

REPRESENTING CHINESE CULTURAL IDENTITY IN LAY ZHANG'S "LIT" MUSIC VIDEO: A ROLAND BARTHES SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

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Music videos are a form of mass media that are accessible and popular. Music video also often used to convey messages, ideas, or represent the culture of their creators. Previous studies have examined how cultural elements appeared in popular media, but limited attention has been given to how traditional Chinese culture is reconstructed in contemporary music videos that produce meanings and strengthen the cultural identity itself. And "LIT" by Lay Zhang is one of the popular music videos that is culturally rich, integrating the traditional Chinese cultural elements with the modern aesthetics, making it a significant subject. This study aims to analyze how Lay Zhang represents Chinese culture in his music video "LIT" using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory approach. With a qualitative approach, purposively analyzing selected scenes within the music video that display visual symbols that also contain the barthes' levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. The results of this study indicate that Chinese culture is represented through traditional symbols such as the lotus flower, dragon, hanfu, as well as the use of red, gold, and black colors, which carry meanings of power, prosperity, and strength, represent not only cultural values, but also cultural continuity. The representation presented in this music video constructs meanings of glory, pride, and the revival of Chinese culture. "LIT" represents Chinese culture as dynamic and adaptive while remaining rooted in traditional values despite being presented in a more modern context. This research contributes to the fields of communication, semiotics, and cultural studies by extending discussions of cultural representation also demonstrating how music video as a form of visual media, is able to construct cultural identity in the context of contemporary culture.

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1. Introduction

Music has actually been around since ancient times, but in today's era, music can be easily accessed by many people and has become a part of everyday life. Music becomes a medium to convey a message. Music is usually closely related to music videos. Music videos are one of the audio-visual media that are often used to convey a message, ideology, or the background of the musicians themselves. Music videos can be produced in more or less any

kind of style subject to wildly different aesthetic strategies (Jirsa & Korsgaard, 2019). In *Theories of Human Communication* book, it says that linguistics and non-verbal communication represent the foundation of messages, which are served in music videos by its visuals, lyrics, symbol and movement. A music video is counted as the mass media because it has the function and characteristic, such as a communicator which the artist, tools such as a music platform or internet, and receiver such as the public or listener itself. In addition, video clips can make it easier to market and introduce a band's latest song so that it can be enjoyed by its fans (Krisnanda et al., 2023). Music videos are used by various musicians from within and outside the country, there are some that blend both cultural and modern values to show their identity, for example by using the local languages. Just like what Whorfian (Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, 134) said, language determines the habits of thought and behavior in that culture. The example includes Weird Genius with "Lathi", Alfy Rev with "Wonderland Indonesia", and Lay Zhang with "LIT".

'LIT' by Lay Zhang went viral following its release in 2020. By blending modern musical elements with traditional Chinese influences, 'LIT' went viral and successfully captured widespread attention. With a production budget reaching 1,4 million USD, Lay Zhang produced a music video that introduced his cultural heritage on a global scale. 'LIT' also earned Lay Zhang four awards at the 28th Chinese Top Ten Music Awards in 2021, including Best Album and Best Song. Additionally, he received an award at the 2020 Chinese Golden Melody Awards. 'LIT' also became one of the song themes for the online game Valorant. This song was also performed on his "Grandline 5: Rocking the Heavenly Palace" concert that broke the Guinness World record, attended by 120.000 person in attendees and 20 million views online.

Lay Zhang consistently incorporates Chinese culture into his artistic works. He often blends pop and hip-hop music with traditional Chinese instruments, and fuses modern dance with traditional movements, and always adopts Chinese stories to his works such as Dunhuang's fairy, Pangu Mythology, Journey to the West (Sun Wukong) and etc. Through his creations, Lay frequently embeds symbolic elements to represent and promote his national identity, Chinese.

Chinese culture has developed for more than 5000 years. Chinese culture is strongly influenced by the three teachings – Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. West's three cultural perspectives are both independent and intertwined, and as social history changes, it not only influences people's modes of communicative thinking but also reveals their values (Yang & Province, n.d.). Confucian emphasis on the social order and also human ethics, the Taoist pursuit of nature and inaction, and the Buddhist emphasis on inner peace and liberation (Wan, 2024). The belief in ancestors and the practice of feng shui are manifestations of this belief system, which emphasizes the close connection between humans and the universe. Chinese culture tends to prioritize social stability. Chinese culture also has lots of symbolism in many aspects which also represent collective identity and historical values, for example, mythological creatures such as a dragon that symbolize power or wisdom, or the use of the color gold that shows glory and luck. Chinese culture can be understood as a system that emphasizes the balance in life and society and keeps developing and adapting to modernity without losing its original values.

The use of music videos as a medium for cultural representation or delivering messages is not only Lay Zhang. Several musicians have utilized this platform to convey cultural, social, and ideological messages. For instance. The study "Representasi Perempuan

Dalam Video Klip Girlband Korea (Analisis Semiotika Video Klip Dalla Dalla dari Girlband ITZY)” (2021) by Salma Zuhaira, and Sukma Ari Ragil Putri using John Fishke’s theory to explore about the representation of woman in Dalla Dalla music video. Then, the study “Representasi Imperialisme Budaya dalam Video Musik BTS Dynamite” (2022) by Ratu Nadya Wahyuningratna and Ratu Laura also adopted Roland Barthes’ semiotic framework to examine how Western cultural influences are depicted in that Music Video. In addition, Muhammad Azruddin Nasution, Mutiara Azhari, Alila Ramadhani, Hasan Sazali, and Maulana Andinata Dalimuthe explored the representation of local culture in their research titled “Representasi Bahasa dan Budaya dalam Music Video Lathi” (2022).

Nevertheless, Previous studies have examined various forms of cultural representation using different semiotic approaches. These studies explored themes such as gender representation, Western cultural influence, and Javanese cultural identity. These studies identified a range of symbols and ideologies embedded in visual communication media, demonstrating that media can serve as an effective means of conveying meanings to a broader audience. However, most previous research has primarily focused on identifying these symbols without providing a deeper explanation of how they construct broader ideological representations of the culture they depict.

Although previous studies demonstrate that visual media effectively communicate the ideological and cultural messages, there are limitations. Most of the studies do not sufficiently explain how these symbols can construct broader representation through the signification process. To date, limited research has examined the representation of Chinese Culture in contemporary Chinese music videos through Roland Barthes’ semiotic. The music video 'LIT' presents a compelling phenomenon for deeper investigation, as it offers an opportunity to enrich the scholarly discourse on this topic and to further examine how symbols generate ideological meanings through visual communication.

Addressing the research gaps identified above, this study examines the representation of Chinese culture in music videos using Roland Barthes’ semiotics framework. As Lay Zhang’s music video “LIT” integrates traditional Chinese cultural symbols with contemporary aesthetics that provide an important context for examining how visual sign able to construct cultural identity and ideological construct meanings. Previous study primarily identified the cultural symbols, but this study also analyzes how visual signs construct ideological meanings through the process of denotation, connotation, and myth by Barthes. And by doing so, this study contributes to communication studies by providing a deeper understanding of how contemporary music videos are able to communicate cultural identity more deeply through visual representation.

And based on the background outlined above, this study formulates the following research problem: how is Chinese culture represented in Lay Zhang’s “LIT” music video through Roland Barthes’ semiotic analysis?

Representation is the process of constructing meaning through signs or symbols that are collectively agreed upon within a culture. This concept is closely related to the process of signification, which can be found in various forms of media such as videos, photographs, dialogues, and others that depict certain ideas, concepts, or emotions. Representation can also be understood as an effort to present reality through signs.

Conceptually, representation is a standard constructed by human thought and connected to the system of language, which shapes how individuals ultimately understand the real world. And as stated by Stuart Hall, representation is a process of producing meaning of

concepts in our minds through language. This not only refers to words, but also gestures, symbols, or visuals. Therefore, meaning doesn't exist naturally, but within an object that is constructed through a culturally shared system of representation itself. When a form of representation becomes dominant or standardized in society, it influences perspectives, behaviors, and social interactions within the surrounding environment (Nalda Sari & Sazali, 2023).

The constructionist perspective by Stuart Hall argues that the media actively construct reality through selected signs. And this perspective relevant to this research because the Chinese cultural elements presented in the music video "LIT" by Lay Zhang have been constructed through the various elements to deliver particular messages regarding the culture itself.

The development of media in contemporary times has significantly facilitated communication, particularly in the delivery and reception of information. Mass media has evolved, no longer limited to traditional platforms such as television and radio, but expanding to include digital platforms that offer various forms of entertainment including music video content. Music videos can be categorized as a form of mass communication, as they encompasses several elements, characteristics, and functions commonly associated with mass communication (Alexandra et al., 2021). Music videos serve not only as a medium of entertainment, but also as carriers of messages and underlying values, conveyed through visual representation and musical elements embedded with specific symbols. This is based on the premise that the media is inherently non-neutral. Music videos have the potential to shape our perception of reality through the narratives they construct. From Hall's perspective, music videos are able to construct particular representations through some selected visual signs, colors, narratives, costumes, settings, etc.

Hall's does not explain specifically explain how meanings are generated from visual elements, so to analyze the process, Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is needed. A meaning can be formed through the existence of a 'sign' that is collectively agreed upon by certain individuals or groups. Thus, meaning itself exists because it is constructed by humans. Roland Barthes, a prominent scholar in the study of signs or semiotics, stated that meaning can be both denotative and connotative. For example, the lotus flower literally refers to the flower itself, while its connotative meaning symbolizes purity and courage. Such signs also appear in music videos through visuals, fashion, and bodily movements. Each sign may hold different meanings for different audiences due to cultural differences. The music video conveyed very rich cultural meaning through the visual and audio expression of lyrics, presenting the inequality of power that often exists in society and offering an opportunity for the audience to consider more intimately a positive self-change and repositioning of one's identity (Hasio & Chen, 2018).

Therefore, there is a strong connection between representation and language that is culturally shared. Representation, which is typically expressed through signs, aligns with Roland Barthes' study of signs. Thus, signs and representation are inseparable concepts.

With the presence of signs in music videos, these videos do not merely present images and songs, but also convey specific meanings. Music videos may represent identities, ideologies, or social issues through the various elements they contain. Eriyanto states that representation is important in two aspects. First, whether a person, group, or idea is

portrayed as it truly is. Second, how that representation is constructed through sentences, images, and words within the media (Lestari, 2017).

Semiotics is the study of signs and process of how meaning can produced. Signs are always present in various elements of both visual and audio media, all of which are integrated within a music video as a form of multimodal communication. Roland Barthes is one of the key figures who studied signs, which are also closely related to representation. Through his research, he stated that signs operate on two levels: denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal or primary meaning of a sign. For example, black clothing denotes a garment that is black in color. Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the additional meaning interpreted by individuals, based on personal experiences or cultural context. For instance, black clothing may be connoted as a symbol of mourning.

In addition, Barthes also introduced the concept of the myth as a second-order meaning that is more deeply embedded in culture and ideology. According to Barthes, myth is constructed when the denotative and connotative meaning accepted as the common sense in society. Myth, in Barthes' framework, is formed by using the first-order signification system as the signifier for a second-order system. Myth functions as a structure of communication—a particular way of signifying (Poetiray et al., 2021). Roland Barthes' semiotic theory is widely used to study signs found in images, videos, and texts. Therefore, this theory is suitable for analyzing the meanings contained in a music video, given the abundance of visuals, lyrics, and symbols it presents. The theory can be used to uncover the messages embedded within. Barthes' semiotic approach enables a deeper exploration of meaning.

In this research, Chinese cultural symbols appearing in the music video "LIT" by Lay Zhang are not merely aesthetic elements, but a sign that carries the denotative, connotative, also myth meanings. These symbols contribute to constructing the meanings that are related to the culture itself.

From Barthes' model, it can be seen that a denotative sign consists of a signifier and a signified. However, at the same time, the denotative sign also functions as the signifier of the connotative sign. In Barthes' concept, connotative signs do not merely carry additional meanings, but also encompass both components of the denotative sign on which they are built. This is precisely Barthes' significant contribution to the development of Saussure's semiology, which had previously focused only on signification at the denotative level (Sobur in Oktaviani et al., 2020).

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Stuart Hall's representation theory is a match. While Hall's theory gives the conceptual foundation by explaining that media actively construct the meanings, Barthes provides the explanation on how the meanings are generated through the sign by the denotation, connotation, and also myth. These two help to analyze how Chinese culture is represented in the music video.

Although Roland Barthes' semiotic theory explains how meanings are constructed, it cannot be interpreted independently of the cultural context itself. Therefore, understanding the cultural context itself is important to interpreting the meanings that are embedded in the visual sign. In this research, visual signs from the "LIT" music video originate from Chinese culture. Examining the Chinese symbols and values is necessary to understand how signs are represented.

According to E.B. Tylor, culture is a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, science, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by humans as

members of society (Rosyada, 2020). Koentjaraningrat stated that culture consists of seven universal elements, namely the system of language, social system, art system, system of tools and technology, livelihood system, religious system, and system of knowledge. Culture serves as an essential part of society, functioning both as a distinctive characteristic and as a guide to the values upheld by its people.

Meanwhile, Chinese culture is the result of values that have been formed over thousands of years, which makes it one of the world's oldest existing cultures. The values embedded in Chinese culture are influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, also known as the three teachings (*San Jiao*). The values derived from Confucianism focus primarily on human activities that play a role in shaping the social order, including self-development and good morals. Taoism, on the other hand, is regarded as a form of "mature and wise thought." By the late Han Dynasty (around 200 CE), Buddhism was considered more complex and analytical. Despite their differences, all three share a common emphasis on life and the 'awareness of the mind.' Overall, this culture also shapes the way people interact and understand each other, making it function as a social and political system that, through the concepts of harmony and hierarchy, underlies stability. All three also contribute to shaping perspectives on life, including those reflected in works of art. Furthermore, Chinese culture also has a belief system in ancestors, which serves as a symbol of respect for the continuity of generations. There is also a cosmology, which includes the concept of *Tian* (heaven), which represents the highest power of moral.

Chinese Culture encompasses a wide range of artworks and symbols, each carrying deep cultural and philosophical values. For example, the color red, according to Chinese beliefs and traditions, symbolizes good fortune, happiness, and abundance (Droevadee & Budianto, 2024). The color gold represents prosperity. Animal symbols such as dragons are revered as powerful and benevolent creatures that are associated with luck, prosperity, and protection. Meanwhile, plants like the lotus flower symbolize spiritual enlightenment and purity.

The aesthetics found in Chinese culture often depict the harmony between humans and nature. Art forms such as Chinese opera, for example, also serve as moral instruments. Tea ceremonies, opera, and visual symbols such as dragons and lotus flowers act as markers of cultural identity. In the modern era, these elements are often adapted and reconstructed to suit contemporary contexts, functioning as a form of global identity that embodies the concept of harmony. For example, these elements often become patterns in hanfu, which has become a trend spreading among young people locally and internationally—connecting them with their cultural heritage without abandoning modernity. Thus, hanfu has been adapted into a modern fashion with a distinct character that is appreciated worldwide. Traditional fashion such as Hanfu, performing arts like Chinese opera, and also visual arts including calligraphy, palace architecture, and symbolic motifs are the integral parts of this cultural system.

Hanfu is an important symbol of the Han ethnic group, representing numerous elements of Chinese culture, from the motifs displayed to the fabrics used. Historically, Hanfu was worn for imperial ceremonies and social activities during the Han and Tang dynasties. However, in recent years, Hanfu has regained public attention and has once again become a fashion trend. The Hanfu Revival Movement has emerged as a symbol of pride and modern cultural strength, frequently appearing across various forms of popular media as cultural awareness and nationalist sentiment continue to rise.

Hanfu has become one of the iconic markers of cultural heritage and a way for Chinese youth to shape their cultural identity, which has also drawn international interest. Beyond being a fashion trend, Hanfu has grown into a cultural sign. It embodies strong aesthetic values that reflect Chinese culture through its materials and motifs. One common motif is the dragon, a symbol of imperial power and glory. All of these elements include the fashion itself can also be observed in Lay Zhang's music video "LIT", which exemplifies the harmony between culture and modernization.

Chinese culture is not only reflected by its philosophical and historical values, but also through those visual symbols that represent its cultural identity. Traditional elements such as hanfu, imperial architecture, dragon, lotus, and others are shaped by Chinese history and values. These symbols are often used in "LIT" music video, that essential for interpreting how the Chinese culture itself is represented and became the focus on using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

2. Method

This qualitative research is used to analyze the object of study in depth. This method also serves as an approach or inquiry aimed at exploring and understanding a central phenomenon,

treating participants truly as subjects rather than mere objects (Luh et al., 2024). Thus, this qualitative research is descriptive in nature and tends to employ analysis, placing greater emphasis on processes and meaning (Wahyuningratna et al., 2023). Qualitative methods emphasize observing phenomena and examining the substance of the meaning of these phenomena. The analysis and sharpness of qualitative research are greatly affected by the strength of the words and sentences used (Rawa et al., 2024).

This study aims to analyze the music video 'LIT' by Lay Zhang. The music video presents a concept that blends traditional and modern Chinese culture, resulting in a rich and complex display of aesthetic and visual elements. It is filled with various signs, making semiotics an appropriate approach for this analysis. Semiotics is the study of how societies produce meaning and values within a system of communication (Fazira et al., 2021). The semiotic model chosen for this study is Roland Barthes' semiotics, which is employed to gain a deeper understanding of the representation of Chinese culture in Lay Zhang's 'LIT' music video.

Roland Barthes' semiotics is well known for its system of signification, which focuses on the process of meaning-making through symbols. Barthes outlines two levels of meaning: denotation and connotation. Denotation is the first level, referring to the literal or primary meaning of a symbol. He also introduces the concepts of signifier and signified as components of denotation. Connotation, on the other hand, is the second level—referring to the secondary meaning that arises from feelings and emotions related to cultural or social contexts. Myth also belongs to the second level, representing a deeper meaning that is a product of cultural construction, yet appears natural.

The unit of analysis in the music video 'LIT' by Lay Zhang consists of visual scenes that contain elements of Chinese culture, such as traditional clothes, traditional ornaments, choreography, weapons, traditional colours, settings, or other cultural symbols that represent the Chinese culture itself. To interpret the denotative meaning of the music video 'LIT' by Lay Zhang, it is necessary to identify specific scenes that depict elements of Chinese

culture. The second stage, connotation, is interpreted based on the cultural values associated with those elements, after selecting scenes that are considered to represent Chinese culture. Thus, denotation refers to the visible sign, while connotation is the interpretation of that sign. Myth is constructed after passing through both the denotative and connotative stages.

Signifier (Penanda)	Signified (Petanda)
Denotative Sign (Tanda Denotatif)	
CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIER (PENANDA KONOTATIF)	CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED (PETANDA KONOTATIF)
CONNOTATIVE SIGN (TANDA KONOTATIF)	

Figure 1. Sign Concept by Roland Barthes

These signs are then analyzed using the selected research model, namely Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, which includes three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. This research uses purposive sampling to select some scenes that are relevant to the research. The data were analyzed through the following stages :

- First, watch the "LIT" music video entirely and identify scenes that contain Chinese cultural elements.
- Identified and classified the cultural symbols
- Analyzed each symbol that was found at the denotative level
- Interpreted the connotative using the Chinese cultural references
- Construct the myths through the symbols that are analyzed to reveal the deeper ideology that is represented in the music video.

To enhance credibility, the interpretations were also supported by the academic literature on Chinese culture. Data interpretation was conducted by comparing the findings and previous studies and some relevant references.

3. Results and Discussion

This music video was released in 2020 on the YouTube platform. "LIT" was produced by Lay Zhang under SM Entertainment and Zhang Yixing Studio. The video has a duration of 5 minutes and 18 seconds, with a storyline inspired by the Chinese opera "Farewell, My Concubine." It features the popular M-POP genre. As the music video is rich in visual signs, the author will analyze scenes that represent Chinese culture using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory.

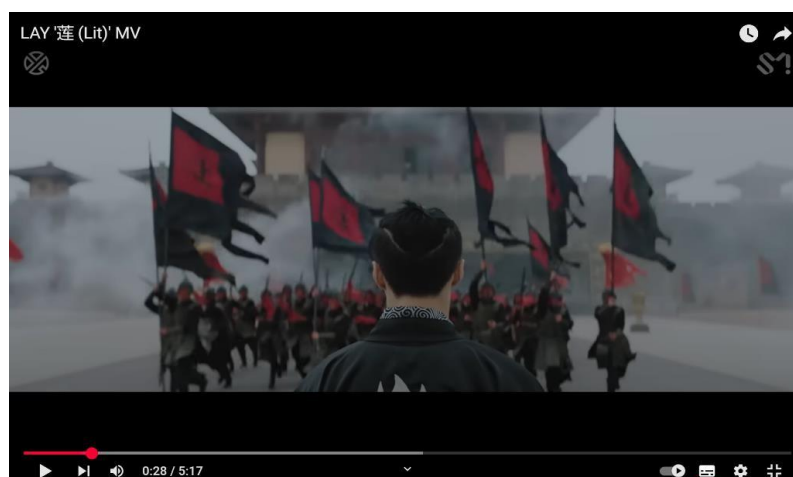


Figure 2. Lay In Hanfu (00:28)

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Lay wearing hanfu stands in the midst of thick fog, a sword in his hand, followed by a group of soldiers storming into the fortress as the Song of Gaixia (垓下歌) plays in the background. The man in hanfu remains silent and slowly turns around to see the soldiers who have entered and surrounded him, wearing an expression of resignation, as if he already knows that the battle is lost. The soldiers launch an attack on him in front of the palace, yet he does not lower his gaze — facing his death with unwavering courage.	The hanfu serves as a symbol of Chinese cultural identity. Hanfu culture presents and expresses its core ideas in a specific way to better demonstrate traditional Chinese philosophical thoughts (Sang in Paulista, 2024). The fog-covered palace evokes a spiritual and dramatic atmosphere. His presence in the palace signifies that he holds a high social status. The use of red and black color elements represents bravery, power, and authority. A low-angle camera shot conveys a sense of power, pride, or superiority. Song of Gaixia is a song that is sung by Emperor Xiang Yu in “Farewell, My Concubine” at the end of the story where it told about the strength, love, and separation due to fate.	This scene portrays a heroic figure. A true hero requires great sacrifice and struggle. As seen in the scene taken from the excerpt of the opera that shows pride and sacrifice.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2026)

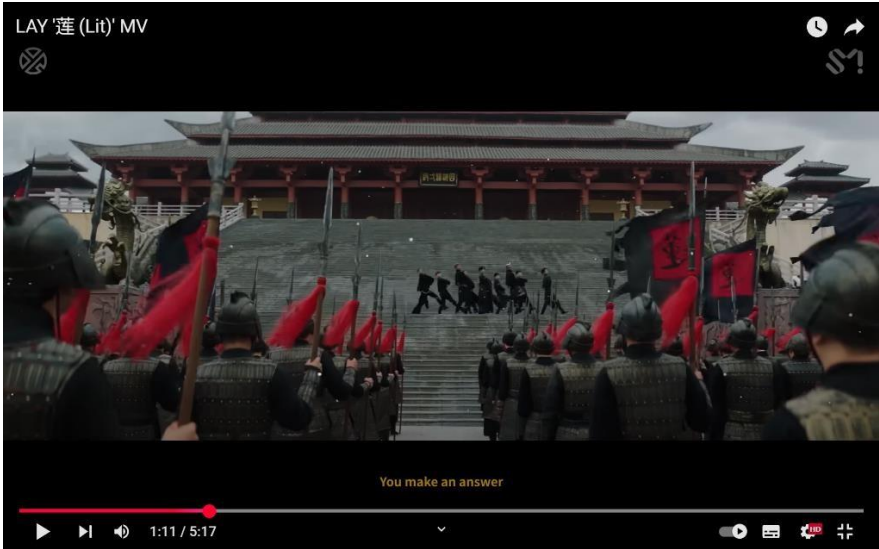


Figure 3. Group of Soldier and Lay as the King (01:11)

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Lay dances in hanfu in front of a group of soldiers in front of the palace, accompanied by backup dancers dressed in modern clothing, during the daytime in the middle of a snowy setting.	The hanfu symbolizes Chinese cultural identity. Dance is a form of performing art in which an expression, story, emotion, or message is communicated to the audience through choreographed human body movements (Syam et al., 2025). This dance performed signifies strength, while the falling snow represents a transition. The harmony between the past and the present is illustrated through the combination of modern-dressed dancers and the traditional atmosphere, which reflects a scene reminiscent of an ancient imperial era. A low-angle camera shot conveys a sense of superiority from Lay as the king.	The modern era and tradition can coexist, spiritual values will continue to live on under any circumstances, just like how the modern dancer and the king's soldier can be in the same place.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2026)



Figure 4. Lotus in the mud (01:07)

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
A blooming lotus flower in a black mud.	A blooming lotus symbolizes growth and the overcoming of difficult times. The lotus flower is one of the traditional Chinese cultural	Cultural strength is timeless and serves as a source of modern art. Just like how Lay adapts the “Farewell, My Concubine” opera as the muse.

symbols and has a high cultural status. In Chinese culture, the lotus flower symbolises purity, elegance, innocence, wisdom, and untaintedness, and is a symbol of the "gentleman's style" (Ruan, 2023). The lotus carries meanings of hope and victory over a challenging environment. The color black (hei) is associated with the water element in Wuxing (the Five Elements of Chinese philosophy), representing wisdom and strength. Meanwhile, the color white has the meaning of purity. In addition, the color of black and white are also symbols of Yin and Yang, which represent the balance.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2026)

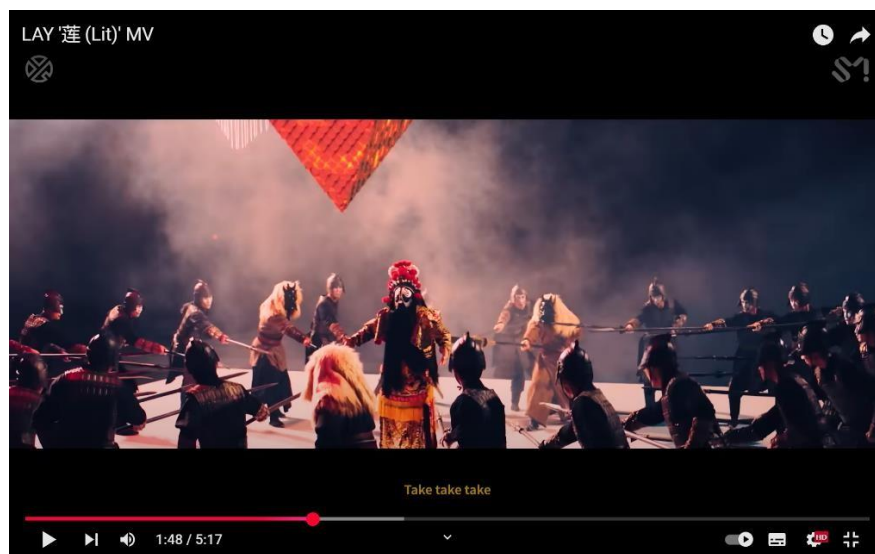


Figure 5. A man dancing surrounded by soldier (01:48)

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
A person wearing a mask dances, surrounded by a group of soldiers with weapons in a dark mysterious atmosphere.	This scene is from the Chinese opera “Farewell, My Concubine”, depicting the moment when General Xiang Yu is besieged by soldiers. The title Farewell My Concubine originates from the historical account of Xiang Yu in Sima Qian's Records of the Grand Historian (circa 104 BCE). The story recounts the tragic farewell between Xiang Yu and his beloved consort Yu Ji before his eventual defeat by Liu Bang’s forces (Wang, 2024). The opera portrays themes of loyalty and sacrifice, as well as a moral and spiritual victory. The surrounding fog and dark ambiance symbolize a blurred space between life and death, while the contrasting red color still conveys courage, and gold signifies honor. A close-up camera shot conveys sharpness and strength.	Cultural strength is timeless and serves as a source of modern art. Just like how Lay adapts the “Farewell, My Concubine” opera as the muse.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2026)

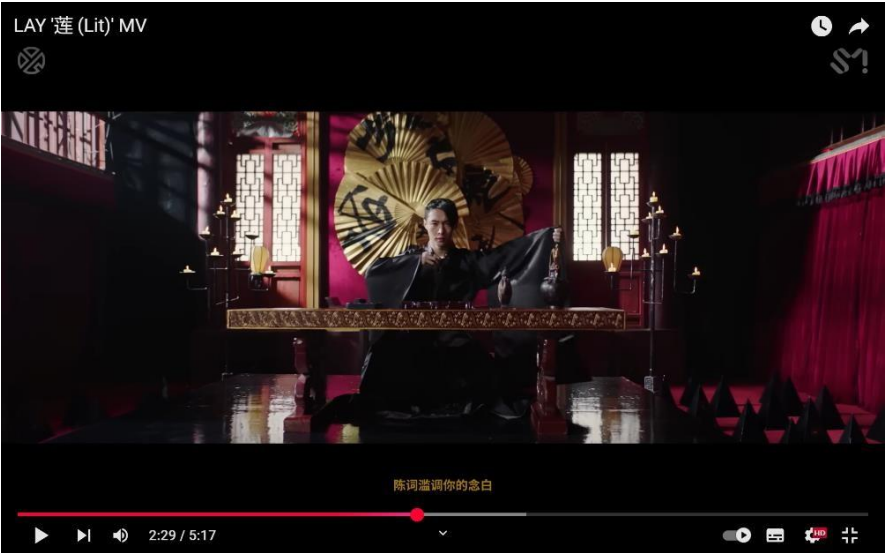


Figure 6.
Lay performs a tea ceremony (02:29)

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
Lay wearing black hanfu perform the Chinese tea ceremony on his throne alone during the daytime surrounded by a triangular object that looks like thorns which then bloom like a lotus.	The tea ceremony began in the 8th century AD during the Tang dynasty and then developed during the Song and Ming dynasties. The origins of the tea ceremony could be traced to ancient China, where tea not only held a position as a vital beverage but also gradually became regarded as an elegant pursuit and a means of cultivating one's character. The development of the tea ceremony is intricately linked with the refinement of tea preparation techniques, evolving into a comprehensive system encompassing tea artistry, etiquette, philosophy, and art (Kuang et al., 2023). The black color on the hanfu can be interpreted as authority or strength, or it can also be said to represent serenity. This is in harmony with the tea ceremony being performed, calm in the purpose of making major decisions. The red color on the throne that dominates conveys courage in struggle, while the gold symbolizes majesty and enlightenment. Meanwhile, the triangular object that resembles a thorn is like a choice that can be dangerous, it blooms when Lay drinks his tea, signifying a decision that has been made well. while the eye level shoot depicts equality, then shifts to a low angle which depicts dominance afterwards.	A wise leader will make decisions carefully and think about many aspects.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2026)



Figure 7. Lay and a dragon face each other (03:39)

DENOTATION	CONNOTATION	MYTH
A dragon opened its eyes and rose. then appeared from behind the palace and flew in front of the soldiers, then faced Lay in front of the palace.	The dragon that appears symbolizes power, protection, and heavenly authority. In ancient China, Chinese dragons have always been seen as a suspicious and bring good fortune to the people (Chen Yang et al., 2024). Dragons have always held a special place in Chinese mythology and culture. In Chinese folklore, dragons are revered as powerful and benevolent creatures associated with luck, prosperity, and protection (Lei & Binti Yahaya, 2024). The soldiers standing in formation indicate preparation for something significant. With Lay being approached by the dragon, he is recognized as a strong leader sanctioned by heaven—a leader who will guide a transformative change. A eye level-angle camera shot indicates equality in position between the two, signifying that they are on the same level.	May reinforce the strength of culture between the past and the present that is continuous. Culture will continue to follow the times without losing its essence. Traditional cultural values play an important role in shaping contemporary cultural identity.

Source: (Authored by the writer, 2026)

The findings in the “LIT” music video present a combination of traditional and modern values, demonstrating that Chinese culture is both dynamic and adaptive. Lay Zhang integrates traditional culture symbols into contemporary choreography and cinematography. Rather than presenting the static historical heritage, the music video reconstructed it as a cultural identity that is relevant in the modern era. Through this integration, traditional values are represented as an adaptation without losing their historical significance.

By placing himself within the imperial settings, hanfu, dragons, lotus, and traditional colors that indicate the representation of Chinese culture, Lay Zhang constructed those through the interconnected symbols. Previous studies explain that Hanfu has become a cultural product for the young generation to express their sense of consumption, highlight their aesthetic taste, and achieve a sense of identity and belonging (Min, 2023). And the combination between red and black color, which red and black color was used to symbolize wealth and official status (Zhang et al., 2026). These findings support Stuart Hall's constructive perspective that argues that representation is a process of producing the meaning rather than merely reflecting the reality because the meanings of Chinese culture are not naturally embedded within the symbols themselves, but through the selected and arranged symbols, “LIT” music video construct the particular understanding of the culture that is shared with audiences.

This analysis also demonstrates how Roland Barthes' semiotic model explains the meaning construction within the “LIT” music video. At the denotative levels, some visual scenes presented the cultural object. In the connotations, these symbols also depict power and prosperity. More specifically, the dragon has always been a symbol of absolute divine power, often demonstrated in its use in various ways, including as the motif of the emperor's robes. All the elements displayed are not only aesthetic, but also play a role in constructing cultural meanings such as historical symbols and the revival of national cultural identity. Also lotus is a quintessential symbol of Chinese traditional culture, the lotus embodies the timeless virtue of “rising from the mire yet remaining unstained,” forming a profound spiritual legacy across Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk traditions (Jun, n.d.). These findings indicate that the visual symbols found in the “LIT” music video functioned as interconnected cultural signs.

In Roland Barthes' theory, symbols can have broader ideological meanings. In the denotative part, strong Chinese cultural symbols are presented, with the overall connotative describing the values of pride, strength, and heritage of culture, which are then structured through myth. Through Myth, culture communicates ideological messages, reinforcing dominant social values and norms (Barus & Siregar, 2025). Myth in this context, is a narrative of an ideology about culture that is strong, timeless, and remains relevant. In the MV “LIT”, Lay Zhang does not position history merely as something that belongs to the past, but rather as a source of cultural identity that remains powerful within a modern context. This representation illustrates that modernity does not necessarily mean abandoning traditional culture or regarding it as outdated, instead, tradition can serve as a source of strength, guidance, and pride amid the flow of modernization. Furthermore, Lay Zhang demonstrates how culture can be packaged and disseminated through music videos as a medium of communication that is persuasively conveyed through global visual representation. The music video may be interpreted as transforming the historical imagery into a contemporary narrative of cultural confidence. However, these interpretations are derived from the cultural literature that was established and understood within Roland Barthes' semiotic framework.

These findings also complement the previous studies concerning representation in music videos while offering a different perspective. Salma Zuhaira (2021) confirms that music videos actively construct identity through visual representation. It demonstrated how music videos can construct the femininity in music video *Dalla Dalla* by Itzy; however, “LIT” emphasizes cultural identity rather than gender gender representation. And similarly, the

previous study on Dynamite by BTS' (2022) that discussed cultural representation in the context of cultural imperialism, where "LIT" talks about cultural values that reconstructed historical symbols rooted in Chinese civilization. A similar study on Lathi (2022) also highlights traditional culture in music videos; however, "LIT" extends the research by demonstrating how multiple cultural symbols are able to construct a representation, with greater emphasis on the historical continuity, and philosophical values of the Chinese cultural identity through Barthes' three levels of signification.

Unlike the previous studies that primarily focused on identifying the cultural symbols, this study demonstrates how the multiple visual signs instead of the individual sign in music videos, this study contributes to the application of Stuart Hall's representation theory by demonstrating how the multiple symbols interact and construct the cultural identity. Furthermore, the Roland Barthes framework that was applied reveals that these symbols that are interconnected are generating the broader ideological meanings of the myth level. This research extends the the previous discussions by showing that cultural representation also involves the construction of the cultural identity through the interconnected systems of meanings itself.

With perspective of the communication studies, these findings showing that music video as the visual communication is capable to deliver messages and constructing meanings through the representation. The cultural symbols and the utilization of existing media of "LIT" is not only an artistic work but also a constructed image that go through the semiotic layering of the symbolism, visual, dance, and even fashion that interact to produce the meanings that cannot be understood alone. These findings also reinforce the Stuart Hall's arguments that media actively construct the reality through representation itself, while Roland Barthes' framework explain how visual signs are generating the denotative, connotative and myth meanings. Through these representations "LIT" music video by contributes to introducing Chinese culture as modern while remaining firmly rooted in traditional and cultural values globally with a good confidence, contribute to the construction of a positive image of its culture. Representing Chinese culture as a living identity by combining traditional values and modernity as a cultural dynamic, using historical symbols to build a narrative of glory, and making it a means of global cultural communication through the mass media, where it can construct a national image through refreshing forms and using any elements with positive significance (Wu et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, these meanings are identified and interpreted within the semiotic framework of Roland Barthes and supported by Chinese literature. This study acknowledges that the interpretations of the visual symbols may differ according to the audience's cultural backgrounds. Audiences that might be familiar with Chinese history may perceive different meanings than international audiences who lack knowledge about Chinese cultural traditions and history. Therefore, alternative readings are remains possible depending on the interpretative framework and the audience's cultural knowledge.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Chinese culture is represented in Lay Zhang's "LIT" music video. As one of many musicians who utilize media as a space to express their culture through music videos, Lay Zhang integrates the traditional cultural symbols with the contemporary visual aesthetics in "LIT". Rather than presenting Chinese culture as a static historical one, "LIT" reconstructs it as a dynamic cultural identity. With Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the interaction between visual elements such as architecture, colors, choreography, costumes, and historical references, reconstructs the meanings that reflect the cultural continuity, heritage, and also identity that remains relevant in the modern era while preserving its philosophical and historical values.

These findings show that Chinese culture is represented through the interaction of the multiple visual signs that collectively construct the meanings of cultural continuity, identity, and heritage. "LIT" presents the Chinese culture as a living identity that adapts to

contemporary visual communication while remaining rooted in traditional values. This indicates that music videos are not only entertainment, but also capable of reconstructing and communicating the cultural meanings and values to broader audiences.

This study contributes to the communication and semiotic studies by integrating Stuart Hall's representation theory with Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to explain how visual symbols interact in reconstructing the representations of Chinese culture. Practically, the findings provide an insight regarding the cultural potential of music video as a visual media that communicates cultural values to wider audiences. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a single music video, so the findings cannot be generalized to every Chinese cultural representation in media. Future studies are recommended to compare multiple music videos or cross-cultural objects to explore the differences and similarities of how cultural representation appeared across various forms of media.

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