

Analyzing the Application of Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements in Brand Packaging Design With Design Semiotics: A Case Study of Modern China Tea Shop

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This paper takes the Chinese-themed packaging of Modern China Tea Shop as the research object, analyzes the brand positioning and the embodiment of traditional Chinese cultural elements in its brand packaging design, and mainly analyzes the characteristics of traditional Chinese culture and symbols such as painting, text, and color in the packaging design. This paper explores the creative design and application of packaging with traditional Chinese elements in its brand touch points through the analysis method in culture code brand design and points out that the packaging design of Modern China Tea Shop is close to consumer psychology, and the Era Z has gradually become the main force of Chinese consumption. The brand accurately grasps the consumer psychology in the era of Gen-Z so as to formulate corresponding marketing strategies. Combined with the analysis of brand trends and consumers, it is clear that the packaging design of Chinese style is not a simple superposition of traditional elements and modern elements, but the integration and innovation of various cultural elements based on the current market and consumers. Furthermore, the paper summarizes the ways of traditional Chinese elements to create commercial value and provides a feasible reference for the brand positioning and packaging design of other tea products in China.

Keywords: Modern China Tea Shop, semiotics, traditional Chinese cultural elements, brand packaging design

Introduction

Brand design can not only help enterprises correctly grasp the brand direction, convey the brand attitude and positioning, but also allow consumers to quickly form correct and effective cognition and memory points for the brand. “Modern China Tea Shop” is a creative milk tea enterprise in Changsha, Hunan Province, which focuses on tea drinks and desserts. It is a domestic brand with a good development trend in China in recent years. It is especially popular among young people in the Age of Z, many of whom are willing to queue up for hours to buy the products of this brand.

In the sales strategy of its brand, in addition to the quality of its products, the taste and technology of tea make people want to buy, and the packaging style with strong Chinese characteristics plays a key role in attracting

consumers to buy. The brand uses traditional Chinese patterns, characters, and colors as design elements, perfectly integrates traditional Chinese culture with regional culture through text and images, and creates its own unique packaging style, which makes the brand highly recognizable in the similar product market in China and exerts certain influence on Chinese tea brands.

Modern China Tea Shop not only creates new Chinese fresh tea but also expands a series of cultural and creative products, which are very attractive. Many tourists to Changsha will buy products in the offline theme store as souvenirs. On China's mainstream e-commerce platforms, Modern China Tea Shop peripheral products have also been on the hot list for a long time. Modern China Tea Shop has won the love of consumers with its modern Chinese style and draws nutrients from traditional Chinese culture in its original products. It sells peripheral products related to daily travel, including flavored tea, teacups, umbrellas, travel cups, satchels, postcards, etc., with affordable prices on the basis of guaranteed quality. To meet the diversified individual demands of young people, it also realizes the self-expression of consumers in the new era.

Semiotic Analysis of the Application of Traditional Chinese Cultural Elements in Brand Visual Touchpoints

At the brand's inception, it was positioned to specialize in Chinese tea, with a visual identity design reflecting a commitment to traditional Chinese aesthetic styles. Both in product development and visual design, the incorporation of elements from traditional Chinese culture was emphasized. The promotion of Chinese traditional culture itself carries significant commercial value for this indigenous Chinese brand. Coupled with a profound cultural connotation, it holds a considerable advantage in competition within the industry. Consequently, it has garnered attention, leading to numerous imitations by smaller enterprises, including attempts to mimic the brand's visual identity and name. However, this also serves as evidence of the brand's competitiveness and the accuracy of its positioning.

In order to deeply understand how Modern China Tea Shop conveys the fusion of traditional culture and modern brand through its visual design, Pierce's ternary symbol model provides an effective analytical framework. By treating the visual elements of a brand as symbols, we can use this model to deconstruct the symbol system of a brand in more detail and reveal how it interacts meaningfully with consumers. Peirce's ternary model, consisting of representamen, objects, and interpretants, can help analyze how symbols in brand visual design convey cultural values.

Representamen: The visual symbols in a brand's packaging, such as traditional patterns, text, and colors, that form the visual language of the brand.

Object: These symbols refer to traditional cultural connotations, such as Chinese tea culture, the five-element color system, and calligraphy art, and represent the cultural and historical information that the brand is trying to convey.

Interpretant: The process of consumers' understanding and decoding of these symbols, that is, how they perceive and interpret the meaning of these symbols from the brand design, thus generating brand identification and emotional connection.

By using Pearce's ternary symbol model, we are able to systematically analyze how brands build cultural connections with consumers through visual touches and maintain their uniqueness and cultural value in a highly competitive market through symbolic design strategies. The application of this model not only helps to

analyze the surface meaning of visual symbols but also reveals the psychological and cultural interpretation process of consumers in the face of these symbols, so as to provide a theoretical basis for successful brand design strategies.

Traditional Painting Elements

The application of traditional Chinese painting elements in the brand design of Modern China Tea Shop is particularly prominent, with the packaging of the tea cups standing out as a major highlight. In 2018, the introduction of the “Ancient Paintings Series” packaging involved the brand acquiring the rights to use a collection of paintings from major museums across the country. Paintings such as “A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains”, “Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains”, “Night Revels of Han Xizai”, and “Auspicious Cranes” (see Figure 1) underwent image enhancement and redesign. Building upon these renowned artworks, the brand adjusted and combined content relevant to its brand attributes, using a modernized redesign to convey the charm of traditional Chinese culture.

For example, when using a portion of “A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains” as the background, a combination of extensive green and purple hues was chosen to emphasize the beauty of the distance and space between heaven and earth. In the case of selecting “Auspicious Cranes” as the background, the original depiction of cranes flying in the air was retained, while diminishing the details of the palace eaves below. This adjustment aimed to highlight the graceful flight of the cranes, conveying a sense of wealth and auspiciousness. Simultaneously, it communicated the auspicious symbolism to consumers.



Figure 1. Antique masterpiece series packaging (by the official website of the brand).

These creative cup designs are not merely simple containers but also a form of fashionable expression and a reflection of lifestyle. They set Modern China Tea Shop apart in the industry and have become a significant feature of the brand’s products, contributing to a powerful promotional impact. The essence of promotion lies in advertising, and the ability of Modern China Tea Shop to create advertisements that people enjoy watching, prompting a desire to actively consume their co-branded products or merchandise, is sufficient evidence that this brand design direction is accurate and aligns with consumers’ psychological needs.

Traditional Character Element

The text design of Modern China Tea Shop draws inspiration from Chinese characters while incorporating innovative elements. Calligraphy, a unique form of artistic expression in China, stands as one of the quintessential symbols of the “Chinese style”. The brand’s text-themed packaging, especially in the creative series, predominantly features auspicious phrases. This creative choice aligns with the psychological needs of consumers, blending traditional calligraphic patterns with modern design, resulting in a strong ethnic style. The packaging and poster designs of the text-themed series (see Figure 2) introduced by the brand are not a mere direct application of calligraphy characters. Instead, they are a fusion of various considerations, including the brand’s products, regional culture, tea culture, and more. The designs integrate these elements to create a harmonious and culturally rich visual representation, showcasing a thoughtful and comprehensive approach to modern design while staying true to the brand’s roots.



Figure 2. The application of text in brand packaging design (by the official website of the brand).

Traditional Color Element

In terms of the application of traditional colors, Modern China Tea Shop creatively designs based on the core concept of the traditional Chinese color theory known as the “Five Colors”. The traditional five colors in Chinese color theory are red, yellow, blue/green, black, and white. These colors were derived from minerals and plants, and their selection was influenced by the ancient people’s extraction of pigments as well as their understanding of the natural world, evolving gradually into a comprehensive color system based on observational insights. Brand not only considers the visual aspects in applying the traditional five colors but also effectively utilizes the cultural connotations behind each color.

Application of red, black, and white colors: Red and black were widely used colors in early China, such as the red and black colors seen on pottery. In traditional Chinese color schemes, the combination of red and black is common, emphasizing the balance between warmth and coolness. Similarly, the pairing of black and white follows a similar principle, where white represents yang and black represents yin, creating a harmonious balance between the two opposing forces.

The brand’s logo features an image of a woman holding a folding fan against a background of red octagonal windows (see Figure 3). The stark contrast between the black hair, white fan, and attire creates a visually striking

logo, making it easily recognizable. This design effectively leverages traditional cultural symbols and colors to convey a distinct brand image.



Figure 3. The application of traditional Chinese five colors in brand visual design (by the official website of the brand).

Additionally, it can be observed that the brand extensively explores traditional colors and their cultural connotations in its representative “Five-Color Series” of teas (see Figure 3). This series includes five types of tea: green tea, black tea, white tea, yellow tea, and dark tea. In terms of nomenclature, these five teas correspond to the traditional five colors in China. The product packaging also incorporates five different colors, each corresponding to the color represented by the name of the respective tea. Through the colors on the packaging, consumers can easily distinguish between the types of tea. The promotional text for this series expresses the hope that the “Five-Color tea” will allow people to experience the vibrant colors of Hunan. The visual impact is intense, not only portraying the rich and colorful culture of Hunan but also highlighting the cultural spirit behind the traditional five colors of the nation.

Table 1

Peirce's Triadic Sign Model Was Used to Analyze the Visual Symbols of Five-Colors Series Tea

Tea symbol element	Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Green tea	Green packaging	Vigor and vitality	Consumers associate youth, nature, health, and the “wood” element in the five elements.
Black tea	Red packing	Passion, strength	Consumers associate warmth, energy, and “fire” in the five elements to enhance emotional resonance.
White tea	White packing	Pure and quiet	White symbolizes purity, and consumers associate it with a quiet and peaceful tea culture experience.
Yellow tea	Yellow packing	Noble and bright	Yellow symbolizes the “earth” in the five elements, which consumers associate with the aura of royalty and authority in traditional culture.
Dark tea	Black packing	Stability and strength	Black symbolizes the “water” in the five elements, and consumers feel the power and deep tea culture experience.

The Role of Traditional Chinese Element Symbols in the Interaction Between Brand Vision and Consumers

Through the semiotic analysis of the brand visual touchpoints of Modern China Tea Shop, it is clear that the brand has cleverly utilized traditional Chinese cultural elements as distinctive touchpoints. By employing visual

symbols, it has constructed a unique brand identity and cultural value. The tea beverage market in China is fiercely competitive, and Modern China Tea Shop has gained significant prominence among numerous brands. Through the analysis of the application of Chinese traditional cultural elements in the design case of this brand, we can outline and summarize the ways in which these elements strategically manifest commercial value in brand design. Modern China Tea Shop, as a tea brand, excels particularly in Derivative Functions, providing it with a unique brand positioning, commercial value, and competitive advantage in the Chinese tea beverage market.

In the face of the vast tea beverage market, ensuring that one's products stand out from similar ones and appeal to a younger audience is crucial. Beyond delivering high-quality products, visual design becomes extremely important. The brand's Derivative Function is prominently manifested in its packaging design. Through differentiation, symbolism, and image creation, the brand has successfully constructed its unique identity. In comparison to other brands of the same type, it not only emphasizes the quality of the product but also places a strong emphasis on cultural experiences. By incorporating elements of Chinese traditional culture, such as ancient paintings and poetry, as brand symbols, it cleverly positions itself in a differentiated space within the market. Through the sensitive use of cultural symbols, a unique and recognizable brand image has been created. The brand was also a pioneer in introducing cultural and creative products into the tea beverage industry. Through the use of these products, consumers gradually feel and understand the core values of the brand. If consumers appreciate the brand's cultural and creative designs, it indicates resonance between the brand's values and those of the consumers, leading them to become loyal customers.

The brand positioning primarily focused on Derivative Functions endows the brand with higher commercial value. By emphasizing cultural experiences and introducing cultural and creative collaborations, it has successfully shaped the brand's added value, leading a new trend in the tea beverage market. This value even surpasses the fundamental attributes of tea beverages themselves. Consumers are not just purchasing a cup of milk tea; they are immersing themselves in a cultural experience that blends tradition with modernity, art with life. This unique commercial value enables the brand to attract consumers seeking richer consumption experiences, thereby achieving a higher level of added value for the brand. The brand releases limited-edition beverages each season, characterized by unique packaging with distinct limited-edition features. Such visual designs attract a large number of consumers, with many purchasing these items for collection purposes or engaging in secondary modifications. On various online platforms, one can observe many individuals using these items as traditional-style flower vases or as contemporary Chinese-style table lamps. This subtle influence on consumer aesthetics further strengthens brand loyalty among consumers.

The consumption behavior of the young generation is gradually showing characteristics of symbolism and socialization. Taking the tea beverage market, with Generation Z as the main consumer group, as an example, young people drinking tea and purchasing tea beverages are not only for their food attributes but also as a new socializing method. Modern China Tea Shop has established a social circle around the tea brand. By enhancing interaction rituals through packaging, cultural, and creative products, the brand taps into individual desires for group identity within the social circle, turning its products into symbols of gifts exchanged within the community. Simultaneously, it has sparked trends like the "first cup of milk tea in autumn" on social media. This branding strategy has given Modern China Tea Shop an advantage in the highly competitive tea beverage market. By emphasizing differentiation and cultural symbols, the brand stands out, attracting consumers who are curious, value rituals, prioritize brand experiences, and appreciate cultural heritage. This positions the brand with stronger attractiveness and loyalty in the competitive landscape, solidifying its position in the market.

Table 2

Analysis of Visual Symbols in Brand Packaging Under Peirce's Triadic Model of Semiotics

Symbolic element	Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Traditional painting	Traditional Chinese landscape painting and figure painting on the packaging	Chinese art, history	Associating with China's long cultural tradition, it conveys the relationship between the brand and Chinese tea culture and gives the brand a sense of quality.
Traditional colors (five colors)	Red, yellow, green, black, white	Five elements theory and traditional culture	The colors in the five-color system symbolize and mean something and are associated with the values of harmony and balance.
Chinese characters and calligraphy	Brush writing, traditional lettering on the package	Traditional calligraphy art	Feel the essence of traditional culture, symbolizing the unique cultural identity and classic quality of the brand.
The female image in the brand logo	Image of a Chinese woman holding a folding fan	Chinese female image and cultural aesthetics	Convey the image of elegance, classical beauty, and modern brand fusion.

Conclusion

The application and innovation of Chinese traditional cultural elements by Modern China Tea Shop have disrupted the monotony of brand design in the tea beverage market, capturing consumers' attention and standing out. In the utilization of traditional cultural elements, the focus extends beyond mere commercial objectives; instead, the goal is to apply Chinese style for brand innovation, ensuring differentiation from other competitive brands. By integrating semiotic theory, particularly Peirce's Triadic Model of Semiotics, it becomes evident how the brand's visual symbols serve as effective carriers of meaning, contributing to both brand identity and cultural resonance.

Through a profound understanding of Chinese traditional cultural connotations and design methods, the brand effectively balances traditional charm with contemporary aesthetics. Using Peirce's model, the visual elements of the brand—such as colors, patterns, and typography—act as the representamen, while the object they refer to is the rich history and cultural symbolism of Chinese tea culture. Consumers, as the interpretants, decode these symbols based on their own cultural understanding and life experiences, creating a strong emotional connection with the brand. This process not only helps the brand stand out in a competitive market but also deepens consumer loyalty by reinforcing cultural identity and emotional resonance.

By utilizing Chinese traditional elements as a theme, the brand unveils the ethnic culture behind visual symbols, truly driving and developing business through culture, achieving a dual success in cultural heritage and commercial benefits. The semiotic analysis highlights how the brand's packaging and design do more than just appeal visually—they function as symbols that engage consumers on a cultural and emotional level, adding layers of meaning and value to the brand experience.

Therefore, in future business design, it is essential to place a greater emphasis on the integration of Chinese traditional cultural elements with modern brand design, using semiotic frameworks to better understand how visual symbols communicate with consumers. This involves preserving tradition while fostering innovation and utilizing modern technology for creative advancements. The success of the Modern China Tea Shop brand demonstrates the effectiveness of incorporating traditional elements cleverly into modern design concepts and contemporary lifestyles. By employing semiotic principles, the brand has been able to disseminate cultural values with a fresh brand image in the tea beverage market, injecting new vitality into both the brand and the market.

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