

A Study on the Image Design of “Chinese-Style” Brands Based on Roland Barthes’ Semiotics

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Abstract: As the crystallization of Chinese branding and cultural symbolism, Chinese-style brands have innovatively led a new wave of brand development with their outstanding and distinctive qualities. Building on Roland Barthes’ semiotics theory, this paper utilizes a secondary semiotic system to explore the innovative integration and contextual origins of traditional elements such as calligraphy, graphics, and color symbols in “Chinese-style” brand image design, ultimately examining the intrinsic connections between brand image representation and connotation. Through this analysis, it can be concluded that “Chinese” represents the cognitive paradigm of traditional culture, while “style” embodies the value extension that takes place as “Chinese” is integrated into current trends. The harmonious combination of “Chinese” and “style” infuses the zeitgeist with creative vigor and deeper cultural identity, revealing valuable insights into the evolution and sustainability of Chinese-style brand image design.

1. Introduction

In 2017, the State Council designated May 10th as “China Brand Day”. Following this announcement, the e-commerce platform “Tmall” launched the “Chinese-style trends are coming” brand marketing campaign in 2018, attracting numerous brand entries into the “Chinese-style” trend, thereby giving rise to the brand “Chinese-style” transformation. According to the *Baidu 2021 Proud Search Big Data for Chinese-Style Trends*, the search volume for “Chinese-style” has increased by 30% compared to ten years ago and has risen to 75%, which is three times the search volume for overseas brands[1]. The *2022 Baidu Consumer Search Big Data for China Brand Day* also mentioned that the search volume for Chinese consumer brands has increased by 27% in the past year, indicating a growing trend overall. The rise and prevalence of “Chinese-style” brands signify that China is gradually breaking away from its international image as a single “manufacturing giant” and witnessing the recognition and admiration of its citizens for local brands. They are no longer only concerned about the utility value of products but also focus on the emotional resonance and cultural identity generated by the brand. Thus, how to utilize innovative design methods to express culture and achieve brand upgrades has become a crucial issue and opportunity for “Chinese-style” brands.

2. Roland Barthes' Semiotics and the Image Design of "Chinese-Style" Brands

French semiotician Roland Barthes, building on the foundations of Saussurean semiotics, transcended the linguistic and logical frameworks of semiotics. Barthes expanded not only the symbolic meanings of the "signifier" and the "signified", but also fully developed and applied the connotations of the "signified" which arises from the relationship between signifiers and signifieds. As a result, the "double frames of signification" system[2] was born, consisting of the direct signified system and the implicit signified system. The explicit feature of "signifier" and the symbolic meaning of "signified" together form the primary system - the direct signified layer (extensional aspect) - which conveys the representational meaning of symbols through their objectivity. Symbols formed in the primary system become a new "signifier" in the secondary system, and form a new symbol with the "signified" in the secondary system, thereby expounding upon the implicit signified layer (intensional aspect) and revealing the profound connotations underlying the representational system. By analyzing symbolic systems such as signifiers and signifieds, extensions and intensions, this dual-layer "signification" process constructs a certain value significance within a specific socio-cultural context, and applies it to explaining various non-linguistic phenomena such as visual imagery.

As a new trend in the development of Chinese brands, the "Chinese-style" brand is essentially the manifestation of the fusion of the two elements of "national" and "trendiness". The word "national" not only refers to China as a political entity but also represents the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation, embodying the traditional aesthetics of form, meaning, and image. The meaning of "trendiness" is even more diverse. The *Report on the Study of the Chinese-Style Trend* published by the Cultural Creative Research Institute of Tsinghua University in 2019 divides it into two layers of meaning: first, the collective market trend of the supply side, referring to the category innovation of Chinese brands. Second, the consumer mass trend of the demand side, where people gradually form consumption habits for new Chinese-made products. The combination of "national" and "trendiness", with traditional culture as its core and Chinese aesthetic as its expressive language, conforms to the trend, forming a brand image design that is highly innovative, cultural, and emotional, and constituting a unique visual symbol of the brand.

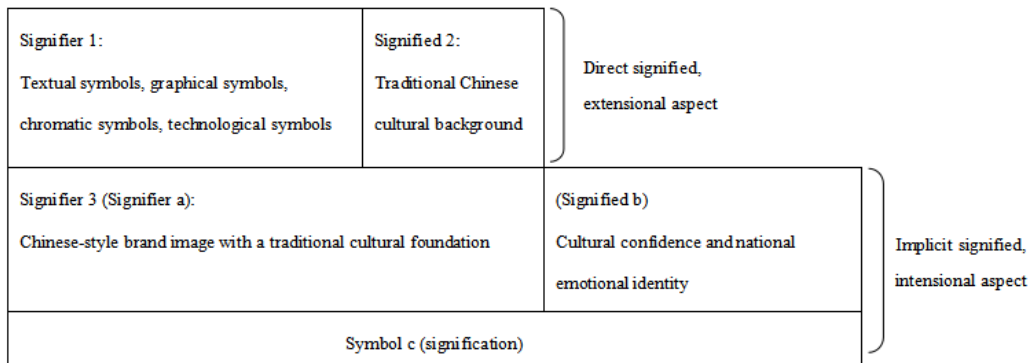


Figure 1: Analysis on the signification system of "Chinese-style" brand images (drawn by the author)

In this paper, Roland Barthes' "double frames of signification" semiotic theory is applied to the study of image design of "Chinese-style" brands, with an analysis of both the direct and implicit aspects. At the direct signified layer, the textual symbols, graphical symbols, chromatic symbols, and technological symbols present in the image design of "Chinese-style" brands constitute the signifier of the first level, while the traditional cultural background they embody becomes the signified. On the other hand, at the implicit signified layer, the "Chinese-style" brand image with a

traditional cultural foundation serves as the first-level signifier, pointing to new signifieds and ascends to cultural confidence and national emotional identity, as illustrated in Fig. 1.

3. Analysis of Direct Signification in the Design of “Chinese-style” Brand Image

3.1. The Textual Symbols with Chinese Characteristics

The textual symbols are an important component of the visual design of “Chinese-style” brands, with the use of Chinese characters imbuing them with Chinese characteristics. Both traditional Chinese calligraphy and customized fonts have unique artistic characteristics that directly affect the image and temperament of “Chinese-style” brands by virtue of their stroke and structure. Among the five traditional calligraphic styles, the running script, cursive script, clerical script, and regular script styles are often used to convey the main messages of brand image[3]. For example, in the Li-Ning 2018 and 2019 Autumn/Winter New York Fashion Week posters, the strong and unrestrained running script takes up a central position in the visual field, immediately conveying the theme of the poster. The seal script, one of the five traditional styles, has a lower recognition, and is typically used as a decorative or auxiliary font. Customized fonts are the integration and innovation of multiple fonts and elements. In the logo of Florasis, the round and plump clerical script is combined with the elegant and delicate Song typeface to create a unique font, giving the brand a fresh new look. The expression of Chinese characters in brand image design directly reflects the cultural connotations of Chinese culture, and its artistic charm awakens consumers’ recognition and love for traditional culture.

3.2. The Graphic Symbols with Eastern Connotations

As a key element of visual communication, graphics have played an important role in the establishment and external communication of brand image, thanks to their strong imagery and infectivity. Each graphic style can be regarded as a visual symbol conveying different emotional and value links. In Chinese-style brands, both traditional brands such as “Jianlibao” and new cultural brands such as “Luckyeh!” are based on the perspective of the times, extracting and innovating graphic elements from historical cultural resources such as traditional patterns and mythical legends, showcasing the profound cultural heritage of the East. In Luckyeh!’s product illustrations, auspicious animals, zodiac animals, and mythical figures are often used as the visual center of graphics, combined with current trendy elements to convey cultural connotations such as “wealth and prosperity”, “good fortune and longevity”, and “avoiding misfortune and seeking good luck”, carrying people’s desires for a better life. Similarly, Jianlibao’s “Golden Carp Protection”, “Lucky Panda”, and “Made in China” series of beverage culture cans incorporate Chinese elements such as golden carp, bamboo, panda, and Chinese knots into their product packaging. These combine bright colors and exquisite images to depict the collision between ancient and modern beauty of the East.

3.3. Color Symbols Rooted in Traditional Culture

Color is the most sensitive and fastest-reacting sign language in the visual elements[4]. Studies have shown that color language can enhance brand recognition by 80%, playing a powerful role in enhancing brand vividness, conveying brand emotions, and stimulating brand perception. With the rise of “Chinese-style” culture, the design of “Chinese-style” brand images have increasingly embraced traditional colors for transmission and modern interpretation. On the one hand, influenced by the Daoist concept of “ink separation into five colors”, some “Chinese-style” brands pursue

elegant and simple colors to recreate the artistic conception of Chinese landscape. For example, in the background of Li Ning's *To Paris* poster, a low purity and low luminosity ink technique depicts a visual image of the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, showcasing the cultural heritage and trend of Chinese sports. On the other hand, while retaining the classical charm of Chinese traditional colors, many "Chinese-style" brands are now focusing on catering to the personality and preferences of young groups, with the overall color choices leaning towards retro, stable, and high-end[5]. Taking Luckyeh!'s "Five Immortals of Wealth, Prosperity, Longevity, Happiness, and Fortune" series of illustrations as an example, the use of retro color series such as vermillion, gamboge, and viridis reflects the positive aesthetic and taste of today's young people, as well as their recognition and admiration of the traditional cultural origins in color symbols.

3.4. Craft Symbols with Unique Distinction

Traditional crafts are the cultural heritage of our country, which has been passed down from generation to generation and embodies the values and practical experience of the Chinese nation, serving as an important carrier of Chinese traditional culture[6]. In the era of the continued rise of "Chinese-style" culture, incorporating traditional crafts into brand image design not only demonstrates the contemporary value of traditional crafts, but also endows "Chinese-style" brand culture with depth. Florasis, a Chinese cosmetics brand, launched the "Florasis Miao Silver Collection" series of products, which restore the exquisite Miao silver craftsmanship in appearance, while incorporating engraving and micro-carving techniques. This design technique incorporates the intangible cultural value of traditional national handicrafts into brand products, showcasing the Eastern aesthetic concept advocated by the brand. Moreover, Luckyeh! also applies the traditional cloisonne craft from intangible cultural heritage to the "Oriental Auspicious Animals" series of decorative paintings, interpreting new brand image features through a series of traditional craftsmanship such as mold making, filigree, welding, and enamel applying, deeply influencing audiences with its aesthetically pleasing artistry.

In summary, the four types of sign symbols, namely, text, graphics, color, and craft, jointly constitute a complete "Chinese-style" brand image design system. The combination design of these symbols, following the trend of contemporary artistic aesthetics, carries the connotation of traditional Chinese culture and has rich meaning in terms of their signification.

4. Implicit Meaning Analysis in "Chinese-style" Brand Image Design

Roland Barthes believed that symbols are not simply about conveying simple meanings, but are more about tools for participating in the production of meaning[7]. In the double frames of signification system, the implicit meaning layer can better reveal the profound meaning it encompasses. The use of traditional Chinese cultural elements in the "Chinese-style" brand image essentially boils down to the promotion of national cultural confidence and the enhancement of national emotional identity.

4.1. Strengthening Cultural Confidence with National Power

With the rapid development of China's economy and the steady improvement of people's living standards, the focus of consumption has gradually shifted from material needs to spiritual and cultural needs. Chinese leaders have placed greater emphasis on building a socialist cultural power, and have repeatedly emphasized the importance of enhancing cultural confidence. Subsequently, related documents such as *Opinions on Implementing the Program for the Inheritance and Development of Chinese Excellent Traditional Culture* and *Revitalization Plan for Chinese*

Traditional Crafts have been promulgated, which have stimulated cultural creativity. CCTV has also successively launched high-quality cultural variety shows such as *Everlasting Classics* and *National Treasure*, which have received strong social feedback, and have aroused strong cultural identification and pride among the Chinese people. People have begun to value the value of Chinese culture and have higher expectations for local brands, gradually prizing brand images with cultural connotations[8]. At the same time, the advancement of national strategies such as “Made in China 2025” and “China Intelligent Manufacturing” has enabled the “Made in China” label to gradually break free from the labels of being low-quality and rough, ensuring the quality of brand products. Therefore, support from the national power not only provides a guarantee for the improvement of national cultural confidence, but also becomes an important driving force for the popularity of “Chinese-style” brands.

4.2. The Power of the New Generation in Bringing National Emotional Identity Together

Contemporary Chinese youth have grown up alongside the prosperity and increasing international influence of their country. With a solid material foundation, they are pursuing higher spiritual and cultural aspirations, displaying unique characteristics of individuality and a love for innovation, making them a new force in Chinese society. The younger generation, mainly consisting of those born in the 1990s and 2000s, are not blindly worshipping foreign brands for a sense of identity, but rather bravely facing and embracing local brands. They are also not limited to the products themselves, but enthusiastic about the symbolical values implied by the brands, and the psychological fulfillment they offer. The *2019 Tencent Study on Post-2000 Generations* showed that in the “national pride among different generations” section, those born in the 1990s and 2000s scored over 9.0 out of 10, demonstrating a stronger sense of cultural identity and national pride[9]. They continuously seek out novel and interesting “Chinese-style” products in search of an emotional resonance with traditional culture, while rallying to form a united national identity.

5. Conclusions

Maurice Halbwachs, in his work *On Collective Memory*, famously stated that “the past is not preserved as it was, but rather reconstructed on the basis of the present”. In the current “Chinese-style” brands, the integration of traditional culture and contemporary trends constitutes a reawakening and reconstruction of popular collective memory of traditional culture. Using semiotic theory as its root, this paper analyzed the traditional cultural connotations embedded in brand image design, as well as the profound meanings of cultural confidence and national emotional identity, offering a new paradigm for brand development considerations. However, it must be recognized that brand image construction is not simply a matter of piling up Chinese cultural elements to stimulate nostalgia among the masses. Rather, brand development should embody the concept of “changing trends and stable national essence”, through visually rich presentation, deep excavation of national cultural essence, and an understanding of contemporary trends to achieve brand upgrading. Only then can we fully support the sustainable development of “Chinese-style” brands.

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