



FACIAL CHARACTER SYMBOLS IN MALANGAN INDONESIAN MASKED PERFORMANCES AND VIETNAMESE HAT BOI

Tran Thanh Vy¹, Daroe Iswatiningsih², Nguyen Thi Thu Hang³

^{1,2} Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia

³Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Vietnam

Email: tranthanhvy@webmail.umm.ac.id

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Abstract

This research analyzes facial character symbols in the Malangan Masked Performances in Indonesia and Hat Boi Vietnam through Roland Barthes' semiotics approach. This research aims to identify the constituent facial iconography of the characters, decode their semiotic dimensions across Roland Barthes' triad of denotation, connotation, and myth, and comparatively analyze the characterization paradigms within both theatrical traditions. This study uses descriptive-comparative qualitative methods using literature review techniques. Data was obtained from literature, visual documentation, and previous studies containing information about colors, face shape, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, beard, and supporting ornaments. The research results show that the Malangan Mask Puppet builds character through a structured physical mask with an emphasis on carvings, facial shapes, colors and ornaments such as urna, horn, jamang and sumping. Hat Boi builds character through direct makeup with more flexible color coding, eye shapes, eyebrows, and beard. At the mythical level, the Wayang Topeng Malangan displays the ideal of a Javanese man who is pious, orderly and balanced, while Hát Bội emphasizes the moral opposition between loyalty - hypocrisy, goodness - evil and straight - heresy in Vietnamese tradition.

Keywords: *facial character symbols; Roland Barthes' semiotics; malangan masked wayang; Hát Bội; comparative study*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional performing arts are cultural heritage inherited from ancestors that embody human values and serve both aesthetic and symbolic functions within society (Iswatiningsih, 2019; Sujarno et al., 2003,). In traditional performances, elements such as costumes, movements, music, and characters function as a system of signs that generate cultural meaning (Sahid, 2013; Trisakti, 2015). Among these elements, the face occupies a crucial position in character construction because it serves as the primary medium through which audiences recognise and interpret the characters being portrayed (Beato, 2022).

Al-Qutbi (2024) explains that the face is the “title” of human identity because it serves as the central focus of the primary senses. Thus, facial expressions and structures reflect an individual’s inner dynamics. This view aligns with Gabriele (as cited in Beato, 2022), who emphasises that the face cannot be understood as purely natural but rather as something that has undergone processes of culturalisation and semiosis. Therefore, in performing arts, the face is always constructed through a complex system of signs. In performance contexts, facial makeup and masks function as the primary visual media for character construction (Tseng & Lin, 2013). Masks are facial coverings used to represent specific characters (Qingping, 2022; Suaib et al., 2025; Nurhikmah et al., 2025), while facial makeup serves a similar function in performances that do not use masks (Pratamawati, 2016). Both contain visual elements such as colours, lines, and shapes that enable audiences to understand a character’s identity, status, and personality traits (Medvedev, as cited in Shmagalo & Xian, 2024).

In Indonesia, Wayang Topeng Malangan is a traditional performing art from East Java that uses masks as the primary medium of character representation (Wibowo et al., 2019). The stories performed are generally derived from the Panji cycle and are conveyed through narration and dialogue by the puppeteer (dalang) (Kamal, 2008). The Malangan masks are structured as a symbolic system through classifications of colour, form, and character types such as gods (Dewa), kings (Raja), heroic figures (Gagahan), refined characters (Alusan), princesses (Putri), and comic servants (Punakawan) (Murgiyanto & Murnadi, 1980). Psychologically, characters are also categorised as protagonists, antagonists, servants, and supporting figures (Andreas et al., 2016). The analysis demonstrates that the masked face functions as a sign system that constructs character identity both visually and symbolically. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, Hát Bội is a traditional theatrical form that has developed into a highly stylised and symbolic performance tradition (Lâm, 2021; Vân, 2023). Unlike Wayang Topeng Malangan, Hát Bội employs direct facial painting that resembles masks to construct characters. Characters in Hát Bội are classified into *đào*, *kép*, *tướng*, *lão*, *ninh*, *mụ*, and *hề*, each possessing distinct visual features and personality traits (Huế, 2008; Lộc, 1998; Nhật Hạ, 2023; Vy, 2025). Each category is expressed through specific colours, lines, and makeup patterns, enabling audiences to immediately recognise the character’s role in the narrative.

Based on the above explanation, it can be understood that Wayang Topeng Malangan constructs facial representation through physical masks, whereas Hát Bội represents the face through makeup. Although differing in visual form, both traditions share the same function, namely using the face as the primary medium for character construction. This difference in medium indicates distinct cultural systems of meaning within each tradition. In the context of globalisation, intercultural interaction has become increasingly intensive, making the understanding of symbolic systems more important. According to H. B. Lê (2015), the meaning of a sign is shaped by cultural context and interpreted by its community of users. Lotman (2015) further asserts that culture is a system of signs and symbols, in which symbols function as fundamental units of cultural meaning. Therefore, the study of facial symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội is essential to understand how cultures construct visual representations of character. Previous studies indicate that research on Wayang Topeng Malangan has largely focused on mask form, colour, and symbolic meaning (Astrini et al., 2013), as well as comparisons with other traditions such as *Biàn Liǎn* (Amanda & Miranti, 2026). Meanwhile, studies on Hát Bội emphasise facial makeup systems and character identity (Vân, 2023; Vy, 2025). Semiotic studies of other performance arts also indicate that sign-based approaches can

analyse visual elements (Renda et al., 2024; Cai et al., 2026). In addition, Roland Barthes' semiotic framework has proven effective in revealing denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings in various visual objects (Wibawa et al., 2024; Fajri et al., 2024; Martsidaun, 2025). However, comparative cross-cultural studies that specifically examine facial symbols between masks and makeup using Barthes' framework remain limited. Thus, a research gap exists in the absence of comparative studies analysing facial symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. Therefore, this study aims to analyse facial sign systems in both traditions and compare the construction of meaning at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth. This research is expected to contribute to the development of cultural semiotics, expand cross-cultural comparative perspectives, and support the preservation of traditional performing arts knowledge in Indonesia and Vietnam.

LITERATURE RIVIEW

Symbol

A symbol is a sign used to represent a particular meaning beyond its physical form. In cultural studies, symbols are understood as media through which societal values, ideologies, and social identities are communicated. Symbols function as forms of representation that evoke specific images or concepts in the human mind. Liungman argues that symbols possess meanings that extend beyond their visual forms because such meanings are collectively agreed upon within a particular culture (Hoàng, 2003).

Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

The semiotic approach seeks to understand the relationship between the signifier and the signified in the construction of meaning (Iswatiningsih & Fauzan, 2021). Building upon the ideas of Ferdinand de Saussure, Roland Barthes developed semiotics as the study of signs operating within cultural life (Barthes, 1968). According to Barthes (as cited in Kevinia et al., 2022), semiotics is the science of interpreting signs, in which language itself constitutes a system of signs carrying particular messages generated by society. Signs can manifest in various forms, including facial expressions and visual representations.

In Barthes' theory, meaning is produced through three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth (Barthes, 1968, pp. 89–92; 1977, pp. 18–19). Denotation refers to the literal or direct meaning that is visually observable, such as color, shape, and facial expression. Connotation refers to the secondary meaning that emerges through cultural associations, emotions, and particular values. Myth, meanwhile, constitutes a broader system of meaning associated with the ideologies and cultural beliefs of a society.

In addition, myth can be understood as a culturally constructed system of belief or meaning that functions to naturalize and reinforce dominant ideologies. Myth is a form of discourse or communication that transcends the boundaries of conventional language, encompassing visual and symbolic representations while often simplifying complex realities into seemingly natural and straightforward narratives. Barthes argues that myth is not an objective truth but rather an ideological construction that serves to maintain existing social structures and power relations (Barus et al., 2025).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive-comparative design using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. A qualitative approach was selected because the objects of analysis consist of visual signs and symbolic meanings embedded in the facial representations of characters in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Vietnamese Hát Bội (Fiantika et al., 2022). Meanwhile, a descriptive-comparative design was adopted to provide a detailed description of visual signs and to compare the similarities and differences in the symbolic systems embodied in the facial representations of both performance traditions (Sahir, 2021; Syahrizal & Jailani, 2023).

The objects of this study are character symbols manifested through facial configurations, namely the wooden masks used in Wayang Topeng Malangan and the direct facial makeup employed in Hát Bội. The units of analysis are divided into seven microfacial components: color, eyebrows, eyes, nose, mustache and beard, lips, and forehead ornaments. These categories serve as the basis for sign interpretation, ensuring that comparisons are conducted systematically across relevant visual elements, including features that do not always possess direct symbolic equivalents in both traditions.

The primary data for Wayang Topeng Malangan consist of 94 visual data units, including 76 images of mask characters documented by Rahayuningtyas et al. (2019) and 18 masks from the collection of Mpu Purwa Museum in Malang. Direct observation at the museum was conducted to verify the correspondence between visual representations in the images and the physical forms of the masks, particularly regarding details of color, eye shape, eyebrows, nose, lips, mustache and beard, and forehead ornaments. The primary data for Hát Bội consist of character facial makeup documentation obtained from V. Chiêu Lê (2008) and Hué (2008), comprising 66 visual characters represented in 97 images. All visual data were selected purposively based on visual clarity, completeness of facial elements, and relevance to the research focus.

Videos were utilized as secondary data to strengthen the interpretation process. These data consist of twelve YouTube videos collected between March 25 and May 1, 2026, including six videos of Wayang Topeng Malangan performances and six videos of Hát Bội performances. For Wayang Topeng Malangan, videos were purposively selected from performances that clearly displayed facial characteristics and were associated with the Panji narrative cycle. For Hát Bội, videos were selected from official performance recordings and makeup demonstrations featuring representative scenes and characters. These videos were used to verify visual readability, character representation, and the consistency of symbolic meanings identified in the static image data. Data validity was ensured through source triangulation by comparing image data, museum observations, videos, and relevant academic literature.

Data collection was carried out through documentation, visual observation, and systematic note-taking. Documentation techniques were employed to gather images, visual archives, books, journal articles, and academic sources relevant to Barthesian semiotics, facial symbolism, and performance traditions. Observation techniques were used to examine the visual elements of masks and facial makeup directly or through audiovisual media. Systematic note-taking was conducted to organize the data inventory according to the categories of analysis, enabling each visual sign to be interpreted consistently prior to the analytical process (Fiantika et al., 2022).

Data analysis began with the classification of data according to character categories, namely Deity (*Dewa*), King (*Raja*), Warrior (*Gagahan*), Refined Character (*Alusan*), Princess (*Putri*), and Clown-Servant (*Punakawan*) in Wayang Topeng

Malangan and *Kép, Túrông, Đào, Nịnh, and Lão* in Hát Bội. Subsequently, the visual elements of facial representation were inventoried according to the units of analysis to identify the most dominant characteristics within each character group. These elements were then examined at the denotative level, interpreted connotatively based on Javanese and Vietnamese cultural contexts, and analyzed at the level of myth to reveal the cultural values and ideologies naturalized through facial symbols.

In the comparative stage, the study examines the similarities and differences in denotative, connotative, and mythological meanings embedded within equivalent units of analysis across the two performance traditions. Consequently, visual elements that are strongly present in one tradition but do not possess a systematic counterpart in the other are still documented and categorized as having “no direct equivalent.”

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis indicate that facial character symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội are constructed through visual elements such as colour, facial shape, eyebrows, eyes, nose, lips, moustaches and beards, as well as forehead ornaments. In Wayang Topeng Malangan, colour and eye shape emerge as the most prominent indicators of character identity, whereas in Hát Bội, the composition of facial makeup colours, eyebrow shapes, and beard styles constitutes the most consistent elements of character construction. These findings demonstrate that although the two traditions employ different visual systems, both regard the face as the primary medium for constructing meaning. At the denotative level, these elements appear as visual components; at the connotative and mythic levels, they generate character images associated with bravery, loyalty, intelligence, authority, and supernatural power.

Facial Character Symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan

Malangan masks possess a highly detailed formal system characterised by a considerable degree of standardisation. In Wayang Topeng Malangan performances, characters are classified into nine principal categories based on specific character typologies. Each category represents distinct personality traits and character identities (Wibowo, as cited in Arifin, 2017).

Character identities in Wayang Topeng Malangan are constructed through a visual signification system embedded within each mask. This system consists of several primary visual elements, including colour, eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth, moustache, beard, and forehead features. In addition, there are supporting visual elements such as the *urna*, forehead ornaments, *jamang* (crown-like head ornaments), *cula* (horn-like ornaments), *sumping* (ear ornaments), and *isen-isen* (decorative motifs). These elements can be classified into several symbolic categories, namely floral ornaments, faunal ornaments, and social-status ornaments. Together, these visual components form an integrated visual structure that functions as a signifier of character identity (Melany, 2016).



Figure 1. Malangan Wayang Masks at Mpu Purwa Museum
Source: Researcher's documentation, photographed on April 28, 2026.

Masks in Wayang Topeng Malangan can be understood as carved facial representations designed to portray character traits and identities while simultaneously functioning as symbols that convey meanings beyond their visual appearance. At the denotative level, Malangan masks are recognized through their distinctive physical characteristics. In general, Malangan masks are oval-shaped, with slightly pointed and somewhat angular chins (Melany, 2016), while the outer contours of the mask are integrated with the lower jaw section (Murgiyanto & Murnadi, 1980). This facial structure serves as the visual foundation upon which other elements create distinctions among character types. As such, it constitutes a standardized aesthetic pattern within the Wayang Topeng Malangan tradition.

In terms of color, Wayang Topeng Malangan employs various primary pigments, including white, red, green, yellow, gold, black, blue, gray, and pink. At the denotative level, these colors function as visual elements directly applied to the mask surface. Based on the analysis of 63 character masks, white appears predominantly among *Patih* (ministerial) characters, whereas red is more frequently associated with *Gagahan* and *Buto* (warrior and giant) characters. Green, yellow, black, and pink occur less frequently and are primarily found among *Alusan* (refined), royal, and *Punakawan* (clown-servant) characters. At the connotative level, this color system operates as a cultural code that constructs character identity. White is associated with purity and loyalty; red with courage and a strong temperament; yellow with cheerfulness; green with peace and fertility; black and blue with wisdom and steadfastness; gold with nobility; and pink with a combination of courage and loyalty (Rahayuningtyas et al., 2019).

With regard to the eyes, most Malangan masks feature relatively large eyes with a wide-open gaze resembling the *kedelen* eye type found in *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry). This eye form represents determination, mental strength, and steadfast dedication to personal principles. In addition, some masks display narrower and slightly downward-slanting eyes. This form resembles the *gabahan* eye type (rice-grain shaped) or *kelipan/pananggalan* eyes (half-closed eyes), which signify patience, composure, loyalty, and faithfulness. A third variant is characterized by fully rounded and prominently open eyes resembling the *telengan* type, distinguished by a glaring expression. This eye form is specifically designed for characters portrayed as fierce or villainous. At the same time, it conveys authority, power, and a strong sense of charisma. Furthermore, eyebrow shape can be regarded as one of the most essential visual elements in the construction of facial character identity. Eyebrow forms are created through stylizations of natural objects and specific forms, such as coconut fronds, lizard tongues,

curly hair, crescent moons, and rainbows. At the connotative level, each eyebrow type represents distinct character traits. *Blarak Sineret* eyebrows symbolize a wise and helpful knightly character, whereas *Kadal Melet* eyebrows represent bravery, decisiveness, and heroism. In contrast, *Kuwel* and *Blarak Sinegar's* eyebrows are generally associated with harshness, arrogance, and disruptive behavior. Meanwhile, *Nanggal Sepisan* and *Kluwung* eyebrows signify elegance, loyalty, cheerfulness, and trustworthiness.

The visual aspects of the mouth and teeth also exhibit considerable variation and function as important indicators of character identity through symbolic representation. Several lip types are rendered in a refined and proportionate manner, such as the *jambe sigar sak tangkep* lips, which resemble a split areca nut and symbolize reservedness, prudence, and the ability to keep secrets. Another example is the *delima mlethek* lip type, whose form resembles a pomegranate blossom in bloom and signifies friendliness, openness, and sociability. In contrast, lip types such as *Singo Barong* or *Singo Barong Mangap* are designed to resemble the wide-open mouth of a lion and generally carry connotations of greed, aggressiveness, and intense desire. Meanwhile, several antagonistic or *monstrous* (*buto*) characters are represented with sharp protruding fangs to reinforce impressions of ferocity and wildness.

In addition, the nose serves as an important marker of character identity. The *Bapangan* nose, characterized by its broader and larger shape, is associated with humorous, knightly, and talkative characters. The *Terong* nose, elongated and slightly pointed, symbolizes bravery, mischief, and evil tendencies. The *Wani Miring* or *Wali Miring* nose, whose shape resembles a knife blade, represents virtuous characters who are wise, supportive, and regarded as bearers of divine guidance. Meanwhile, the *Gandik'an* or *Mundu* nose, resembling a wrapped bundle, connotes cheerful, loyal, and faithful personalities. Certain types of mustaches and beards also play a significant role in character identification. The *Kucing Anjlok* mustache symbolizes a knightly figure who is humble, wise, and altruistic. By contrast, the *Njlaprang* mustache indicates determination and bravery while simultaneously suggesting arrogance and stubbornness. The *Udan Gerimis* beard symbolizes justice and honesty, whereas the *Brewok* beard conveys an impression of fierceness, rigidity, and cruelty.

The distinctive character of Malangan masks is also evident in their refined and deeply carved details, ranging from crown engravings featuring leaf or floral motifs to strands of hair symbolizing masculinity. Meanwhile, forehead ornamentation, known as *jamangan*, functions as an indicator of political and spiritual status. Decorations such as *Lung-Lungan* motifs or the *Garuda* symbol are generally reserved for characters of high rank. Furthermore, the sharp carving techniques applied to wrinkles, beards, and facial hair, such as the *Kucing Anjlok* style, reinforce the identity of Panji characters as embodiments of the cultural ideal (Murgiyanto & Murnadi, 1980).

Facial Character Symbols in Hát Bội

The traditional Vietnamese Hát Bội performance employs a symbolic system manifested through facial makeup that is strictly regulated by the arrangement of shapes, visual patterns, colours, and lines across various facial elements. Vân (2023) classifies Hát Bội facial makeup compositions into four principal visual principles: symmetrical composition, composition based on the two-thirds balance principle, thematic composition, and rhythmic composition. These four principles demonstrate that Hát Bội makeup is not constructed arbitrarily; rather, it follows specific visual conventions designed to establish character identity and personality with clarity. The arrangement of

facial makeup in Hát Bội functions as a structural framework for character construction. Through these compositional principles, combined with other elements such as colour and facial visual components, both the character identity and the moral essence of a role can be effectively expressed (Vân, 2023).



Figure 2. Hát Bội Art Theatre Performers

Source: Daibieunhandan, “Thường thức nghệ thuật hát bội qua ‘Hội show 2026’,” accessed May 21, 2026.

In terms of color, Hát Bội facial makeup employs a wide range of hues, including bright red, dark red, yellow, purple, sky blue, green, gray, silver, black, and white. These colors function as reflections of a character’s personality and moral disposition. Among them, the most dominant colors are red, black, and white. Through facial makeup, character identities are expressed according to the symbolic meanings associated with each color. Bright red signifies heroic figures characterized by courage, decisiveness, loyalty, and integrity. In contrast, dark red is used for antagonistic characters who possess extraordinary power and high social status but are also associated with anger, hedonism, or moral weakness.

Dull white, gray, or pale pink are employed to represent characters who are cunning, sycophantic, ungrateful, and cold-hearted. Faces painted with black-and-white patterns are typically assigned to heroic figures characterized by frankness, honesty, simplicity, and a quick temper. Meanwhile, faces featuring a combination of multiple colors and mottled patterns are generally reserved for wild characters, supernatural beings, or figures endowed with mystical powers. However, to identify characters more accurately, one must consider not just color but also eyebrow shape.

Eyebrow representation in Hát Bội exhibits considerable typological variation in both color and shape and plays a significant role in expressing character identity. In terms of color, white eyebrows symbolize gentleness and refinement. Coarse eyebrows combined with a large facial structure indicate villainous characters. Silk-shaped eyebrows or long, clearly defined dagger-shaped eyebrows symbolize heroic figures endowed with knightly virtues and a strong sense of justice. Conversely, tilapia-shaped eyebrows or swallow-shaped eyebrows, which appear short, broken, or unusually slanted,

indicate sycophantic, cunning, manipulative, and untrustworthy characters. Fire-shaped eyebrows marked by red lines signify a hot-tempered disposition (Khài, 1966, p. 113).

Regarding the eyes, performers generally emphasize the overall facial makeup while leaving the area near the eyelash line unpainted to preserve flexibility in emotional expression. The depiction of the eyeballs varies considerably, and eye shape serves as an indicator of both age and character identity. Egg-shaped eyes, characterized by an elongated oval form, reflect bravery, strength, and courage and are commonly associated with military commanders. Apple-shaped eyes, which are round but slightly flattened, signify characters who are mature, experienced, and composed. In addition, slanted eyes with upward-tilting eye lines represent young characters who are powerful, agile, and energetic. Conversely, empty eyes or eyes lacking internal detailing create an impression of old age, mystery, or ferocity and frequently appear in elderly generals or malevolent supernatural beings (Vân, 2023).

In the forehead area, Hát Bội also employs various symbolic typologies, including the *Tai Chi forehead*, *North Star forehead*, *Trigram-symbol forehead*, and specific motifs such as the tiger-character forehead marked with the Chinese character *Wáng* (王). These designs function as symbolic markers that reinforce character identity and personality. Several of these forms are used to distinguish characters according to social rank, spiritual power, and moral qualities. For example, the *Taichi forehead*, featuring a red-and-white circular pattern, symbolizes the balance of yin and yang, wisdom, and the capacity to uphold justice, as exemplified by the character *Bao Cong*. Meanwhile, an eye symbol placed on the forehead signifies a character endowed with the ability to perceive distant events, discern truth, and possess profound inner strength, such as the Grand Chancellor *Van Trong*. Thus, forehead ornaments in Hát Bội function as visual symbols that deepen characterization both dramatically and philosophically.

In the dimension of mouth shape, this feature also functions as a visual element that reinforces both facial expression and the fundamental nature of a character. Several mouth types, such as the *silver-bar mouth*, *tiger mouth*, *thunder god mouth*, *fire-curved mouth*, and *double-horn bean mouth*, are employed to create specific impressions. Mouth shapes that are sharp, open, or strongly curved generally emphasize characters who are harsh, fierce, aggressive, or full of vigor. In contrast, softer mouth forms support characters who are calm, gentle, and refined. In addition, facial hair constitutes another important symbolic feature and is generally represented through variations in both form and color. Three primary beard colors are employed: white, black, and reddish blond (referred to in traditional theatrical terminology as "*hung*"). The combination of beard color and shape functions as a semiotic sign that constructs character identity through facial representation in Hát Bội. The three-tuft and five-tuft beard types, available in black or silver, are divided into distinct strands. The three-tuft type consists of two strands positioned at the sides of the mouth and one on the chin, whereas the five-tuft type includes two additional strands at the temples or corners of the mouth and a long strand extending from the chin. These beard types symbolize dignified and authoritative figures, typically associated with the aristocratic class. The *black beard*, characterized by its short length, sparse growth, and stiff, upright strands, may appear in black, silver, or reddish-brown and signifies an irritable and fierce temperament. The *trimmed beard* (black, red, or reddish-brown) represents humorous, relaxed, and playful characters.

Meanwhile, a long black-stranded beard represents a sycophantic or opportunistic character. A long silver-stranded beard symbolizes an elderly yet heroic military commander. A long red or reddish-brown beard signifies traitors, sorcerers, or villainous

figures. A short three-tuft beard, in either black or silver, is commonly used for ordinary people, elderly fishermen, or woodcutters. A *rat beard* signifies a hasty and reckless personality. Finally, a *goatbeard* or painted beard is typically employed for comic roles, foolish scholars who fail examinations, or young noblemen known for their flirtatious behavior.

Comparison of Facial Character Symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội

From the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotics, visual elements can be interpreted at the denotative level as physical forms or visual arrangements, while at the connotative level these elements convey meanings related to character traits and identity. Furthermore, at the level of myth, facial symbols function as representations of ideological values and culturally constructed ideals of humanity within the societies that sustain these performance traditions.

Table 1
Comparison of Facial Character Symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội at the Denotative and Connotative Levels

Comparative Aspect	Wayang Topeng		<i>Hát Bội</i>	
	Denotation	Connoctation	Denotation	Connoctation
Red color	Bright red or blood red	Temperamental, wrathful, courageous, driven by ambition and boundless desire	Bright red	Heroic, decisive, loyal, and full of integrity
			Dark red	Extraordinary strength, authority, temperamental, hedonistic, or moral
White color	White	Refined, pure, calm, honest, and spiritually clean	Dull white	Sycophantic, cunning, and resentfu
			Natural face with white makeup and a slight pink tint	Royal officials, female roles, and dei
Black color	Dark black	Firm, strong, resilient, and wise	Black-and-white facial patterns	Integrity, heroism, and a temperamental disposition (warrior characte

Green color	Dark green or light green	Fertility, tranquility, firmness; symbolizes life, wisdom, unpredictability in strategy, perseverance, and protection of the nation	Dark green or light green	Characters associated with the worship of evil spirit
Yellow color	Light yellow, dark yellow, ivory yellow, gold	Cheerfulness, authority, and nobility	No direct equivalent	
Multicolored face	Generally dominated by a single primary color		Multicolored, striped, irregular, and eccentric facial makeup	Cruelty and barbarity
Eyebrow				
Eyebrows	<i>Blarak</i> <i>Sinegar</i>	Brave, assertive, arrogant, and disruptive	Thick sharply slanted eyebrows	Powerful, hot-tempered, and fierce
	<i>Blarak</i> <i>Sineret</i>	Heroic, brave, wise, authoritative, and helpful	Willow-leaf eyebrows	Gentle and refined
Long, Thing, Curved Eyebrows	<i>Nanggal</i> <i>Sepisan</i>	Elegant, loyal, helpful, cheerful, kind-hearted, and steadfast.		
	<i>Kluwung</i>	Trustworthy, cheerful, loyal, faithful, and wise		
	No direct equivalent		Sword-shaped eyebrows	Authoritative, powerful, and dominant
<i>Kadal Melet</i>				
Distinctive Eyebrow Types		Brave, firm, loyal, strong, and heroic	Dagger-shaped eyebrows	Decisive and strong
	<i>Kuwel</i>	Brave, steadfast, evil,	Tilapia- or swallow-	Cunning, aggressive,

		harsh, and disruptive	shaped eyebrows	rebellious, and untrust
		No direct equivalent	Upward-split eyebrows	Deceitful and fraudule
Eyes	<i>Gabahan eyes</i>	Patient and composed	No direct equivalent	
	<i>Kedelen eyes</i>	Determined, resolute, and strong-willed		
	<i>Dondongan eyes</i>	Rough and coarse		
	<i>Penanggalan eyes</i>	Loyal and faithful		
	<i>Kelipan eyes</i>	Calm and composed		
	<i>Telengan eyes</i>	Appearing cruel yet authoritative		
	No direct equivalent		Egg-shaped eyes	Heroic, powerful, and courageous
			Apple-shaped eyes	Experienced, mature, and calm
			Slanted eyes	Powerful and agile
			Empty eyes	Aged, mysterious, fierce, or uncan
Nose	<i>Pangotan nose</i>	Heroic, brave, wise, authoritative, helpful, and obedient	Not systematically classified	Nose shapes follow the overall makeup theme and character design to create visual unity and dramatic expression
	<i>Bapangan nose</i>	Humorous, heroic, and talkative		
	<i>Terong nose</i>	Brave, disruptive and evil		
	<i>Wani miring / Wali miring nose</i>	Wise, helpful, and bearer of divine messages		
	<i>Gandik'an / Mundu nose</i>	Cheerful, loyal, and faithful		

Mustache and beard	<i>Nunggeng mustache</i>	Brave, firm, and loyal	Three- or five-strand beard	Calm and authorit
	<i>Kucing Anjlok mustache</i>	Heroic, brave, helpful, wise, obedient, and authoritative	No direct equivalent	
	<i>Bundelan mustache</i>	Brave, firm, wise, and authoritative		
	<i>Njlaprang mustache</i>	Antagonistic: brave, steadfast, arrogant. Protagonistic: heroic, brave, wise, and authoritative		
	<i>Ulo Nglangi mustache</i>	Heroic, brave, and obedient		
	No direct equivalent		Long beard	Character identity marker based on beard color
		Corn beard	Hot-tempered and fierce	
		Rat mustache	Hasty and careles	
		Goat beard / painted beard	Comic charact	
Lips	<i>Jambe Sigar Sak Tangkep lips</i>	Discreet and cautious in action	Not systematically classified	Mouth and lip expressions are generally integrated into the overall facial makeup system
	<i>Delima Mlethek lips</i>	Friendly and approachable		
	<i>Delima Pecah lips</i>	Laughing expression		
	<i>Singo Barong lips</i>	Greedy		
	<i>Singo Barong</i>	Greedy or avaricious		
	<i>Mangap lips</i>			
	<i>Gecul lips</i>	Cheerful and humorous		
Upper Eyebrow Area				
Ornamen	Flora motifs: <i>Padma, melati,</i>	Purity, honor, and sincerity	No direct equivalent	

	<i>wijaya</i> <i>kusuma</i>		
	Animal motifs: <i>Garudha</i> <i>mungkur,</i> <i>gajah</i> <i>mungkur,</i> <i>nogo sekar</i>	Strength, anger, and aggressiveness	
	Social motifs: <i>Sodo,</i> <i>minangkara</i>	Friendliness and sociability	
Forehead	No direct equivalent	Various forehead typologies	Symbolic markers that reinforce character identity and persona

In terms of coloration, both Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội employ a diverse spectrum of colors, albeit with different levels of symbolic codification. In Wayang Topeng Malangan, white and red are the most dominant colors, while other hues such as green, yellow, black, blue, gold, gray, and pink appear only in specific character groups. These findings indicate that character construction in Wayang Topeng Malangan is primarily based on a limited set of dominant colors. In contrast, Hát Bội facial makeup exhibits a more systematic and structured color-coding system.

In both traditions, red functions as a marker of strong temperament, integrity, and heroism. However, in Hát Bội, the symbolic spectrum of red is more finely differentiated: bright red signifies heroic protagonists, whereas dark red denotes powerful figures with temperamental or antagonistic traits. White in Wayang Topeng symbolizes purity, honesty, and spiritual refinement. In Hát Bội, white is associated with elegant and dignified characters, while dull white refers to cunning, deceitful, or treacherous figures. Furthermore, Wayang Topeng employs blue and yellow as visual codes of authority and wisdom. By contrast, Hát Bội combines multiple colors to emphasize the identities of generals, demons, and supernatural beings.

With regard to facial composition, Wayang Topeng Malangan generally features an oval facial structure with a slightly pointed chin and clearly defined, stable contours. This visual modeling renders the face relatively static, functioning as a fixed framework for a particular character identity. In contrast, Vietnamese Hát Bội applies principles of symmetry and visual balance, resulting in facial representations that appear more theatrical, rhythmic, and expressive. From a Barthesian perspective, Wayang Topeng makes meaning by having a stable formal structure, while Hát Bội makes meaning by having a flexible and very noticeable system of facial makeup composition.

In the aspects of the eyes, eyebrows, and nose, Wayang Topeng Malangan tends to present forms that remain relatively close to natural facial features. At the denotative level, distinctions are primarily expressed through variations in size, curvature, sharpness, and proportion. At the connotative level, however, these forms reveal qualities such as

patience, loyalty, courage, wisdom, and steadfastness. In Hát Bội, different eye types create strong theatrical effects and facilitate immediate character recognition. The eyebrow system is likewise integrated into the visual code to strengthen character identification on stage. Consequently, Wayang Topeng emphasizes naturalistic impressions and subtle symbolic meanings, whereas Hát Bội foregrounds a more conventionalized and dramatically explicit visual language.

The differences between the two traditions become more pronounced in the representation of mustaches, beards, and lips. In Wayang Topeng Malangan, mustaches and beards constitute relatively structured elements within the character-signification system, with distinctions primarily manifested through variations in thickness, curvature, and arrangement. In Hát Bội, beards likewise function as character markers but display greater flexibility and diversity through differences in length, color, and growth patterns. At the connotative level, thin and curved mustaches such as *Ulo Nglangi* and *Kucing Anjlok* in Wayang Topeng Malangan are generally associated with wise, obedient, supportive, and authoritative figures. In contrast, Hát Bội often associates similar facial-hair forms with cunning, sycophantic, or reckless characters. Long, thick, and straight beards in both traditions signify loyal figures, military commanders, or members of the aristocracy. Nevertheless, thick mustaches and beards in Wayang Topeng Malangan, such as the *Nunggeng* and *Bundelan* types, are more strongly associated with firmness, heroism, and courage. In Hát Bội, similar beard forms emphasize a character's fierce temperament, aggressiveness, or extraordinary strength. Unlike Wayang Topeng Malangan, lip and mouth features in Hát Bội are not classified as rigorously; consequently, character interpretation relies more heavily on the combined effects of facial makeup and beard symbolism.

From the perspective of ornamentation and facial composition, Wayang Topeng presents a more complex sign system. At the denotative level, facial surfaces are frequently adorned with motifs derived from plants, animals, and social symbols. At the connotative level, these ornaments represent purity, strength, aggressiveness, and sociability. In Hát Bội, such ornamental elements are less prominent because meaning is primarily concentrated in facial colors, eyes, eyebrows, and facial hair. Most forehead ornaments function mainly as visual enhancers of character identity, although certain motifs, such as the *Taichi forehead* and the forehead featuring a central eye symbol, retain distinctive symbolic significance. Therefore, Wayang Topeng may be understood as exhibiting a more dispersed decorative and symbolic system, whereas Hát Bội emphasizes a facial sign system that is more direct, concentrated, and immediately recognizable.

Mythic Level in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội

Within Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, myth is understood as a second-order signification system that renders particular cultural values natural, self-evident, and beyond question (Jadou & Ghabra, 2021). At the mythic level, facial symbols in Wayang Topeng Malangan and Hát Bội represent broader cultural value systems. In Wayang Topeng Malangan, myth is constructed through a relatively fixed morphology of masks. The combination of colours, eye shapes, eyebrows, noses, lips, and head ornaments reproduces the Javanese worldview concerning the ideal human being, closely related to the concepts of *alus* (refined) and *kasar* (coarse) as well as Javanese cosmology (Zuhriyah, 2013).

Characters portrayed with white or light-green faces, small eyes, and delicate facial lines are culturally understood as representations of Alus' qualities, including wisdom, self-control, and harmony. Conversely, red faces, large eyes, and more pronounced facial features are associated with kasar characteristics, such as courage, ambition, strength, and assertiveness. Through the repeated use of these visual conventions, audiences come to accept that human character can be recognised and understood through specific facial signs. Consequently, the symbolic system of Malangan masks functions as a representation of the Javanese worldview concerning the balance between power, morality, and social harmony. At the mythic level, the facial makeup system of Hát Bôi reproduces cultural conceptions of moral and cosmological order that are regarded as natural within society. Through the use of colours, line patterns, and facial configurations grounded in the principles of Yin–Yang and Wu Xing (the Five Elements), characters are constructed as representations of the opposition between good and evil, order and chaos, and well as loyalty and betrayal (Vân, 2023). The findings indicate that Hát Bôi facial characterisation consistently links physical appearance to particular moral qualities.

Bright colours, especially bright red, not only identify heroic and loyal characters but also naturalise the notion that courage, loyalty, and moral virtue constitute the ideal qualities of leaders and warriors. Conversely, darker colours and complex facial patterns used for antagonistic characters reinforce the perception that cunning, evil, and destructive behaviours pose a threat to social order. Sharply angled eyebrows are associated with decisiveness, strong character, and authority, thereby reinforcing the ideal image of a warrior or leader. Meanwhile, upward-split eyebrows are specifically employed to represent traitorous characters, symbolising deceitful and destructive qualities that endanger social stability.

These myths are rooted in Vietnamese cultural values shaped by Confucian ethics, particularly the principles of loyalty, righteousness, moral justice, and social order. Within this framework, the visual system of Hát Bôi functions as a cultural mechanism that connects physical appearance with moral values, leading audiences to perceive these associations as natural and unquestionable. Thus, myth in both performance traditions operates as a cultural mechanism linking facial characteristics to broader social value systems. Wayang Topeng Malangan emphasises cosmological harmony and character typologies based on the alus–kasar dichotomy, whereas Hát Bôi highlights moral and social classifications grounded in Confucian ethics and the symbolism of Yin–Yang and Wu Xing. Therefore, facial symbols in both traditions serve not merely as aesthetic devices but also as instruments for reproducing ideologies and worldviews transmitted across generations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, Wayang Topeng Malangan constructs facial character symbols through a standardised mask system, with elements such as colour, eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, moustache, beard, and forehead ornaments serving as the main signifiers. At the denotative level, these elements form the visual identity of the character. At the connotative level, facial elements represent values such as loyalty, courage, wisdom, and steadfastness. At the level of myth, this system reflects the Javanese cosmological view of harmony between humans and the universe. In contrast, Hát Bôi constructs facial character symbols through conventional and theatrical makeup, using colour, eyebrows, eyes, and beard as the main signifiers, while the lips and forehead

function as supporting elements within the overall visual system of the face. All of these elements represent the identity, morality, and status of the character. The findings indicate that the face in Hát Bội reflects character traits, social hierarchy, and moral values influenced by Confucianism, Yin–Yang, and Wu Xing, or the Five Elements. Comparatively, both traditions employ the face as the primary medium for character construction and the transmission of cultural values. However, Wayang Topeng Malangan tends to present a more stable form of symbolism through masks, whereas Hát Bội demonstrates a more expressive, dynamic, and dramatic sign system through facial makeup. This difference indicates that, although the two traditions employ different visual mechanisms, both function to reproduce the values and worldview of their respective supporting communities. Theoretically, this study affirms the relevance of Roland Barthes' semiotics in revealing the relationship between visual signs, cultural meaning, and myth in traditional performing arts. Practically, this study supports cross-cultural studies and the preservation of traditional arts in Indonesia and Vietnam. However, this research remains limited to documentary visual data and secondary sources. Therefore, direct observation and interviews are necessary for further research to gain a more comprehensive understanding of facial symbols in both performance traditions.

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