

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Screenplay Theory and Narrative Structure of Film

The fundamental basis for analyzing a cinematic work lies in understanding the blueprint that shapes it: the screenplay. A screenplay is not merely a collection of dialogue and scene descriptions; it is the narrative architecture that serves as an essential guide for the entire film production process. This section will elaborate on screenplay theory, focusing on conventional narrative structure and the vital role of conflict, as a macroscopic framework for dissecting the narrative of the film *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*.

2.1.1 Definition and Function of the Screenplay as a Narrative Blueprint

A screenplay is defined as a blueprint or a design for delivering a story for a film. Its function extends beyond ordinary literary text; a screenplay must be written in a language that can be effectively visualized, as its purpose is to be realized on screen. In the production hierarchy, the screenplay serves as the primary creative idea that forms the foundation before the filming process begins. This document directs the director, actors, and the entire technical crew, ensuring that the narrative vision, character development, and thematic intentions are conveyed coherently.

It is important to understand that a screenplay, in its written form, is an "unfinished story". Its full manifestation is only achieved when elements such as acting, cinematography, music, and editing combine to create a complete cinematic experience. Therefore, film analysis cannot stop at the screenplay text but must focus on the final film text presented to the audience. The screenplay provides the structure, but the film delivers meaning through its audiovisual execution.

2.1.2 The Three-Act Structure

The most common narrative structure used in cinema, particularly in Hollywood, is the three-act structure. This classic paradigm divides the story into three distinct parts: the beginning, the middle, and the end, each with a specific function in building the plot and characters. This structure helps keep the storyline organized and easy for the audience to follow.

Act 1: The Setup

The first act aims to introduce the audience to the main character, the story's world, and the conflict they will face. In this act, the audience is given enough information to understand the narrative world and the character's motivations. In *Shang-Chi*, the first act introduces the protagonist, Shang-Chi, who lives under the alias "Shaun" in San Francisco. His world is an ordinary life as a valet, representing his attempt to escape his past. His internal conflict trauma and guilt is already implied. This act concludes with the inciting incident: an attack on a bus by his father's men aimed at seizing the pendant left by his mother. This event forcibly pulls Shang-Chi out of his normal life and thrusts him into the film's main conflict.

Act 2: The Confrontation

The second act is the longest and most substantial part of the screenplay, where the introduced conflict begins to develop and intensify. The protagonist faces various obstacles and challenges that test them physically and emotionally. In *Shang-Chi*, this act covers his journey to Macau, his confrontation with his sister, Xialing, his capture by Wenwu, and the journey to the mystical village of Ta Lo. The obstacles become increasingly difficult, and the dramatic tension continuously rises. A crucial moment in this act is the dinner scene at Wenwu's compound, where Wenwu reveals his true motivation, which is rooted in grief. This scene serves as a major psychological confrontation point, clarifying the emotional stakes of the conflict.

Act 3: The Resolution

The third act is the dramatic peak and conclusion of the story, where all the built-up conflicts reach their climax and are finally resolved. In *Shang-Chi*, this act includes the great battle in Ta Lo, the final confrontation between father and son, Wenwu's self-sacrifice, the defeat of the Dweller-in-Darkness, and the final resolution where Shang-Chi fully accepts his heritage and identity. This act provides emotional and logical satisfaction, tying up all the previously opened plot threads and affirming the film's main theme.

2.1.3 The Essential Role of Conflict in Driving Plot and Character

Conflict is the engine of narrative. Without conflict, a character's desires would be easily achieved, leaving no room for new experiences or character development. A story becomes interesting precisely because there are obstacles to overcome. Through conflict, characters not only move the plot forward but are also faced with situations that force them to change and show character development.

Shang-Chi is powered by a complex blend of external and internal conflicts.

External Conflict: Refers to the physical fights and tangible challenges the character faces. This includes Shang-Chi's fights against the Ten Rings members, his confrontation with the Iron Gang in the past, and the collective battle against the cosmic entity, the Dweller-in-

Darkness.

Internal Conflict: This is the heart of the film's narrative. Internal conflict is the psychological and emotional struggle within a character. The film deeply explores the internal conflicts of its two main characters:

Shang-Chi: Struggles between the "Shaun" identity he created to escape and the "Shang-Chi" destiny imposed by his father. His conflict is between the desire for a normal life and the obligation to face his past; between his mother's values (harmony) and his father's (power).

Wenwu: Driven by an internal conflict between profound grief over his wife's loss and the remaining love for his children. His conflict is between the destructive desire to resurrect his loved one and the awareness of the destruction he causes.

Significantly, the film illustrates how different internal conflicts in characters facing the same external event the death of Ying Li result in vastly different responses and life paths. This single event triggers Wenwu to return to a path of violence and delusion, while it pushes Shang-Chi to run away. The interaction between these internal and external conflicts gives the film its thematic depth.

Although Shang-Chi's main narrative follows a linear three-act structure, its true complexity emerges from the strategic and non-linear use of flashbacks. These flashbacks do not function as passive exposition but as a second narrative track running parallel to the present day plot. The placement of these flashbacks is often done to create mystery and emotional resonance by revealing the psychological reasons behind a character's actions *after* the audience has witnessed the action. Thus, the film's structure can be understood as a constant dialogue between the past and the present. A comprehensive narrative analysis must examine how the linear three-act structure of the present-day plot interacts with the fragmented structure of the past, which is revealed gradually. This interaction is at the core of the film's themes of memory, trauma, and legacy.

2.2 Semiotic Approach: Roland Barthes's Theory

To dissect deeper layers of meaning beyond the plot, this research will replace a conventional intrinsic approach with a semiotic one. Semiotics offers analytical tools to "read" a film as a text laden with signs. Using the framework of French theorist Roland Barthes, this analysis will move beyond *what* the film says to *how* it creates meaning through a complex system of visual and narrative signs.

2.2.1 Semiotics as a Tool for Film Analysis

Semiotics is the study of signs, symbols, and their interpretation in various contexts. Film is a highly relevant object of study for semiotic analysis because it is constructed from an interplay of various sign systems visual (cinematography, color, costume), auditory (dialogue, music, sound effects), and narrative (plot, character) that work together to convey messages and meanings. This approach allows the researcher to deconstruct cultural assumptions and ideologies hidden within

the film text, which are often taken for granted by the audience. In other words, semiotics helps us understand how culture explains or comprehends certain aspects of reality through representation in media.

2.2.2 Barthes's Orders of Signification: Denotation, Connotation, and Myth

A fundamental model in Barthesian semiotics is the two-stage system of signification, which later evolved into three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. This model provides a systematic way to unravel meaning from the most literal to the most ideological.

Denotation: This is the first order of signification. Denotation is the literal, objective, or actual meaning of a sign that can be perceived by the senses. It is the most basic and commonly agreed-upon meaning.

Example in *Shang-Chi*: Denotatively, the Ten Rings are ten metal bracelets worn on the arms. The pendant is a piece of jewellery made of jade worn around the neck.

Connotation: This is the second order of signification. At this level, the sign from the first order (the whole of the denotative signifier and signified) becomes a new signifier for a broader meaning that is cultural, emotional, or subjective. Connotation operates at a subjective level and is often unconscious.

Example in *Shang-Chi*: The Ten Rings (signifier) connotatively mean eternal power, conquest, violence, immortality, and Wenwu's legacy of power. The jade pendant (signifier) connotatively means motherly love, protection, true identity, and the spiritual heritage of Ta Lo.

Myth: Myth is the final order of signification where connotative meaning is naturalized into a dominant narrative or ideology within a culture. Myth transforms history into nature, making a cultural belief seem like an eternal truth that need not be questioned. Myth is how a culture articulates itself.

Example in *Shang-Chi*: The conflict between the Ten Rings (representing technology, power, and aggressive masculinity) and the power of the Great Protector dragon from Ta Lo (representing nature, harmony, and spiritual femininity) creates a myth about the necessity of balancing these two opposing forces to achieve wholeness. Wenwu's delusion that he can resurrect his wife is a personal myth born from grief, which the film presents as a dangerous ideology that threatens the world's balance.

2.2.3 Application of Barthes's Five Narrative Codes

To complement the analysis of static signs, Barthes also developed five narrative codes in his work *S/Z*. These codes serve as dynamic tools for analyzing how meaning is produced and structured throughout the narrative arc.

The Hermeneutic Code (HER.): This is the code of puzzles or enigmas. This code drives the narrative by posing questions that make the audience curious and want to know the answers. In *Shang-Chi*, this code is very dominant: What is Ta Lo? Who is Shang-Chi's mother? Whose voice is Wenwu hearing? Where did the Ten Rings come from? The answers

to these puzzles are revealed gradually to maintain suspense.

The Semic Code (SEM.): This code relates to the connotative meanings attached to characters, objects, or settings, which collectively build themes and atmosphere. The character of Wenwu is consistently associated with darkness, cold blue colors, and rigid, intimidating architecture. Conversely, Ying Li and the inhabitants of Ta Lo are associated with light, nature, warm colors (gold, red), and fluid movements. This semic field visually defines the ideological opposition between the two worlds.

The Symbolic Code (SYM.): This code operates through antithesis or binary oppositions that structure the main themes in the text. *Shang-Chi* is rich with symbolic oppositions that are at the core of its conflict: Father vs. Son, Past vs. Present, West (America) vs. East (China/Ta Lo), Power vs. Harmony, Technology/Weapons (Rings) vs. Nature/Spirituality (Dragon), Grief vs. Healing, Masculine vs. Feminine.

The Proairetic Code (ACT.): This is the code of actions. This code refers to the sequential logic of narrative events that can be summarized by a name (e.g., "the fight," "the escape," "the meeting"). The bus fight sequence is a perfect example of the proairetic code, where each action (a punch, a kick, a bus maneuver) triggers the next and progressively raises the stakes.

The Cultural Code (REF.): This code refers to shared knowledge or references outside the film text itself, which are assumed to be understood by the audience. The film heavily uses cultural codes, such as references to Chinese traditions (the Qingming tomb-sweeping festival), mythology (Dragons, Dijiang, Qilin), philosophy (the balance of Yin and Yang), and various martial arts styles (Wing Chun, Tai Chi, etc.).

A comprehensive semiotic analysis of *Shang-Chi* demands an integration of Barthes's "orders of signification" model with his "five narrative codes." The first model is effective for deconstructing the meaning of key symbols (like the Rings or the pendant) in a static state. However, the second model is essential for analyzing how these symbols function dynamically within the ongoing narrative to create meaning, tension, and thematic depth. Thus, this research will propose a hybrid Barthesian model: using denotation, connotation, and myth to analyze key signifiers, and using the five codes to analyze how these signifiers are woven into the narrative fabric to structure the central conflict between *Shang-Chi* and Wenwu. This integrated approach will yield a more dynamic and complete semiotic reading.

2.3 Extrinsic Approach: Literary Psychology

After dissecting how the film creates meaning through signs (semiotics), the approach of literary psychology is used to analyze *why* the characters act the way they do. This extrinsic approach provides the tools to delve into the characters' internal worlds, their subconscious motivations, and the psychological wounds underlying their actions. This analysis will complement the semiotic reading by linking the film's symbols to recognizable human psychology.

2.3.1 Literary Psychology in Film Studies

Literary psychology is an interdisciplinary approach that applies psychological theories to analyze

literary works, including film. This approach believes that literary works, as products of the human imagination, reflect psychic processes and activities. In film studies, this approach is used to explore character motivations, internal states, inner conflicts, and their psychological development. Characters in films are treated as case studies, where their actions, dialogue, and relationships are analyzed to uncover the underlying psychological dynamics.

2.3.2 Trauma and Grief as Catalysts: An Analysis of Wenwu through the Kübler-Ross Model

Wenwu's entire character arc can be understood as a manifestation of unresolved and pathological grief. The death of his wife, Ying Li, is the triggering trauma that shapes all his actions throughout the film. To analyze his psychological condition, the Five Stages of Grief model, popularized by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, will be used. It is important to note that this model is not applied as a rigid linear path but as a heuristic framework a set of categories for understanding complex emotional and behavioral patterns, in line with Kübler-Ross's original intent.

Denial: This is the core of Wenwu's delusion. He fundamentally rejects the reality of his wife's death. The key phrase driving his actions is the belief that, "She is not dead, she is trapped behind the gate." This denial is not just a momentary disbelief but an alternative reality he has constructed to protect himself from the unbearable pain of loss.

Anger: When painful reality cannot be completely avoided, the emotion manifests as anger. Wenwu's anger is not directed at the cause of his wife's death but is vented on those closest to him: his children. He trains Shang-Chi brutally, turning him into a killing machine, and emotionally neglects Xialing. All of this is an expression of displaced anger over his powerlessness to save Ying Li.

Bargaining: This stage involves the hope that an individual can avoid the cause of grief through some form of negotiation. Wenwu's entire plan to attack Ta Lo is an extreme form of bargaining. He makes an imaginary pact with the evil entity he mistakes for his wife's spirit: "If I destroy Ta Lo and open the gate, I will get her back." This is a bargain with fate, based on magical thinking to regain control over his life.

Depression: This stage is characterized by deep sadness, despair, and withdrawal. This period occurs after Ying Li's death, where Wenwu reverts to his Ten Rings warlord persona. He withdraws emotionally from his children, creating a void in the family. Power and conquest become a way to fill the emptiness left by his grief.

Acceptance: Acceptance is the stage where the individual embraces the inevitable reality. Wenwu only reaches a form of acceptance in his final moments. When he realizes that the voice calling him is a monster and not his wife, his delusion shatters. In that tragic moment of enlightenment, he accepts his wife's death and his own impending death. He then sacrifices himself to save Shang-Chi and bequeaths the Rings to him, an act that signifies the final release from his pathological grief.

2.3.3 Psychoanalytic Analysis: The Dynamics of Id, Ego, and Superego

To further sharpen the psychological analysis, Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework—Id, Ego, and Superego—will be applied to dissect the internal conflict of the father and son. This approach will show how their psychological structures are not only different but also in direct opposition, which is the source of the film's main conflict.

Wenwu: Grief-Fuelled Domination

Wenwu's unresolved grief fuels his Id, the part of the personality containing psychic energy and primitive instincts that demand immediate gratification. Wenwu's Id manifests as an irrational and unstoppable desire to reclaim his wife by any means, ignoring reality and consequences. His Ego, which serves as a mediator with reality, manifests in his powerful and pragmatic warlord persona. It is this Ego that devises the strategic plan to attack Ta Lo, a "realistic" way within his delusional framework to satisfy the Id's demands. Meanwhile, Wenwu's Superego—the conscience and moral values formed during his life with Ying Li—is completely suppressed and paralyzed by the force of his Id. This Superego only re-emerges in his final moments when he chooses sacrifice (a moral act) over power (an Id-driven act).

Shang-Chi: The Ego's Struggle For Self-Integration Shang-Chi's psychological structure is a direct reflection of the trauma inflicted by his father. His Id contains all his repressed emotions: the trauma of witnessing violence, anger at his father, guilt for running away, and the desire to escape responsibility. To cope with this turbulent Id, his Ego creates the "Shaun" persona. "Shaun" is a sophisticated defense mechanism, a carefully constructed identity to mediate between the Id's impulse to flee and the demands of the real world in San Francisco. Shang-Chi's Superego is a battlefield between two conflicting value systems: his mother's teachings (harmony, protection, balance) and his father's teachings (power, violence, domination). His entire narrative journey is a process in which his Ego struggles to reconcile these warring parts, rejecting his father's superego and internalizing his mother's to form a new, integrated, and whole identity.

The psychological dynamics of Wenwu and Shang-Chi are not merely parallel but are causally and dialectically connected. Wenwu's psychological collapse, driven by grief, directly creates Shang-Chi's psychological trauma. Thus, the father-son conflict in the film is an external manifestation of their interconnected psychological pathologies. It is impossible to understand Shang-Chi's psychology without first understanding Wenwu's, and Wenwu's psychology is fundamentally rooted in the failure to process grief. This cause-and-effect relationship provides strong psychological depth to the film's central conflict.

2.4 Relevant Previous Research

This section aims to position this research within the existing landscape of academic and critical discussions about the film *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. By reviewing previous studies focusing on the character analysis of Shang-Chi and Wenwu,

this section will demonstrate a deep understanding of the field of study while also identifying the research gap that this thesis will fill.

To provide a structured overview, here is a summary of relevant previous research in table form.

No.	Focus of Analysis	Methodology/Theoretical Framework	Key Findings
1	Cultural representation, mythology, and critique of exoticism.	Cultural Semiotics (Barthes), Critical Race Theory.	The film represents Chinese myths and traditions but is also criticized for evoking "exotic East" fantasies.
2	Shang-Chi's character arc, identity, and hero's journey.	Cultural Identity Theory, Joseph Campbell's Monomyth, Character Analysis.	Shang-Chi's journey follows the hero archetype, involving a struggle with the past and the development of a hybrid identity.
3	Wenwu's character complexity, motivation, and role as a tragic antagonist.	Character Analysis, Narrative Theory, Psychological Reading.	Wenwu is a compelling and sympathetic villain driven by grief, who often overshadows the hero and drives the plot.
4	Linguistic adaptation of Shang-Chi as a multilingual immigrant.	Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).	Shang-Chi uses linguistic convergence to adapt to his American social context, reflecting his desire for a "normal" life.

2.4.1 Cultural Analysis and Representation in Shang-Chi

A significant amount of research on *Shang-Chi* focuses on its cultural aspects. These studies analyze the film's engagement with Chinese and Chinese-American culture. On one hand, the film

is praised for its representation of various cultural elements, such as the use of mythology (the Great Protector Dragon, Dijiang), religious traditions (the Qingming festival), and authentic martial arts (Wing Chun, Tai Chi). This representation is seen as a step forward in showcasing Asian culture on a global stage. However, on the other hand, significant criticism has emerged. Some analysts argue that by placing most of the magical and traditional elements in an "other world" like Ta Lo, the film risks reinforcing exotic stereotypes of the "East" as a magical, ancient world separate from modernity.

2.4.2 Character Analysis of Shang-Chi: Hero's Journey and Identity

Research focusing on the protagonist often frames his character arc using narratological and psychological frameworks. A common approach is to use Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or the "Hero's Journey," to map Shang-Chi's transformation from an ordinary individual into a hero. Other analyses delve into his psychological condition, identifying that his character is rooted in trauma, guilt, and an attempt to escape his father's shadow. Furthermore, many studies highlight his development in forming a hybrid cultural identity, where he eventually embraces both his Chinese heritage and his American experience. These studies consistently establish Shang-Chi as a character defined by his struggle to reconcile the past with the present.

2.4.3 Character Analysis of Wenwu: The Complexity of a Tragic Antagonist

The character of Wenwu has attracted significant critical attention, often more than the protagonist himself. The existing literature tends to move beyond viewing Wenwu as a one-dimensional villain. Instead, he is analyzed as a complex tragic antagonist, with understandable and sympathetic motivations rooted in deep love and grief over the loss of his wife. A particularly important and recurring point of analysis is the argument that Wenwu, with his active goal (resurrecting his wife) and strong charisma, serves as the primary engine of the film's plot. Some critics even argue that he is the most dynamic and compelling character, to the point of overshadowing the main character whose name is in the film's title.

2.4.4 Research Position: Synthesis and Research Gap

A synthesis of previous research reveals a clear pattern: analyses of culture, narrative, Shang-Chi's heroism, and Wenwu's tragic villainy are often conducted as separate investigations. Furthermore, there is an unresolved critical tension in the literature: on one hand, studies that position Shang-Chi as a successful hero in his journey; on the other, analyses that consider him a weak hero overshadowed by his far more compelling antagonist.

This tension arises because the true center of the film is not either character individually, but the relationship between them. The father-son dynamic is the source of the plot, the core of the conflict, and the vessel for the film's deepest themes. Therefore, a significant research gap lies in the lack of an integrated analysis that examines this dynamic simultaneously from multiple

theoretical perspectives.

This research aims to fill that gap. The main argument proposed is that the most productive way to understand *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is to analyze the father-son relationship as the film's ideological and emotional core. By combining **semiotic analysis** (to decode how their conflict is signified through symbols like the Rings, the pendant, color, and movement) with **psychoanalytic analysis** (to understand the psychological reasons behind their conflict, rooted in grief and trauma), this research will offer a new, holistic interpretation. This approach will move beyond the debate over who the "real" protagonist is and instead ask a more fundamental question: "How does this father-son dyad collectively produce the film's overall meaning?" Thus, this research will make an original contribution by synthesizing previously fragmented frameworks to produce a more complete and nuanced understanding.

