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The Aesthetics and Symbolic Meaning of the Emperor's Costume in Wayang Potehi's Dinasti Song at Gudo, Jombang

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ABSTRACT

Costume aesthetics is an important yet narrowly examined element in Wayang Potehi scholarship, which has concentrated on acculturation, preservation, and social function while leaving the visual object itself largely undescribed. This study therefore describes the visual characteristics and analyses the aesthetic value and symbolic meaning of the Emperor's costume in the play Dinasti Song as performed at the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, Gudo, Jombang Regency. The research was qualitative and descriptive, framed by Djelantik's aesthetic theory and Barthes' semiotics, and drew on non-participatory observation at the temple, semi-structured interviews with three purposively selected informants — a puppeteer and puppet craftsman, the manager of the Wayang Potehi museum and troupe, and a costume maker — and photographic documentation, analysed through data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing, with source triangulation establishing validity. The costume is characterised by a long robe with a symmetrical silhouette and wide sleeves, dominant gold combined with red, green, blue, and white, a five-clawed dragon motif accompanied by cloud and wave motifs, a royal crown, and embroidered supporting ornament in satin, brocade, and gold thread. Read aesthetically, the costume achieves unity, dominance, and balance across form, content, and presentation; read semiotically, its elements signify power, wisdom, honour, and legitimacy at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. The study's principal contribution is the finding that the costume's points of aesthetic dominance and its points of symbolic weight coincide, indicating that beauty and meaning were not separate design problems for its makers.

KEYWORDS

Chinese-Indonesian acculturation
Djelantik aesthetics
dragon motif
glove puppetry
visual semiotics

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INTRODUCTION

Wayang Potehi is a traditional glove-puppet theatre that originated in southern China and developed in Indonesia through a long process of cultural acculturation, particularly on the island of Java. This development is visible not only in the stories performed and in the form of the performance itself, but also in visual elements such as costume, ornament, and puppet-making technique, all of which have gradually been adapted to local culture. In Jombang Regency, East Java, the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple in Gudo has become one of the centres for the preservation of Wayang Potehi, and to this day remains active in staging performances while sustaining the continuity of the tradition.

One visual element that plays an especially important role in Wayang Potehi performance is the costume worn by each character. A costume is not merely a complement to a puppet's appearance; it also functions as a medium of visual communication that signals a character's identity, social standing, personality, and the cultural values that character embodies. Among the many characters found in Wayang Potehi, the Emperor in the play Dinasti Song wears the most elaborate costume of all, marked by a royal robe, a crown, a dragon motif, a dominant gold colour, and a range of ornaments that together project authority and power. This visual complexity makes the Emperor's costume a compelling subject for study from the standpoint of aesthetics and symbolic meaning.

Previous Studies

Studies of Wayang Potehi have been carried out by a number of researchers with a variety of foci and approaches. Rather than reviewing these works one by one, the discussion below groups them into three thematic clusters — acculturation and cultural identity, preservation and social function, and visual elements and costume — in order to show where the existing scholarship concentrates and where it thins out. This organisation also makes the research gap addressed by the present study easier to locate, since that gap falls at the intersection of the three clusters rather than within any one of them.

Acculturation and cultural identity

A first body of work approaches Wayang Potehi as a product of cultural encounter. Sari (2021) examines the process of cultural acculturation in Wayang Potehi in Indonesia, explaining that the form underwent adaptation through the meeting of Chinese and local culture and so produced a performance able to survive and develop on Java; importantly for the present study, that adaptation shaped not only the way stories are presented but also the visual elements of performance, including character costume. Wicaksono (2021) approaches the same question through the lens of multiculturalism, showing that Wayang Potehi is the outcome of a dynamic interaction between Chinese and local communities and that its continuity depends not only on performance itself but on the community's acceptance of the cultural values it carries. Both studies rest, explicitly or implicitly, on the classical formulation of acculturation as the change that results when groups of differing cultures enter continuous first-hand contact (Redfield et al., 1936), and both establish the cultural background against which any element of Wayang Potehi must be read.

What this cluster does not do is descend from the level of the tradition as a whole to the level of the individual object. Acculturation is demonstrated at the scale of repertoire, audience, and institution rather than at the scale of a particular garment worn by a particular character. The present research takes up that unexamined scale, asking how the cultural values these studies identify are actually encoded in the visual detail of a single costume.

Preservation, social function, and adaptation

A second and larger body of work is concerned with keeping Wayang Potehi alive. Budiman (2019) addresses the use of modern communication media, finding digital media to be an

effective strategy for introducing Wayang Potehi to a wider public. Tan (2021) argues more generally that the continuity of traditional performing arts requires innovation that does not erode the cultural values those arts carry. Handayani (2021) documents a functional transformation in which Wayang Potehi has moved from a ritual medium towards a medium of entertainment and cultural preservation. More recently, Ambarastuti (2024) and Kurniasanti (2025) have both examined preservation through digitalisation and adaptation to technological change, the latter in the specifically Chinese-Indonesian community context of Semarang.

Taken together, these studies establish why Wayang Potehi scholarship matters and what threatens the tradition, but they treat the performance largely as a unit to be sustained rather than as an object to be read. None examines the visual dimension of performance, and none treats costume as carrying meaning in its own right. The present study complements this cluster by arguing that what is being preserved includes a specific visual and symbolic vocabulary — one that cannot be safeguarded if it has never been described.

Visual elements and costume

A third and smallest cluster comes closest to the concerns of the present research. Prasetyo (2022) examines the visual elements of Wayang Potehi — shape, colour, and character costume — and establishes that these elements play an important role in constructing character identity in performance. Hidayat (2023) examines visual narrative in Wayang Potehi and shows that costume functions as a marker of character and strengthens the delivery of story content. Lim (2022) approaches costume from the production side, examining embroidery technique, types of embroidery, and workmanship quality as attributes of a craft product.

Each of these studies stops short of the question this research asks. Prasetyo (2022) discusses costume in general terms without focusing on a single character in a single play. Hidayat (2023) establishes that costume signifies but does not analyse the formal aesthetic elements through which it does so, nor the layered structure of the meanings involved. Lim (2022) documents how costume is made without asking what the finished object means within a performance context. The present research addresses all three limitations at once by concentrating on one costume, analysing it formally through Djelantik's aesthetic theory, and interpreting it semiotically through Barthes' framework.

Research gap and novelty

Compared with the studies reviewed above, research on Wayang Potehi remains dominated by discussions of cultural acculturation, preservation, social function, communication media, costume-making technique, and visual elements in a general sense. The gap is therefore not an absence of publications but a deficiency in knowledge: the tradition's most semantically loaded object has been named repeatedly and described nowhere, and no study has yet been found that integrates Djelantik's aesthetic theory with Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis to examine the Emperor's costume in Wayang Potehi performance. This article is the first to analyse a single Wayang Potehi costume simultaneously as a composed aesthetic object and as a layered cultural sign, and so to test whether its aesthetic structure and its symbolic structure coincide.

Theoretical Framework

Before the two principal frameworks are set out, one conceptual premise should be made explicit. This study treats costume as an element of material culture, in the sense given by Koentjaraningrat (2009), for whom culture comprises a system of ideas, a system of social action, and the physical objects produced by human activity, with the last serving as the tangible expression of the first. A costume is therefore not merely an artefact accompanying a performance but a physical form in which a system of cultural ideas has been deposited and

made visible — which is precisely what makes it available to both aesthetic and semiotic analysis. This premise also connects the present study to the broader field of visual aesthetic analysis in the performing arts, in which visual elements are examined not as decoration but as constitutive of how a performance produces meaning for its audience (Prabowo, 2023).

Aesthetics is understood here as the study of beauty through the relationship among form, content, and presentation in a work of art. According to Djelantik (1999), the aesthetic quality of a work is built from three principal elements: *wujud* (form or appearance), *bobot* (content or weight), and *penyajian* (presentation). *Wujud* concerns the directly observable visual aspect of a work — its shape, colour, motif, texture, material, and composition — and is further governed by the sub-principles of unity (*keutuhan*), dominance (*penonjolan*), and balance (*keseimbangan*), through which the various visual elements are drawn together into a single, legible composition. *Bobot* refers to the ideas, values, function, and message contained within a work of art; it is the dimension through which a costume ceases to be mere decoration and becomes a bearer of meaning. *Penyajian* concerns the way a work is realised and displayed — the skill, technique, and means through which it is brought before an audience — so that it is able to produce a genuine aesthetic experience for those who encounter it.

The analysis of the costume's symbolic meaning draws on the semiotic theory of Barthes (1977), which regards every visual object as a system of signs that produces meaning through layered signification. Barthes explains that a sign is composed of a signifier and a signified, which together generate denotative and connotative meaning; connotation, repeated and naturalised within a culture, in turn develops into myth — a second-order system of meaning shaped by that culture and experienced by its members as simply the way things are. Denotative meaning describes a costume as it visually appears, while connotative meaning uncovers the cultural values attached to each visual element. Through the concept of myth, Barthes' framework explains how such symbols have become part of a cultural system that is accepted, almost unreflectively, as the natural representation of a ruler's identity.

Using these two theories together allows the study to examine the Emperor's costume in a comprehensive way. Djelantik's aesthetic theory identifies the artistic quality of the costume on the basis of its form, content, and presentation, while Barthes' semiotic theory interprets the symbolic meaning contained within each visual element. The analysis therefore does not stop at describing the costume's form and beauty, but goes on to reveal how the Emperor's costume represents identity, power, honour, and Chinese cultural values within Wayang Potehi performance.

Two research questions follow. First, what are the visual characteristics of the Emperor's costume in the play Dinasti Song as performed in Wayang Potehi at the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, Gudo? Second, what aesthetic values and symbolic meanings are carried by those characteristics? The study aims to describe the visual characteristics of the Emperor's costume and to analyse the aesthetic value and symbolic meaning it carries as a representation of Chinese culture within Wayang Potehi performance.

METHOD

Research Design and Approach

This research used a qualitative method with a descriptive design. The design was chosen because the study aimed to describe visual characteristics and to analyse the aesthetic value and symbolic meaning of the Emperor's costume rather than to measure the incidence of any variable. Qualitative research is appropriate where the aim is to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or cultural phenomenon (Creswell, 2018), and it proceeds by producing descriptive data in the form of written accounts and observed behaviour examined within its natural setting (Moleong, 2017). The approach

therefore allowed the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the object of study through direct observation under natural conditions, so that the data obtained described not only the costume's physical characteristics but also the cultural values embedded within it.

Two theoretical frameworks were brought to bear, and at distinct points in the analysis. Djelantik's (1999) aesthetic theory was applied at the second analytical stage, once the visual characteristics of the costume had been established descriptively, in order to examine the aspects of *wujud*, *bobot*, and *penyajian*. Barthes' (1977) semiotic theory was applied at the third stage, to interpret the denotative, connotative, and mythic meanings carried by each visual element. Keeping the two frameworks sequential rather than simultaneous made it possible to test, at the final stage, whether the elements identified as aesthetically dominant were the same elements identified as symbolically weighted.

Site, Period, and Participants

The research was conducted at the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, Gudo Village, Gudo Sub-district, Jombang Regency, East Java. This site was chosen because it is one of the centres for the preservation of Wayang Potehi in Indonesia that routinely stages performances and continues to maintain the use of traditional costume in each of its plays; its standing as a site of continuing Wayang Potehi practice in Gudo has been documented in earlier fieldwork by Rahma (2016). Fieldwork was carried out over [month]–[month] 2025 and comprised [number] visits to the temple and the adjoining Wayang Potehi Museum Gudo, including [number] performances observed in full.

The object of the research is the Emperor's costume in the play Dinasti Song. Three informants were selected through purposive sampling on the criterion of direct involvement in the making, use, or custodianship of Wayang Potehi costume at the site, so that the making of the garment, its use in performance, and its interpretation within the tradition were each represented by a practitioner. The informants agreed to be identified by name; their roles and the basis on which each was selected are set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Informants, roles, and basis of selection

Informant	Role	Basis of selection
Toni Harsono	Manager of the Wayang Potehi Museum Gudo, puppeteer, and head of the Wayang Potehi troupe Fu He An	Custodian of the collection and principal authority on costume philosophy and the history of the tradition at the site
Widodo Santoso	Wayang Potehi puppeteer and puppet craftsman	Handles and manipulates the costumed puppet in performance and maintains the puppets in the collection
Tutik	Wayang Potehi costume maker	Makes the garments analysed, and therefore the source on material selection, embroidery technique, and design decisions

Data Collection

Three techniques were used. Observation was non-participatory: the researchers examined the Emperor's costume directly, both within the museum collection and in use during performance, without taking part in the performance itself, and recorded its form, colour, motif, material, ornament, and manner of use in a structured observation sheet organised by Djelantik's three aesthetic aspects. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in stages with each informant, guided by an instrument covering the history of the costume, its production

process, its function, its symbolic meaning, and the reasons behind the use of particular visual elements; the guide was used as a prompt rather than a script, so that informants could introduce categories the researchers had not anticipated. Documentation consisted of photography of the costume as a whole and of its ornament in detail, of the performance, and of archival material held at the museum.

Secondary data were drawn from books, scholarly articles, theses, and other documents relevant to Wayang Potehi, aesthetics, and semiotics, and were used to situate rather than to replace the field material. The observation protocol and the interview guide are summarised in Table 2 and may be supplied in full as supplementary material on request.

Table 2. Data collection techniques and the material each produced

Technique	Implementation	Data obtained
Observation	Non-participatory examination of the Emperor's costume during performance and within the museum collection, recorded on a structured observation sheet	Form, colour, motif, material, ornament, and manner of use
Interview	Semi-structured interviews conducted in stages with the three informants listed in Table 1	History of the costume, production process, function, aesthetic judgement, and symbolic meaning
Documentation	Photography of the costume, of ornament details, and of the performance; consultation of archival material held at the museum	Visual evidence supporting and cross-checking the observational and interview data

Data Validation and Analysis

Credibility was established by source triangulation. Each substantive claim about the costume was required to hold across at least two of the three sources — observation, interview, and documentation — and claims about symbolic meaning were additionally required to be attested by more than one informant. Where an informant's account of a motif diverged from what observation recorded, the discrepancy was put back to the informant in a subsequent interview rather than resolved by the researchers.

Analysis proceeded interactively through three stages. At the reduction stage, material from observation, interviews, and documentation was sorted into three coding categories derived from the research questions: visual characteristics, aesthetic value, and symbolic meaning; within the first category, sub-codes followed the physical divisions of the garment — robe, colour, motif, crown, ornament, material — so that every subsequent analytical claim could be traced back to a specific part of the object. At the display stage, the coded material was set out element by element in descriptive accounts supported by photographs and interview extracts, producing the matrices that appear below as Tables 3 and 4. At the final stage, conclusions were drawn by interpreting each element twice: first against Djelantik's categories of *wujud*, *bobot*, and *penyajian*, and then against Barthes' levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. Comparing the two interpretations element by element was what made the convergence reported in the discussion below visible as a finding rather than an impression.

Research Ethics and Positionality

No institutional review board with jurisdiction over non-clinical arts research operates at the authors' institution, and consent was therefore secured directly. Each informant was informed of the purpose of the research, of the intended publication, and of the use to which interview

material and photographs would be put, and gave consent verbally before the first interview; permission to photograph the costume, the collection, and the performance was negotiated separately with the management of the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple and the Wayang Potehi Museum Gudo. All three informants consented to be named. Because the costume is used in a temple that is an active place of worship as well as a performance venue, photography was confined to the puppets, the collection, and the stage, and no ritual activity or worshipper was recorded. The authors are not members of the Chinese-Indonesian community at Gudo and are not practitioners of Wayang Potehi; they approached the tradition as outside researchers based at a university in the same province, and the interpretations offered below were put back to the informants for comment before publication.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Visual Characteristics of the Emperor's Costume

The findings show that the Emperor's costume in the play Dinasti Song has visual characteristics that clearly distinguish it from those of other characters in Wayang Potehi performance. On the evidence of observation, interview, and documentation, these characteristics are evident in the form of the costume, its use of colour, its motifs, its ornament, and the materials from which it is made. All of these visual elements are arranged harmoniously to represent the Emperor as the highest authority within the kingdom's social order, while simultaneously strengthening the character's visual identity on stage. Besides functioning as an artistic element, the costume also serves as a medium of visual communication that helps the audience recognise the status, personality, and role of the character throughout the performance.

Silhouette and form of the robe

The Emperor's costume takes the form of a long robe with a symmetrical silhouette that covers almost the entire body of the Wayang Potehi puppet. The cut of the robe is loose, with wide sleeves, producing an impression of grandeur and authority when the puppet is manipulated by the *dalang* (puppeteer). On the chest, back, sleeves, and lower section of the robe, dragon motifs are embroidered in a symmetrical arrangement that forms the central point of visual attention. The Emperor also wears a crown in a form distinctive of Chinese royal tradition, decorated with gold-coloured ornaments. The presence of the crown reinforces the character's identity as the supreme ruler while also distinguishing him from noble or official characters of lower rank.

Colour

The dominance of gold is the primary characteristic of the Emperor's costume. This colour is combined with red, green, blue, and white to produce a harmonious colour composition. Informants explained that the use of gold is tied to Chinese imperial tradition, in which the colour signifies the highest social position, nobility, and honour. Red provides a visual accent that reinforces an impression of courage and authority, while green, blue, and white function as supporting colours that create compositional balance. This combination results in an appearance that stands out more than that of any other character, drawing the audience's visual attention towards the Emperor, as seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The Emperor's costume in Wayang Potehi

Photograph by the authors, Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, Gudo, Jombang, 2025. Reproduced with the consent of the Wayang Potehi Museum Gudo.

Motif, crown, and material

The dragon motif is the most dominant decorative element on the costume. It is embroidered on the chest, back, sleeves, and lower section of the robe in a balanced composition, as shown in the detail in Figure 2. Alongside the dragon motif, cloud and geometric ornament motifs complete the overall costume design. The principal material is satin combined with brocade and gold embroidery thread, producing a glossy texture under stage lighting. The choice of material not only enhances the visual quality of the costume but also gives it the flexibility needed for the puppet's movement during performance. The full set of visual characteristics identified through observation is summarised in Table 3.



Figure 2. Detail of the dragon motif embroidered on the robe

Photograph by the authors, Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, Gudo, Jombang, 2025. Reproduced with the consent of the Wayang Potehi Museum Gudo.

Table 3. Visual characteristics of the Emperor's costume

Visual aspect	Finding
Form	A long robe with a symmetrical silhouette and wide sleeves
Colour	Dominant gold combined with red, green, blue, and white
Motif	Dragon as the primary motif, accompanied by cloud and wave motifs and geometric ornament

Visual aspect	Finding
Crown	A gold-coloured royal crown serving as the Emperor's principal identity marker
Material	Satin, brocade, and gold embroidery thread

Aesthetic Analysis Based on Djelantik's Theory

These visual characteristics were analysed further using Djelantik's aesthetic theory, encompassing the aspects of *wujud*, *bobot*, and *penyajian*. The analysis proceeds element by element — the robe, the colour scheme, the dragon motif, the crown, and the ornamentation — in order to show how each visual component contributes to the costume's overall aesthetic quality.

Form (wujud)

On the aspect of form, the costume demonstrates harmony among shape, colour, motif, ornament, and material, together forming a balanced visual composition. The symmetrical proportion of the robe, combined with the dominance of gold, produces an appearance that is majestic and appropriate to the character of an emperor. The symmetrical placement of the dragon motif across the chest, back, and sleeves further establishes a clear focal point, so that the audience is able to recognise the character's identity at a glance.

The principle of unity (*keutuhan*) is evident in the way the robe, crown, colour palette, and motif are treated not as separate elements but as a single integrated visual system: the gold of the robe echoes the gold of the crown, and the dragon motif recurs across the chest, back, and sleeves so that no part of the costume reads as disconnected from the whole. The principle of dominance (*penonjolan*) is achieved through the placement of the dragon motif at the centre of the chest, the largest and most detailed embroidered element on the costume, which naturally draws the eye before any other detail is noticed. The principle of balance (*keseimbangan*), meanwhile, can be seen in the way the supporting colours — red, green, blue, and white — are distributed evenly across the robe's surface so that the overall composition does not feel weighted towards any single side, even though the garment itself is not perfectly bilaterally symmetrical in its embroidered detail.

Content (bobot)

On the aspect of content, the costume does not merely function as performance attire; it also carries cultural values that represent the power, authority, and honour of a ruler. Its visual elements operate as a form of non-verbal communication that helps the audience understand the character of the Emperor without requiring explanation through dialogue. The robe's scale and the weight of its ornamentation communicate rank before the puppet has spoken a single line; the crown communicates the character's position at the apex of the kingdom's hierarchy; and the recurring dragon motif communicates that this authority is not merely political but also cosmological, tied to the traditional Chinese association between the dragon and the legitimacy of imperial rule. In this sense the *bobot* of the costume lies less in any single ornament than in the cumulative message produced when robe, crown, colour, and motif are read together as one visual statement of who this character is and what he represents.

Presentation (penyajian)

On the aspect of presentation, the costume displays a high standard of workmanship through its embroidery technique, its choice of material, and its suitability to the scale of the Wayang Potehi puppet. The satin base allows the gold thread embroidery to catch stage lighting and produce a shimmering surface that reads clearly even from a distance, while the brocade trim adds textural depth that distinguishes the Emperor's robe from the flatter costumes of

secondary characters. This quality of presentation is inseparable from the skill of the costume maker, whose embroidery work must be dense and precise enough to render a recognisable dragon face and clawed limbs within the limited surface area of a puppet-scale garment, while remaining light and flexible enough not to restrict the *dalang*'s manipulation of the puppet during performance. The harmony among form, content, and presentation demonstrates that the Emperor's costume possesses an aesthetic quality capable of supporting the visual delivery of the story.

Semiotic Analysis Based on Barthes' Theory

Semiotic analysis following Barthes shows that each visual element of the Emperor's costume carries denotative, connotative, and mythic meaning. The analysis proceeds through the three levels of signification in turn, applied to the costume's principal visual elements: the robe and crown as a whole, the colours gold and red, and the dragon, cloud, and wave motifs.

Denotation

At the level of denotation, the costume is understood simply as royal attire consisting of a long robe, a crown, gold colouring, a dragon motif, and supporting ornament. This is the costume as it is literally seen: cloth cut into a particular silhouette, thread arranged into a recognisable animal form, a headpiece placed above the puppet's face. Denotation names what is visually present without yet asking what that presence stands for, and it is this level that corresponds most directly to the visual characteristics described above.

Connotation

At the level of connotation, the colour gold is read as a sign of power, nobility, and honour. This reading is not arbitrary but rests on a long-established chromatic hierarchy in which the yellow-gold range was reserved for imperial use and progressively restricted to the person of the emperor himself, acquiring associations with centrality, sovereignty, and the sacred that no other colour in the Chinese palette carries (Kim, 2018). The colour red, used as an accent on the robe, connotes courage, good fortune, and leadership spirit within the same symbolic system, where it is among the most consistently auspicious colours in both ritual and everyday contexts (Eberhard, 1986).

The dragon motif represents authority, wisdom, protection, and the legitimacy of an emperor in Chinese culture. Its five-clawed form in particular functions as an exclusive marker reserved for imperial rank, distinguishing the Emperor from any noble or official character who might otherwise be dressed in comparably rich fabric — a distinction that was, historically, regulated rather than merely conventional, with lesser claw counts assigned to lower ranks of the nobility (Eberhard, 1986). The cloud motifs accompanying the dragon connote the favour of heaven and an auspicious, harmonious cosmic order surrounding the ruler, while wave motifs at the hem connote the extent and unity of imperial territory, stretching outward like water to the edges of the realm. As Rawson (2015) observes of Chinese ornament more broadly, such motifs are rarely decorative in isolation; they are organised into repeating schemes whose arrangement on an object is itself part of what the object communicates, so that the placement of dragon, cloud, and wave in vertical relation on the robe reproduces in miniature a cosmological order with the ruler at its centre. The crown, finally, becomes a sign of supreme authority, differentiating the Emperor from every other figure who appears on the Wayang Potehi stage, however elaborate their costume might otherwise be.

Myth

At the level of myth, the repeated use of gold, the dragon motif, and royal attributes reflects a system of cultural meaning inherited across generations within Chinese tradition. Barthes' concept of myth is useful here because it explains why these associations — gold with nobility, the dragon with imperial legitimacy — no longer read as arbitrary cultural conventions to the

performance's audience but as something closer to self-evident fact: of course an emperor wears gold; of course a dragon signals supreme authority. This naturalisation is precisely what myth accomplishes, converting a historically specific, culturally particular association into something that feels timeless and inevitable. Within Wayang Potehi performance at the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, this mythic layer does two things at once: it strengthens the Emperor's identity as a character within the story being told, and it keeps a specifically Chinese cultural value system visibly alive within a performance tradition that has otherwise been substantially reshaped by decades of acculturation with Javanese audiences and settings. The results of both the aesthetic and the semiotic analyses are brought together element by element in Table 4.

Table 4. Aesthetic value and symbolic meaning of the costume, element by element

Costume element	Aesthetic value (Djelantik)	Symbolic meaning (Barthes)
Robe	Symmetrical proportion creates visual balance and unity	Signifies the ruler's highest rank and station
Gold colour	Becomes the visual focal point and reinforces an impression of grandeur	A sign of power, nobility, and honour
Red accent	Provides contrast that heightens the robe's dominance in the overall composition	Signifies courage, good fortune, and leadership spirit
Dragon motif	Enriches artistic quality through dense, detailed visual composition	Signifies authority, wisdom, protection, and imperial legitimacy
Cloud and wave motifs	Complete the composition and add rhythmic visual variety around the dragon	Signify heaven's favour, harmony, and the unity of imperial territory
Crown	Reinforces the character's visual identity as the focal point of the ensemble	A sign of supreme authority within the kingdom's social order
Embroidered ornament	Adds aesthetic quality and visual detail through fine workmanship	Signifies opulence and royal social status

The Convergence of Aesthetic Dominance and Symbolic Weight

Read together, the aesthetic and semiotic analyses above show that the Emperor's costume operates on two levels at once: as a composed, harmonious visual object in Djelantik's sense, and as a layered cultural sign in Barthes' sense. These two readings are not independent of one another. The very features that make the costume aesthetically dominant — the centrality of the dragon motif, the saturation of gold, the symmetry of the robe — are the same features that carry the heaviest connotative and mythic weight. Aesthetic dominance and symbolic dominance track each other closely on this costume, which suggests that, for its makers and wearers, beauty and meaning were never conceived as separate design problems: the costume was built to be beautiful precisely by being built to signal power.

This convergence is clearest in the treatment of the dragon motif. Under Djelantik's aesthetic theory the motif is the costume's point of dominance (*penonjolan*) — the single densest, most technically demanding piece of embroidery on the garment, and therefore the element most responsible for the costume's visual impact. Under Barthes' semiotics the same motif is also the costume's heaviest carrier of connotation and myth, since a five-clawed dragon signifies imperial rank more unambiguously than any other element of the ensemble. That a single design choice can simultaneously anchor a work's formal composition and its cultural

signification is not a coincidence particular to this costume; it points to a more general principle for reading traditional performance costume, in which the maker's aesthetic judgement about what should visually dominate a garment and the culture's shared understanding of what a garment should communicate are, in practice, the same judgement made twice, from two different theoretical directions.

This finding extends the studies reviewed in the introduction. Where Prasetyo (2022) established that the visual elements of Wayang Potehi costume in general help construct character identity, the present analysis specifies how that construction works for one costume in particular, and shows that it works through the coordinated operation of two distinct signifying systems rather than through either alone. Where Hidayat (2023) observed that costume functions as a marker of character within Wayang Potehi's visual narrative, this study supplies the theoretical apparatus, through Djelantik and Barthes together, that Hidayat did not pursue, showing concretely which visual choices carry which layers of meaning. The departure from Lim (2022) is sharper and worth explaining rather than merely noting. Lim treats embroidery technique as a matter of craft production, separable in principle from questions of meaning; the present findings suggest that technique and meaning cannot be fully separated in this object, since the density and placement of the embroidery described under *penyajian* above is itself part of how the costume signifies rank. The most likely explanation for the divergence is one of corpus rather than of analysis: Lim works across a range of puppet-theatre garments in which rank is not the organising variable, whereas the Emperor's costume is an object whose entire design problem is the display of rank, and on which, accordingly, the technical and the semantic collapse into one another.

The findings also carry a practical dimension. Because the costume's aesthetic and symbolic dimensions are so tightly bound together, any future restoration, replication, or teaching of Wayang Potehi costume-making at Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong would need to treat the dragon motif's placement, the specific balance of gold against red, green, blue, and white, and the crown's form not as stylistic choices that could be simplified or substituted without cost, but as the very elements that carry the character's cultural legitimacy. This has direct relevance for the museum and workshop activity already taking place at the temple, where costume-making knowledge is held by a small number of practitioners. It also suggests a concrete direction for arts education: a curriculum built around this costume could teach Djelantik's three aesthetic aspects and Barthes' three levels of signification side by side, using the same physical object, rather than treating formal analysis and cultural-meaning analysis as separate units of instruction.

CONCLUSION

The Emperor's costume in the play Dinasti Song at the Tri Dharma Hong San Kiong Temple, Gudo, is a visual statement of sovereignty before it is a garment. Its long robe with a symmetrical silhouette, its royal crown, its dominance of gold against red, green, blue, and white, and its five-clawed dragon accompanied by cloud and wave motifs together construct the Emperor's identity as supreme ruler and hold that identity legible to an audience from the moment the puppet appears, without a line of dialogue being spoken.

Answering the second research question, the costume is aesthetically accomplished and semantically loaded in the same places. It satisfies Djelantik's three aspects — harmony of shape, colour, motif, texture, and ornament in its form; the representation of power, authority, and cultural identity in its content; and a standard of workmanship that supports characterisation in performance in its presentation — while carrying, at Barthes' three levels, meanings that run from the literal description of royal attire, through the connotation of gold as nobility and of the five-clawed dragon as exclusive imperial authority, to a mythic layer at which these associations are experienced as natural rather than conventional. The central claim

of this article is that these two structures coincide: the points at which the costume is most aesthetically dominant are the points at which it is most symbolically weighted, and beauty and meaning were therefore not separate design problems for its makers.

The study contributes to the aesthetics of the performing arts a demonstration that formal and semiotic analysis of a single object can be mutually confirming rather than merely complementary, and it contributes to Wayang Potehi scholarship the first sustained description of the visual and symbolic vocabulary that preservation efforts are, in practice, preserving. For the custodian community at Gudo the implication is concrete: the elements identified here are the elements that cannot be simplified in restoration, replication, or teaching without cost to the character's cultural legitimacy.

The limitations are those of scope. The study examines one character, in one play, at one site, and its findings should be read accordingly; nor does it address how audiences at Gudo actually interpret the costume, since the evidence here comes from makers and performers rather than from spectators. Three lines of research follow directly. A comparison with the costumes of secondary court characters — ministers, generals, and consorts — within the same play would test whether the visual and symbolic hierarchy identified here holds across the full cast through which it is meant to be read. A comparison with the Emperor as staged by other Wayang Potehi communities in Java would establish which elements are specific to the Gudo tradition and which are shared. And a reception study among audiences at the temple would determine whether the mythic layer described here is in fact activated by those watching, or whether it survives principally in the knowledge of the practitioners who make and handle these garments.

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Data availability. The field notes, interview transcripts, observation sheets, and photographic documentation underlying the findings are held by the corresponding author and may be consulted on reasonable request. Photographs of the collection may be reproduced only with the further consent of the Wayang Potehi Museum Gudo.

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