

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the Problem

Film, as a powerful medium of mass communication, serves not only as entertainment but also as a complex system of signs that reflects and shapes cultural narratives. It constructs meaning through a combination of visual and auditory elements, creating a text ripe for interpretation. According to Van Zoest (in Shobur, 2013:128), "film is built with signs, including various sign systems that work together to achieve the desired effect." One of the most profound human experiences that cinema explores is grief, a universal yet deeply personal process. The 2021 Marvel Studios film, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, presents a compelling narrative that is fundamentally structured around the theme of grief and its divergent paths. The film's central conflict stems not from a simple desire for power, but from the unprocessed trauma of its primary antagonist, Xu Wenwu, and the corresponding journey of healing undertaken by its protagonist, his son Shang-Chi.<sup>2</sup>

The narrative presents a stark dichotomy between father and son. Xu Wenwu, a man who has lived for a millennium, is emotionally paralyzed by the death of his wife, Ying Li. His grief manifests as a destructive obsession, driving him to actions that threaten the world.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Shang-Chi, who also carries the deep trauma of his mother's death and his subsequent abusive upbringing, embarks on a journey of confrontation and integration, ultimately finding a path toward healing and self-acceptance.<sup>8</sup> This narrative juxtaposition offers a rich ground for analyzing the psychological and symbolic dimensions of processing loss.

To adequately unpack these complex character dynamics, this research will employ an integrated theoretical framework. The first component of this framework is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's seminal five-stage model of grief. Initially developed from interviews with terminally ill patients, the model has been broadly applied to various forms of catastrophic loss. The model posits five

potential responses to grief: **Denial:** A state of shock or disbelief where an individual has "a difficult time grasping the reality of their situation" Anger: As reality sets in, feelings of bitterness and injustice emerge, often characterized by questioning fate or a higher power Bargaining: An attempt to postpone the inevitable, often involving deals with a higher power or being consumed by "if only" scenarios accompanied by guilt Depression: A period of despair, hopelessness, and isolation upon realizing the certainty of the loss Acceptance:

The final stage where an individual acknowledges the reality of the loss and is able to move forward. This model provides a robust psychological lens through which to map the internal journeys of Wenwu and Shang-Chi.

However, a psychological framework alone is insufficient to analyze a cinematic text. It is crucial to understand *how* these internal states are communicated to the audience through the language of film. For this, the research will turn to the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes. Barthes, building upon the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, developed a model for analyzing how signs generate layers of meaning His framework is built on a two-order system of signification: Denotation: The first order of signification, which is the literal, objective, and commonly agreed-upon meaning of a sign For instance, the denotative meaning of the Ten Rings is a set of mystical armbands that grant power. Connotation: The second order of signification, where the sign from the first order interacts with the "feelings or emotions of the user and the values of their culture" This meaning is subjective, cultural, and ideological. **Myth:** For Barthes, when a connotation becomes so widely accepted that it is perceived as natural and self-evident, it functions as a myth. Myth is a dominant ideology that "gives justification for the dominant values that apply in a certain period".<sup>1</sup>

This research posits that Xu Wenwu's unresolved grief becomes the foundation for a powerful personal myth—a distorted reality he constructs to avoid the pain of his loss. This myth is expressed through a system of signs within the film. Conversely, Shang-Chi's journey is one of deconstructing his father's myth and his own trauma, a process also marked by a transformation of key signs. By integrating Kübler-Ross's psychological stages with Barthes' semiotic analysis, this study aims to provide an exhaustive and nuanced interpretation of how *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* portrays the profound and transformative power of grief.

## 1.2. Identification of the Problem

Based on the background described above, this research identifies several key problems for investigation: The character of Xu Wenwu is driven by an unresolved grief that arrests him in the early stages of the Kübler-Ross model. This psychological state is not merely an internal motivation but is externalized through a system of semiotic signs that culminate in a powerful, destructive "myth" where his deceased wife is alive. The specific mechanisms of this semiotic construction warrant a detailed analysis.

Shang-Chi's character arc represents a successful navigation of the five stages of grief. This psychological progression from denial and trauma to acceptance and integration is visually and narratively signified through key transformations in the film, including the evolution of his fighting style and the symbolic color change of the Ten Rings. These signs function as markers of his healing process.<sup>11</sup> The film establishes a direct symbolic and psychological contrast between father and son through their relationship with grief. Wenwu's story illustrates how grief can lead to the creation of a false, ideological myth, while Shang-Chi's story shows the process of deconstructing that myth to find an authentic identity. This central dichotomy is the core engine of the film's thematic exploration of family, legacy, and trauma. The cinematic language of *Shang-Chi*—including color symbolism, character action, and dialogue—functions as a complex semiotic system. A comprehensive analysis requires an integrated framework that can connect these external signs (semiotics) to the internal psychological states (grief stages) they are intended to represent.

## 1.3. Limitation of the Problem

To ensure a focused and in-depth analysis, this research is subject to the following limitations:

**Object of Study:** The analysis will focus exclusively on the cinematic text of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), directed by Destin Daniel Cretton. It will not extend to the Marvel Comics source material or other films within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, except where directly relevant to the narrative of the film itself. **Scope of Analysis:** The research will concentrate on the character arcs of the protagonist, Shang-Chi, and the primary antagonist, Xu Wenwu. Other characters, such as Xialing and Katy, will be considered only insofar as they relate to and illuminate the psychological and semiotic journeys of the two main characters. Theoretical

**Framework:** The analysis will be strictly conducted using the integrated framework of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief and Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (denotation, connotation, and myth). Other psychological or semiotic theories will not be incorporated.

#### **1.4. Formulation of the Problem**

Based on the identified problems and limitations, this research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does the film *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* employ semiotic signs (denotative and connotative) to represent Xu Wenwu's arrested development within the five stages of grief, leading to the construction of a personal myth that denies the reality of his loss?
2. What are the key semiotic signs (e.g., color, fighting style, character actions) that signify Shang-Chi's successful progression through the five stages of grief, culminating in his integration of his past and his achievement of acceptance?
3. How does the semiotic and psychological contrast between Shang-Chi's journey of healing and Xu Wenwu's entrapment in grief articulate the film's overarching themes of intergenerational trauma, identity, and the process of breaking destructive family cycles?

#### **1.5. Objectives of the Research**

In line with the formulation of the problem, the objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze and describe the semiotic signs that represent Xu Wenwu's failure to progress beyond the initial stages of grief, and to interpret how these signs construct the Barthesian myth that drives his actions.
2. To identify and interpret the key semiotic signs that mark Shang-Chi's psychological journey through the five stages of grief, from his initial state of avoidance to his final stage of acceptance and integration.
3. To explain, through a comparative analysis of the two characters, how the film uses the integrated semiotic-psychological framework to explore its central themes of trauma, healing, and the redefinition of one's legacy.

## 1.6. Benefits of the Research

This research is expected to provide the following benefits:

1. **Theoretical Benefit:** This study will contribute to the field of media and cultural studies by offering a novel methodological approach that integrates psychological theory with semiotic analysis for film criticism. It will provide a practical model for examining how abstract psychological concepts are rendered tangible and meaningful through the specific language of cinema, thereby enriching the analytical tools available to scholars.
2. **Practical Benefit:** For students, critics, and enthusiasts of film, this research will offer a deeper and more nuanced understanding of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. It will illuminate the sophisticated narrative techniques used to explore complex themes of grief and trauma. Furthermore, it can serve as an academic reference for future studies on psychological representation within the popular genre of superhero films.<sup>1</sup>

## 1.7. Systematic Organizations of the Framework

This thesis will be organized into five chapters, structured as follows:

### CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the research, including the background of the problem, identification and limitation of the problem, formulation of the research questions, objectives, benefits, and the systematic organization of the thesis.

### CHAPTER II THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will present a comprehensive literature review of the two core theories underpinning the analysis. It will first detail Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage model of grief. Subsequently, it will provide a thorough explanation of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, focusing on the concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth.

### CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter will outline the qualitative research methodology employed. It will define the object of study, the data sources, and the techniques for data collection (e.g., scene analysis, dialogue transcription). It will also detail the step-by-step procedure for data analysis using the integrated semiotic-psychological framework.

#### **CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS SHANGCHI AND THE LEGEND OF TEN RING**

This is the central chapter of the thesis, presenting the detailed analysis of the film. It will be divided into two main sections: the first analyzing Xu Wenwu's arrested grief and the myth he constructs, and the second analyzing Shang-Chi's journey toward acceptance. A final section will offer a comparative discussion of the two arcs and their thematic implications.

#### **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

This final chapter will summarize the key findings of the research, provide conclusive answers to the research questions, and discuss the broader implications of the study. It will also offer suggestions for potential avenues of future research.

