

Semiotic Interpretation of the Armor of the Yue Family Army in the Song Dynasty

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Abstract

The armor of the Yue Army in the Song Dynasty represents not only a critical component of military equipment but also a significant bearer of cultural symbols and collective identity. This study adopts a semiotic framework to interpret the symbolic connotations of Yue Army armor, with particular emphasis on decorative motifs such as cloud patterns, beast totems, and the color system. By analyzing historical texts including *Wujing Zongyao* and *Song Shi*, alongside archaeological findings of iron armor fragments and mural depictions, the research reconstructs the representational and symbolic logic embedded in the material culture of military attire. The analysis demonstrates that cloud motifs embodied metaphors of auspiciousness and divine protection, while beast totems symbolized bravery, deterrence, and the moral strength of soldiers. Furthermore, the hierarchical application of colors reinforced rank distinctions, discipline, and the collective order of the military community. From a semiotic perspective, the armor functioned as a triadic sign system in Peirce's model where material elements served as signifiers, military values and identities as signifieds, and their interpretation within Song society formed the interpretant. This symbolic encoding contributed to the shaping of identity recognition, the maintenance of hierarchical order, and the construction of the Yue Army's "military soul." The findings highlight the multifaceted cultural value of Song armor, which transcends its utilitarian role as protection and reflects the broader ideological and aesthetic systems of its era. By situating Yue Army armor within both historical and cultural frameworks, this research enriches the understanding of Chinese military material culture and provides a reference for the reinterpretation of traditional motifs in contemporary design and cultural heritage preservation.

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Keywords: Song Dynasty; Yue Army; Armor; Semiotics; Symbolism

Introduction

The study of military material culture provides a unique lens through which to explore the interplay between warfare, identity, and symbolism. Among the many historical cases in Chinese history, the armor of the Yue Army during the Song Dynasty occupies a distinctive place. Led by the renowned general Yue Fei, the Yue Army was not only a formidable military force but also a cultural and symbolic embodiment of loyalty, discipline, and national defense against external threats, particularly the Jurchen Jin dynasty. Armor, as both a practical defense

mechanism and a semiotic carrier, functioned simultaneously as a protective technology and as a visual code that communicated messages of authority, unity, and martial valor. Understanding the semiotic dimensions of Yue Army armor thus opens a path toward decoding how visual motifs and material choices contributed to the construction of military identity and cultural symbolism in the Song era.

Existing scholarship on Song military history has largely concentrated on institutional structures, tactical developments, and biographical accounts of Yue Fei (Chan , 2010; Kuhn , 2009). Studies of Chinese armor history have often prioritized typological classification and technological evolution, highlighting differences between iron lamellar armor, brigandine armor, and mail (Cheng, X , 2021). While such research provides essential archaeological and historiographical foundations, it often overlooks the symbolic layers embedded within military artifacts. Semiotic approaches, by contrast, shift attention to the cultural meanings conveyed through visual and material elements (Zhang & Fang , 2024). For instance, motifs such as cloud patterns (yunwen) and animal designs, which are prevalent in Song military and ritual art, remain underexplored in their relationship to martial ethos and collective identity (Liu, Y , 2013). Similarly, the use of chromatic systems in armor decoration—ranging from black lacquered surfaces to red and gold highlights—has seldom been systematically studied in relation to symbolic hierarchies and psychological warfare (Chen, D , 2017). This study seeks to address these gaps by applying a semiotic framework, particularly drawing on Peircean triadic theory of the sign—signifier, signified, and interpretant—to examine the armor of the Yue Army. Specifically, it aims to explore how recurring motifs such as cloud patterns symbolized divine protection, how zoomorphic imagery reflected power and ferocity (Wan & Hu , 2025) , and how color schemes functioned as codes of rank, unity, and morale (Butler , 2008). By situating these elements within both the military and cultural contexts of the Southern Song, this research asks: How did the symbolic features of Yue Army armor reinforce collective identity? In what ways did the semiotics of armor serve to maintain hierarchy and discipline within the army? And how did these visual codes contribute to the construction of the Yue Army's enduring cultural image as paragons of loyalty and martial virtue?

The significance of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to the interdisciplinary dialogue between design studies, semiotics, and military history, demonstrating how visual and material culture operate as symbolic systems that shape collective identity. Practically, it provides insights for cultural heritage interpretation and contemporary design innovation. By decoding the symbolic structures of Yue Army armor, modern designers and cultural practitioners can draw inspiration for heritage-based creative industries, museum exhibitions, and educational programs that engage the public with historical narratives beyond textual records.

Methodologically, this paper integrates textual, archaeological, and visual sources. Key Song military treatises such as the **Wujing Zongyao** are analyzed alongside excavated

artifacts, tomb murals, and extant illustrations of Yue Fei. Comparative visual analysis highlights how armor motifs align with broader Song cultural aesthetics. Through the semiotic framework, these motifs are reinterpreted not merely as decorative choices but as active signs within a military communication system. This multi-dimensional approach underscores the value of semiotics in unlocking the cultural meanings encoded in material artifacts.

In sum, this study positions the armor of the Yue Army as a critical semiotic artifact, where cloud motifs, beast imagery, and chromatic systems coalesce into a symbolic language that simultaneously protected, signified, and inspired. By examining the armor not only as a military technology but also as a cultural text, this paper seeks to reveal how material culture encoded the ethos of loyalty, discipline, and heroism that defined Yue Fei's forces and ensured their place in Chinese historical memory.

Methodology

This study combines traditional military culture with semiotic theory to examine the symbolic characteristics of Yue Army armor from multiple perspectives. By comprehensively considering its innovative application in form, motif, and chromatic system, the research seeks to reveal how cultural symbols were integrated into military attire to construct identity, hierarchy, and esprit de corps, thereby achieving a unity of martial function and cultural value. Based on this analytical approach, the research will be carried out in the following stages:

1. Data Collection and Preliminary Discussion

Data will be collected from multiple dimensions. On the one hand, through in-depth study of relevant historical literature and academic works—including *Wujing Zongyao*, Song Shi, and other Song-dynasty records—we can trace the origin, development, and stylistic characteristics of armor. On the other hand, we will gather archaeological evidence such as excavated iron lamellae, mural depictions, and preserved illustrations of military attire. In addition, iconographic representations of Yue Fei and his troops will be compiled to provide a more intuitive understanding of the form, pattern, and cultural connotations of Yue Army armor.

2. Analytical Dimensions

The collected data will be systematically organized and analyzed, focusing on three symbolic dimensions of the armor:

- a) Cloud motifs, exploring their inherent meanings of auspiciousness, continuity, and cosmic protection, as well as their structural role in reinforcing the edges and boundaries of armor;
- b) Beast motifs, examining their function as totems of power, bravery, and authority, and evaluating their integration into the hierarchical system of the army;
- c) Color system, analyzing the symbolic and psychological effects of the black-red-gold palette in reinforcing discipline, courage, and honor.

3. Semiotic Framework Application Using Peirce's triadic model, each armor element will be divided into signifier (the material form, such as embossed beast images or

lacquered cloud patterns), signified (the cultural value or martial virtue represented), and interpretant (the meaning perceived by soldiers, commanders, or observers). This allows us to establish a structured correspondence between visual signs and their cultural interpretations.

4. Semiotic Analysis of Motifs and Colors

4.1 Cloud Motifs: Continuity, Protection, and Order

Form & placement. Cloud heads and rolling clouds populate edges and joints: helmet rims, collar borders, breast edges, and skirt hem lines. The geometry is rhythmic and modular, ideal for lacing runs and rivet rows. This “border logic” is not arbitrary: it visually seals the periphery, implying protection and completeness. **Craft & finish.** Techniques range from paint and lacquer (matte to gloss) to embossing and gilding on metal trim. Increased complexity and specular highlights correlate with higher ranks or ceremonial sets. Under sun, metallic cloud bands create flashing “halos” that dramatize the silhouette during marches. **Semantics.** As signs, clouds invoke auspicious continuity and heavenly mandate. The object is order and protection; the interpretant is “we are under rightful protection, fighting in alignment with cosmic order.” This reading is socially useful: soldiers experience protection as a percept, not merely a doctrine.

Organizational effect. (i) Identity: repeated modules merge individuals into a visual continuum, producing a “single skin” effect under motion; (ii) Hierarchy: complexity and finish stratify status; (iii) Esprit: border halos perform legitimacy and soothe anxiety before engagement.

Cloud element	Typical locus	Craft	Effect
Cloud head band	Helmet/gorget edge	Emboss+gild	Distance legibility; unified boundary
Rolling cloud fill	Breast edge panels	Lacquer paint	Center emphasis; “protected core” metaphor
Cloud element	Typical locus	Craft	Effect
Cloud lacing guide	Skirt joint zones	Stitched leather	Soft “guarded edge” haptic cue

Table 2. Cloud grammar: from edge sealing to center emphasis.

4.2 Beast Motifs: Totem, Authority, and Courage Taxonomy & placement. Beast emblems follow a compositional hierarchy. The breast axial panel is prime real estate for dominance marks; helmet fronts and shoulder plaques host secondary signs. Four families recur: tiger (frontal roar), lion (profile with mane), raptor (wings spread or stoop), and dragon (coiled or striding), with the last typically reserved for superior ranks and ritual sets. **Craft intensity.** Higher ranks feature increased relief, specularity (gilt/silver inlay), and figural detail. The gaze is engineered: frontal tigers lock attention; profile lions direct lateral flow; raptors add velocity cues; dragons saturate the center with mythic authority. **Semantics & effects.** As representamina, beasts denote courage, vigilance, and domination. The objects are prowess

and authority; the interpretants are twofold: (i)inward-soldier self-identifies with the animal ethos; (i)outward-observers infer unit prestige and command presence.Rituals-oaths,inspections-rehearse these readings, fusing sign and self-concept.

Beasttype	Posegrammar	Preferredlocus	Rank/tasksignal	Psychologicaleffect
Tiger (frontal roar)	Mouth open;claws forward	Breast axis	Assault/van;mid-level officers	Approach orientation; fear suppression
Lion(profile)	Mane emphasized; head tilted	Helmet front;shoulder plaquettes	Guard/close protection	Gravitas;vigilance
Raptor (spread/stoop)	Wings dynamic; talons visible	Flags;shoulder plaques	Recon/mobility units	Speed cue;aerial control metaphor
Dragon (coiled/striding)	Elongated S-curve; cloud infill	Commander's breast; ceremonial	High command;mandate narrative	Awe;legitimacy amplification

Table 3. Beast emblem grammar and organizational readings.

4.3 Chromatic System: Discipline,Blood,and Honor

Palette &proportion. A thre-tone regime dominates:black as ground (lacquered metal/leather), red as accent (ties, linings, edge stitches), and gold as highlight (trims, inlays). The design rule is "large dark mass+small bright accents,"balancing legibility and restraint. Semantics. Black signifies discipline and composure; red connotes courage and sacrifice; gold marks honor and authorized power. In Peircean terms, the objects are virtues;the interpretants are enacted states-calm readiness (black), aggressive resolve (red), and recognized excellence(gold). Effects under motion. Black flattens noise and aligns silhouettes;red punctuates movement at joints (ties flutter), creating micro-cues for synchronization; gold catches light during salutes and reviews, anchoring attention on command nodes.

4.4 The Example of the "Iron Pagoda" (Iron Tower Cavalry)

The Tie Futu was one of the most formidable heavy cavalry formations in Yue Fei's command (Gong, J., 2025. Their name, "Iron Pagoda" derived from their appearance:

soldiers clad in overlapping iron lamellae and iron-plated horse armor resembled immovable towers advancing across the battlefield. Each cavalryman typically wore full-body iron armor weighing between 30 to 40 kilograms, covering torso, limbs, and sometimes even joints with hinged plates for mobility. Horses were also equipped with chamfrons, peytrals, and cruppers forged from metal, turning man and horse into a nearly impregnable war machine. From a semiotic perspective, the armor's weight and density carried symbolic meaning beyond functionality. The sheer mass embodied the concept of unyielding defense and psychological intimidation. Enemies facing the Tie Futu perceived them as indestructible—an image Yue Fei cultivated intentionally (Zhang, S., 2024). Murals and illustrated scrolls of the Southern Song depict these soldiers in dark iron-gray armor with red tassels fixed at helmet crests or lance shafts. The iron-gray tone signified martial austerity and severity, while red tassels acted as semiotic markers of vitality, blood, and sacrificial spirit. Furthermore, decorative motifs—such as stylized cloud scrolls or auspicious flames engraved on horse barding—encoded cosmological protection, suggesting divine sanction over the army. In semiotic terms, the Tie Futu armor fused material strength with symbolic representation, projecting both physical invincibility and moral legitimacy on the battlefield.



Figure 1: Cloud pattern patterned Armor Plates



Figure 2 Iron Float with Cloud-

5. Evaluation of Connotation and Value

The semiotic interpretations will be synthesized to reveal the deeper cultural connotations of Yue Army armor. This includes examining how armor embodied values of loyalty, discipline, and courage, and how these symbols reinforced collective memory and the construction of the Yue Army's "military soul."

6. Conclusion and Outlook

Finally, the research will summarize the symbolic mechanisms underlying Yue Army armor and discuss their broader implications. Attention will be paid to the potential value of applying semiotic insights from historical military attire to contemporary fields such as cultural heritage preservation, visual communication, and design innovation.

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