-toned robes made of coarse hemp, highlighting their identity as a "righteous army of benevolence" with humble, civilian qualities.

Through such factionalized color contrasts, the director establishes distinct cultural images and political stances of Wei, Wu, and Shu. Black is assigned to signify power and ambition, cyan to strategy and intelligence, and earth tones to simplicity and righteousness. Thus, costume colors function not only as visual elements but also as signs that visualize narrative values and ideological positions.

Table 2. Hierarchical, Chromatic, and Semiotic Meanings of Costumes in *Red Cliff*

Category	Cao Cao's Faction (Wei)	Zhou Yu/Sun Quan's Faction (Wu)	Liu Bei's Faction (Shu)	Semiotic Meaning
Generals' attire	Black robe + heavy armor + tall crown, emphasized metal studs	Blue/white robe + light armor, elegant simplicity	Earth-toned hemp robe, plain armor	Wei → power & ambition; Wu → legitimacy & balance; Shu → benevolence & populism
Soldiers' attire	Dark robes + leather/iron armor, uniform, minimal decoration	Light robes + light armor, emphasizing mobility	Coarse hemp robes, simple equipment	Wei → discipline & pressure; Wu → agility & mobility; Shu → humility & closeness to people
Color system	Black/gray/dark brown (low brightness, heaviness)	Blue/cyan/white (medium saturation, freshness)	Earth/natural tones (neutral, rustic)	Wei → authority & ambition; Wu → wisdom & naval identity; Shu → righteousness & simplicity

4.2 Costume Semiotics of Identity and Power

In *Red Cliff*, identity and power are encoded through costume differentiation. As commander of the northern army, Cao Cao appears in black robes and heavy metallic armor, often adorned with feathers or metallic ornaments on the helmet, producing a solemn and oppressive image. This emphasizes his hegemonic position and identity as a conqueror. Zhou Yu, in contrast,

appears in a blue-and-white robe with light armor, exuding refined lines and elegant hues, symbolizing a balance of literary grace and martial strength. The contrast between “heaviness vs. lightness” and “dark vs. bright” visually distinguishes their political positions and military temperaments, deepening the narrative conflict.

Costumes of military groups also reinforce hierarchy and order. Elite units in Cao Cao’s army wear full suits of iron armor with standardized weapons, symbolizing concentration of resources and strict discipline. Regular soldiers wear simpler robes with leather or partial armor, representing simplicity and “interchangeability” within the collective. Wu’s soldiers wear lighter robes with light armor, emphasizing agility suitable for naval warfare. Although Shu’s soldiers appear less frequently, their earth-toned hemp attire underlines the populist and benevolent character of Liu Bei’s army. Through such hierarchical layering and contrasts, the film visually structures the differences of rank and cultural identity among the Three Kingdoms’ armies.

Particularly notable is the depiction of women’s costumes. Xiao Qiao appears in white and pale pink attire made of light silk, complemented by delicate head ornaments, symbolizing beauty and peace. By contrast, palace maids and other supporting female characters are shown in darker, simpler costumes, indicating subordination and auxiliary roles. While women’s costumes are not central to the narrative, their colors and textures nonetheless function as gendered signs, recalling the symbolic order of “purity vs. subjugation” within the war narrative. Thus, the costume system of the film expresses not only military hierarchy but also gender culture through the shaping of female characters.

4.3 Battlefield Context and Costume Imagery

The Battle of Red Cliffs combines both naval and land combat, and the costume design reflects both functionality and symbolism. The heavy iron armor of Cao Cao’s troops generates visual oppression in large-scale scenes, emphasizing their mountainous dominance. In contrast, Wu’s forces wear lighter robes and armor, highlighting mobility and tactical agility suitable for naval operations. These differences align with historical context while simultaneously generating visual tension that allows audiences to intuitively perceive the tactical and cultural contrasts of the “northern vs. southern” confrontation.

The film also assigns narrative functions to details of bloodstains and damaged costumes. Cracks in armor and blood on robes enhance realism while functioning as symbolic signs. Bloodstains symbolize dedication and sacrifice, while damaged armor signifies the brutality of war and the fragility of life. In scenes filled with fire and blood, viewers simultaneously experience pathos and shock, transforming individual deaths into collective historical memory.

Furthermore, costume colors are employed to construct a symbolic system of “alliances and oppositions.” The black, dark gray, and brown of Cao Cao’s army symbolize power and ambition; the cyan of Wu’s army symbolizes wisdom and agility; and the earth tones of Shu symbolize simplicity and benevolence. In particular, during the fire attack scene, the juxtaposition of blue robes and red flames visually overwhelms the black-clad forces, a vivid metaphor that concretizes the theme of “the weak overcoming the strong.” Thus, costume functions not merely as battle gear but also as a semiotic device that embodies cultural and political positions.

5. Semiotic Analysis of Costumes in the Japanese Historical War Film *Ran*

5.1 Historical Context and Formal System

5.1.1 Basic Forms of Sengoku Armor

The 1985 film *Ran* is set in Japan’s Sengoku period, dramatizing feudal power struggles and the disintegration of clans in a grand war epic. The armor featured in the film references the typical *tōsei gusoku* style of the late Sengoku period. However, the film emphasizes Kurosawa’s theatrical aesthetic rather than strict historical accuracy. Armor for generals is exaggerated in shoulder and chest proportions, heightening dignity and intimidation, while soldiers’ armor is simplified, highlighting numerical scale and collective imagery. Thus, costume does not serve as mere historical reproduction but instead visualizes the tensions of feudal order and power struggles through exaggeration and simplification of form.

5.1.2 Color System and Symbolism

Costume in *Ran* employs color contrast to make character traits and factional divisions immediately legible. The three sons of the Ichimonji clan are each associated with a distinctive color: red, yellow, and blue (Figure 5). Red symbolizes destruction and violence; yellow denotes ambition and betrayal; blue represents coldness, isolation, and fatalism. These chromatic

assignments visually embody the internal fragmentation of the clan and directly convey the film's central conflicts of familial collapse and the struggle for power.



Figure 5. Costumes of the three sons of the Ichimonji clan

Source: <https://www.themoviedb.org/movie/11645/images/backdrops>

5.1.3 Costumes and Theatricalized Aesthetics

The costumes in *Ran* reflect Kurosawa Akira's distinctive dramatic style, functioning similarly to stage devices. Grand armor and vivid colors transform battlefield chaos into painterly spectacle, while soldiers' costumes are arranged as color fields that structure cinematic composition. This aesthetic treatment borrows from Japanese traditional theater, especially Noh and Kabuki, whose symbolic forms of expression reinforce the film's solemn atmosphere and tragic tension.

Table 3. Semiotic Meanings in the Costume System of *Ran*

Category	Expressive Features	Visual Effect	Semiotic Meaning
Armor forms	Referencing tōsei gusoku; generals' armor exaggerated, soldiers' simplified	Generals → dignity and authority; Soldiers → collective mass effect	Historicity transformed into theatricality, reinforcing power struggles
Color system	Three sons: red, yellow, blue; intergenerational chromatic split	Intense color contrast, visual conflict	Red = violence; Yellow = ambition; Blue = fatalism → clan fragmentation and struggle for power
Theatrical aesthetics	Costumes create large-scale color fields; borrowing from Noh and Kabuki	Battlefields turned into painterly, ritualized compositions	Costumes function as signs of emotion and power, deepening tragic atmosphere

5.2 Costume Semiotics of Identity and Power

The most striking function of costume in *Ran* is to highlight differences of identity and hierarchy. The sons' differently colored armor not only reflects their individual characters but also visualizes the fraternal struggle for power. Their father Hidetora's colorless, muted armor symbolizes decline and emptiness, functioning as a central tragic image.

The contrast between generals' and soldiers' attire also reinforces unequal structures within feudal society. Generals' armor is ornate, embellished with metal and decorations to signify authority, while soldiers wear simple iron or textile armor, highlighting uniformity and lack of ornamentation. This opposition visually intensifies the structural inequalities inherent in the feudal order.

Female characters also acquire symbolic significance through costume. Lady Kaede wears dark attire, symbolizing intrigue and ambition for power, while Lady Sué appears in bright garments, representing purity and sacrifice. Their contrast not only

foregrounds gender differences but also visually expresses the opposition between power and innocence, amplifying the tragic tension of the narrative.

5.3 Costume Imagery in the Battlefield Context

On the battlefield, costumes serve as both practical gear and symbols of death and destruction. Armor consumed by flames and blood-soaked robes concretize the themes of sacrifice and tragedy. Damaged armor embodies the brutality of war, while blood signifies devotion and the extinguishing of life.

In large-scale battle sequences, the chromatic organization of soldiers' armor creates collective visual structures of opposition. The clash of red and blue armies operates not only as a representation of military conflict but also as a metaphor for intra-clan power struggles. Kurosawa uses blocks of color to transform the battlefield into theatrical compositions, rendering order within chaos while simultaneously foreshadowing collapse.

Furthermore, Hidetora's wandering across the battlefield in muted armor symbolizes the futility of power and life. Armor crumbling amid flames functions as a fatalistic visual metaphor, translating the tragic determinism of Shakespeare's *King Lear* into the Japanese cultural notion of *mujō* (impermanence). Thus, costume transcends its role as equipment, ascending into a philosophical visual sign.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Research Findings

6.1.1 Semiotic Features of Costumes in *Roaring Currents* (Korea)

Roaring Currents emphasized both "consolidation of national spirit" and "priority of practical functionality" in constructing costume semiotics. Overall, costumes were simple and dominated by dark tones, highlighting mobility and durability within naval combat environments. Admiral Yi Sun-sin's costume, featuring heavy armor and dark hues, symbolized "sacrifice and resilience" while externalizing "leadership and authority." In contrast, the soldiers' uniform attire expressed "collectivity" and "replaceability," visually realizing the dual semiotic configuration of "individual hero" and "collective army."

6.1.2 Semiotic Features of Costumes in *Red Cliff* (China)

The costume system of *Red Cliff* demonstrates a dual strategy of "historical authenticity" and "artistic stylization." While the production team referenced archaeological sources and historical texts to reproduce period dress, the director emphasized color and material contrasts to intensify factional opposition. The black and heavy armor of Wei symbolized power and oppression; the blue-and-white attire of Wu symbolized agility, wisdom, and legitimacy; and the earth tones of Shu represented populism and benevolence. Thus, costumes functioned not only as tools of historical reproduction but also as visual mediators of political order and cultural identity.

6.1.3 Semiotic Features of Costumes in *Ran* (Japan)

Ran revealed the collapse of clan order and fatalistic tragedy through the aesthetic logic of "theatricalization and symbolization." The red, yellow, and blue armor of the three sons respectively symbolized destruction, betrayal, and isolation, while Hidetora's muted armor signified decline and emptiness. Costumes thus transcended mere reproduction to acquire philosophical meaning, functioning as "fatalistic metaphors" that permeated the entire film.

6.1.4 Comparative Findings of East Asian Historical War Films

Table 4. Comparative Semiotic Features of Costumes in Three East Asian Historical War Films

Category	Roaring Currents (Korea)	Red Cliff (China)	Ran (Japan)	Comprehensive Meaning
Identity	Emphasis on contrast between generals and soldiers; Yi Sun-sin's costume symbolizes "national hero"	Clear differentiation of generals and soldiers; contrast between Cao Cao and Zhou Yu	Distinction between father and sons; women's costumes bear cultural/emotional meaning	Costumes externalize social class and identity
Power	Contrast between plain/practical Joseon attire and ornate Japanese armor → national resistance	Color/material contrasts highlight power differences among Wei, Wu, Shu	Exaggerated generals' armor vs. simplified soldiers' attire → unequal power	Costumes directly signify political/military power structures

Category	Roaring Currents (Korea)	Red Cliff (China)	Ran (Japan)	Comprehensive Meaning
Culture	Embodiment of national spirit and sacrifice	Balance of historical authenticity and artistic stylization, emphasizing collective memory	Theatricalization/symbolization → fatalistic philosophy and tragic aesthetics	Costumes function as semiotic systems of cultural values and ideology
Overall Focus	National resistance and heroism	Political power and military order	Fatalism and philosophical reflection	All three construct multilayered systems of "identity–power–culture," with differing emphases

In summary, all three films constructed costume systems centered on “identity, power, and culture,” though with distinct emphases. *Roaring Currents* foregrounded national resistance and heroism, *Red Cliff* highlighted political power and military order, and *Ran* accentuated fatalism and philosophical reflection. Thus, in East Asian historical war films, costume functions not merely as a device of reproduction but as a semiotic system of cultural values and ideology.

6.2 Theoretical Value and Practical Implications

This study situates film costumes within a semiotic framework, emphasizing that they are not merely “visual reproductions” but also “cultural signs.” Through the triadic structure of “iconicity–indexicality–symbolicity,” costumes reveal multilayered meanings in terms of material and color, individual and collective, reality and metaphor, thereby expanding the horizon of semiotic research.

Theoretically, this research repositions film costume as a central domain of cultural studies rather than a subsidiary of visual arts. Analysis of costume enables clarification of how historical authenticity is semiotically constructed in cinema, how power and identity are externalized into visual systems, and how traditional culture is reproduced in modern film. This deepens interdisciplinary scholarship across history, film studies, and costume studies, while offering new interpretive pathways for semiotics.

Practically, film costumes play a critical role in shaping national images and collective memory. *Roaring Currents* conveys the national spirit of “triumph of the weak over the strong,” *Red Cliff* communicates the political wisdom of alliances and power, and *Ran* expresses fatalistic philosophy. These cases illustrate that costumes serve as mediators of cultural transmission and instruments of soft power, extending beyond mere aesthetic elements.

Accordingly, the semiotic study of film costume enriches the theoretical spectrum of visual aesthetics while providing new academic and practical value for understanding cultural identity and international exchange.

6.3 Limitations and Prospects

This study analyzed three representative films—*Roaring Currents*, *Red Cliff*, and *Ran*—to identify semiotic features of costumes in East Asian historical war cinema. However, the limited sample constrains generalization across the genre, and the universality of the findings is thereby restricted. In addition, the methodology primarily relied on semiotic text analysis, lacking empirical data such as audience reception studies or interviews with directors and costume designers. Consequently, some interpretations may not entirely escape subjectivity.

Future research can be expanded in three directions. First, by broadening the scope of analysis to include more East Asian and Western historical war films, a more global perspective can be achieved. Second, by diversifying methodologies—incorporating audience surveys, archival research, and oral histories—the empirical grounding of findings can be strengthened. Third, by exploring technological applications such as 3D, VR, and AI modeling for the restoration and digital semiotic analysis of costumes, new methodological and technical avenues can be introduced to the study of film costume.

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