

Semiotic Misinterpretation of Tai Chi Symbols in Tea Packaging: Cultural Impact and Design Strategies

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Abstract

Tai Chi symbols are widely used in tea packaging; however, their cultural significance is often disconnected from the products they represent. While these symbols hold profound philosophical and historical meanings in Chi-nese culture, their commercialization in packaging design frequently results in misinterpretations that diminish their authenticity. This research looked at the mistaken interpretations of Tai Chi symbols in semiotics while it studied their improper use against cultural identity, brand evaluation, and consumer connection. The research conducted an exploratory qualitative case study analysis on 46 tea packaging designs from the Chinese mainstream online markets. This research design chose cases according to market reach, branding, and symbolic complexity. Saussure's Signifier-signified relationships provided the theoretical basis for conducting a descriptive analysis in two phases, including categorizing the visual elements of Tai Chi symbols and the semantic analysis through design element frequency data analysis. The findings indicated four critical issues in applying Tai Chi symbols in tea packaging design: poor strategic placement and inappropriate sizing reduced their recognizability; excessive visual standardization diminished their cultural depth; overused commercialization trivialized their philosophical and aesthetic value, destroying cultural authenticity; and the widespread aesthetic fatigue reducing engagement and diminishing brand perceived uniqueness. This study emphasized that respecting cultural symbols' historical and philosophical connotations demands that products match the intrinsic values embedded in cultural symbols. The main contribution of this study was to develop a semiotic framework that allowed designers to manage the commercial-authenticity conflict by letting them reinterpret Tai Chi symbols in planned ways that combined cultural accuracy with heritage protection. Therefore, this culturally sensitive design method can strengthen brand narrative and cultural communication effectiveness, attract consumers, and create significant market value.

Keywords: *Tai Chi Symbols, Tea Packaging Design, Semiotics.*

Introduction

Tai Chi symbols, as an essential carrier of Chinese traditional culture, are being widely used in tea packaging design (Wang & Mangaliag, 2024). However, the commercial application of this cultural symbol faces significant contradictions: the simplification and deformation of the symbol may lead to the loss of its profound philosophical connotation (Solloway et al., 2016). Li and Cheng (2022) identified visual design authenticity suffered from damaged cultural integrity from spatial layout, size scaling, and symbol integrity; similarly, excessive commercial operation can easily lead consumers to question the cultural authenticity (Torelli et al., 2021); also, Li & Cheng (2022) demonstrated that visual simplification weakened cultural depth, leading to aesthetic fatigue.

The increasing number of applications has not led to a unified scientific research focus. Research mainly consisted of conceptual examinations since it lacks quantitative standards and systematic assessment criteria for understanding value communication obstacles due to the misalignment of symbol structure, visual deformation, and commercial overuse (Torelli et al., 2021; Li & Cheng, 2022). IBISWorld (2024) reported that premium brands within China's US\$40 billion tea industry employed

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traditional symbols, while some customers detected cultural dilution of these elements, leading to an immediate need for commercial goals to adjust toward philosophical protection.

This research implemented semiotic theory to explore four aspects: (1) Spatial strategy and recognizability trends, (2) Standardization against cultural depth, (3) Commercial practices that lead to philosophical value degradation, and (4) Homogenization effects on brand differentiation. The study established two evaluative metrics, including cultural authenticity measures and commercial performance indicators, to generate a double benefit of authentic symbol usage standards and practical packaging design guidance connecting tea products to Tai Chi cosmological traditions that address balancing commercial value and cultural authenticity.

This research was of crucial importance in three different fields: cultural maintenance, commercial creativity, and scientific growth. It protected cultural and philosophical elements of Tai Chi symbols by examining commercial design misinterpretations, which resulted in their long-term integration into visual applications. Additionally, this research provided designers with powerful tools to move past superficial symbolism and developed methods that blended packaging aesthetics with product identity along with Tai Chi's cosmic background. Lastly, as a strategic tool, it gave businesses evidence-based techniques to blend cultural authenticity with market-friendly elements. The academic contribution of this research included developing measurable methods for symbol reading across cultures, alongside filling scientific unknowns about how distorted graphic structures affected different consumer groups' cognitive processing.

Literature Review

Application of Tai Chi Symbols in Packaging Design

The Tai Chi symbol, embodying Yin-Yang philosophy via dynamic balance, mutual generation, and eternal change, risks "symbol hollowing" in modern design (Li et al., 2012). Munoz & Letouze (2022) highlight culturally sensitive approaches, integrating cross-cultural research and contextual innovation, balancing heritage with modern relevance. The strategic role of cultural symbols in packaging design is mainly reflected in three aspects: effectively improving brand awareness, establishing emotional connections by evoking cultural identity, enhancing brand value and influencing consumer decisions (Vyas, 2015). Additionally, research showed that packaging design can satisfy functional needs and cultural identity (Fritz et al., 2017). However, applying Tai Chi symbols in packaging design presents a pivotal system of advantages and disadvantages. Although enhancing the differentiated competitiveness of products, it may cause doubts about cultural authenticity (Torelli et al., 2021). The cultural connotations of using Tai Chi symbols, four-image diagrams, or Bagua diagrams on tea packaging and their relevance to the product become concrete manifestations of this effect. Therefore, there is a disconnect between theory and practice in the academic discussion on commercializing cultural symbols. Although the issues of "cultural appropriation" and "over-commodification" have attracted much attention, existing research has focused chiefly on conceptual analysis and case criticism, lacking a systematic evaluation system and quantitative standards. Filling this gap is conducive to the sustainable application of cultural symbols.

Misunderstanding and Challenges of Tai Chi Symbols

The incorrect interpretation of Tai Chi symbols in commercial design mainly stems from interpretative ambiguities across systems and dual-fold cognitive barriers. Wang and Mangaliag (2024) stated that there was a lack of a unified interpretation system for Tai Chi symbols, and the superficial interpretation of their connotations led to deviations in design applications. This misappropriation occurred due to two connected factors that work together. On the one hand, designers lack a deep understanding of the cultural depth of Tai Chi symbols, resulting in a misunderstanding in the mainstream design context (Solloway et al., 2016). On the other hand, the cultural background differences of the audiences lead to cognitive differentiation; viewers who lack the cultural foundation of Tai Chi often simplify it to a simple physical exercise or artistic expression and find it difficult to grasp its philosophical essence (Yang et al., 2015). Therefore, the limitations of the cognitive level have become the root cause of misuse and abuse. In commercial packaging, the misinterpretation of the Tai Chi symbol structure and the distortion of its visual form weaken the communication of its philosophical connotation, and the intentional simplification and conceptual distortion of Tai Chi symbols in the design process affect the accurate expression of the value of the product. In-depth research on these issues is of key significance to balancing cultural inheritance and commercial application.

Research Method

Theoretical Framework- Semiotics Theory

Saussure's semiotic theory focuses on the relationship between the signifier and the signified, highlighting arbitrariness. This arbitrariness determines that there is no necessary natural connection between the symbol and its referent (Stoltz, 2021). The non-essentialist framework provides vital analysis for cultural symbols, including Tai Chi, because the yin-yang graphic diagram (signifier) transforms meanings during commercial utilization. When the symbol appears on tea product packaging, the traditional meaning of "dynamic equilibrium", which belongs to Tai Chi symbolism, is replaced by commercial attributes such as "wellness" and "exoticism". Frequent updating of packaging symbolism follows the process, which Budhi et al. (2023) call commercial semiosis, a packaging method that relies on signifier-signified correlations for marketing purposes.

The analytical strength of the theory emerges from its ability to break down two fundamental dimensions: signifier integrity, the preservation of symbolic recognition through proportional accuracy and chromatic fidelity of physical elements, and signified fidelity, which determines conceptual connection to cultural origins rather than marketing alterations. A dual-axis evaluation method enables the analysis of how various designs move from iconographic precision to contextual arrangements, which either protect or alter the essence of Tai Chi philosophy. The method explores comprehensive semiotic arrangements between cultural maintenance and marketplace requirements, thus packaging functions as both a cultural transference agent and a commercial connector.

Research Design

The research used a qualitative case study design to analyze Tai Chi symbol usage patterns and their misinterpretation problems in tea packaging design. A descriptive analysis of 46 tea packaging cases with premium and mass market levels in domestic market orientations and simple to complex designs evaluated three core elements of visual Tai Chi symbol deployment methods and semiotic distortion patterns while investigating contextual causes leading to cultural-signifier misapplication. The study used Saussurean semiotics and cultural symbol theory while performing iterative visual-textual coding to determine how design elements affect cultural authenticity through visual composition analysis, chromatic symbolism research, and contextual motif studies.

Sample selection. The 46 tea packaging cases selected in this study explicitly used Tai Chi symbols or design elements embodying Tai Chi philosophy, including direct Yin-Yang fish graphics, S-shaped segmentation compositions, black and white contrast colors, and dynamic balance visual expressions, to ensure the thematic relevance of the research subjects, which came from e-commerce platforms, design portfolio, and offline physical channels. The sample covered mainstream tea categories, diverse design styles, and different market positioning. This multidimensional sample horizontally and vertically analyzed the characteristics of traditional cultural symbols under different product positioning, supporting comprehensive research.

Data Analysis Method. Each sample was assigned an individual code and analyzed in depth based on three core dimensions: application location, type of misreading, and form of expression. A complex hierarchical system was then established on this basis. The first-level classification included five types, namely structural misreading, intentional misreading, list of related concept symbols, product temperament deviation, and invalid symbol listing. Each type had a secondary classification indicator. This multi-level classification method captured various deviation phenomena in design practice more accurately. Based on Saussure's semiotic theory, this study adopted a research path that combined visual semiotic analysis with content analysis to systematically examine the application characteristics of Tai Chi symbols in packaging design. Theoretically, the study constructed a dual analysis framework of the signifier and the signified of the Tai Chi symbol and deeply interprets the symbolic system of this traditional symbol. In the empirical research part, by coding and descriptively analyzing 46 packaging design samples, the product relevance, visual expression techniques and spatial layout characteristics of the Tai Chi symbol were examined in detail, thereby revealing the mainstream trends and typical problems in existing design practices.

Result with Finding and Analysis

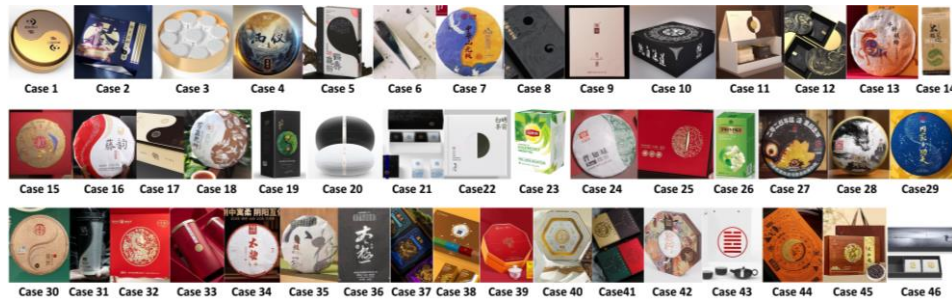


Fig. 1. 46 Tea Packaging Design Cases

Table 1. The Application of Tai Chi Symbols in Tea Packaging

Type	Case Number	Percentage
Graphic	2,3,4,5,7,9,10,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,23,24,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32,37,41,43,44,45.	63%
Chinese character	34,35,36.	6%
Shape	1,39,40,42.	8%
Color	6,20,21,22.	8%
Opening method	8,10,11,12,38,46.	13
texture	33.	2

The 46 selected cases all incorporated Tai Chi symbols or ideas, indicating the high popularity of traditional cultural elements in modern design (see Fig. 1). Through in-depth analysis of these cases, it can be found that applying Tai Chi symbols presents a diversified innovation trend. Among them, 63% of the cases directly presented the Tai Chi symbol as the primary graphic in the visual center of the packaging and maintained the traditional form of expression. 6% of the cases directly used Chinese characters to present information. 8% of the cases reflected the Tai Chi symbol through the packaging shape structure, showing the extension of the design in three-dimensional space. 8% of the cases broke through the traditional form and only conveyed the Yin-Yang concept of Tai Chi through color contrast. 13% of the cases innovatively integrated the Tai Chi thought into how the packaging was opened, giving it dynamic interactive functionality. Another 2% of the cases used special textures and materials to express the texture of the Tai Chi symbol (see Table 1). Current research indicated that applying Tai Chi symbols has expanded from simple visual decoration to a comprehensive design language that includes structure, interaction, and materials, reflecting the deep integration of traditional culture and modern design. Additionally, nearly half of the cases used non-traditional expressions, reflecting the designer's innovative interpretation of Tai Chi thought; simultaneously, paying attention is necessary to avoid weakening the meaning of symbols due to excessive abstraction. Lastly, integrating Tai Chi into packaging functions (such as opening methods) reflected the practical considerations of design and faced the challenge of balancing form and connotation.

Table 2. Misunderstanding the categories of Tai Chi symbols on tea packaging

Type	Specific categories	Case Number
Misunderstanding of symbol structure (32.60%)	Symbol deconstruction errors (13%)	3, 5, 13, 14, 17, 31,
	Spatial relationship dislocation (6.52%)	4, 16, 24,
	Graphic fragment cutting (2.17%)	9,
	Element addition and subtraction variation (10.86%)	7, 8, 18, 29,30,
Misunderstanding of symbol intention (34.78%)	Philosophical dimension (23.91%)	6, 11, 19, 20, 21,22, 23, 25,26, 27, 28,
	Cultural dimension (10.86%)	15,32, 33, 44, 45,
List of related concept symbols (19.56%)	Wrong genealogical relationship (15.21%)	12, 37, 38, 39, 40,41, 46,
	Too narrow audience (4.43%)	42, 43,

Product temperament deviation (2.17%)	Value dimension (2.17%)	1,
Invalid symbol listing (10.86%)	List of Tai Chi symbols (4.34%)	2, 10,
	List of Tai Chi Chinese characters (6.52%)	34, 35, 36,

Types of Misreading of Tai Chi Symbols. In the diversified innovation trend, applied Tai Chi symbols faced opportunities and challenges, and using the symbols was particularly important. Through an in-depth analysis of 46 Tai Chi symbol application cases, the study found that there were five typical types of misreading in current design practice: symbol structure misreading (32.60%), symbol intention misreading (34.78%), related symbol list (19.56%), product temperament deviation (2.17%) and symbol invalid list (10.86%). These misreading phenomena affected the visual expression of Tai Chi symbols and weakened their profound cultural connotations (see Table 2).

Misreading of symbol structure included four main types, namely symbol deconstruction errors (13%), spatial relationship dislocation (6.52%), symbol fragmentation cutting (2.17%), and element addition and subtraction changes (10.86%). Symbol deconstruction errors are the most common, mainly manifested in decomposing the Tai Chi symbol into two independent fish patterns or distorting its appearance. For example, Case 3 simplifies the Tai Chi symbol into two decorative fish shapes, destroying its integrity and weakening its cultural connotation. Spatial relationship dislocation is mainly manifested in changing the proportional structure of the Tai Chi symbol through stretching, perspective, etc. For example, Case 24 uses positive and negative shape design to combine the Tai Chi symbol with a water pattern, resulting in an imbalance of yin and yang, which leads to a fundamental deformation of the symbol structure. Symbol fragmentation cutting is manifested by using only a partial fragment of the Tai Chi symbol. For example, Case 9 only shows a quarter of the Tai Chi symbol on the packaging, destroying its integrity. The addition and subtraction of elements are mainly manifested by deleting or ignoring key aspects. For example, Case 29 only uses the S line to divide the Yin-Yang fish, omitting the fisheye, affecting the symbol's original meaning.

Additionally, misreading of symbolic intentions is mainly reflected in the two dimensions of philosophy and culture. Misreading in the philosophical dimension (23.91%) primarily manifests in the simplified expression of the concept of yin and yang, such as interpreting the philosophy of yin and yang only through the contrast of black and white, while ignoring its core connotation of dynamic balance. For example, Case 6, Case 20, and Case 21 use black and white to contrast the concept of yin and yang and the Tai Chi symbol. On the other hand, misreading in the cultural dimension (10.86%) is reflected in the confusion of the symbol system, such as mechanically combining Tai Chi symbols with traditional cultural images (e.g., the sun and the moon, the dragon and the phoenix) to form a superficial Yin-Yang symbol system. For example, Case 44 combines the sun and moon symbols with Tai Chi symbols to express the concept of Yin-Yang. Both misreadings lead to a one-sided understanding of the profound connotation of Tai Chi philosophy. This misreading can easily lead to a one-sided understanding of the profound connotation of Tai Chi philosophy and even cause the distortion and abuse of cultural connotations.

Moreover, the list of related concept symbols mainly includes two aspects. One is the confusion of symbol genealogy, accounting for 15.21%. It is mainly manifested in the forced juxtaposition of symbols of different cultural systems, lacking internal logical connections, forming a shallow collage of symbols. For example, Case 38 combines the five-element symbol with the Tai Chi symbol to express the concept of unified balance; however, this rigid superposition weakens the independent cultural value of each symbol. On the other hand, the excessive use of highly professional and profound cultural symbols has caused cognitive barriers; 4.43% of consumers could not understand their meaning. Case 43 uses the Bagua as the design basis and combines the Tai Chi symbol to convey a sense of affinity, but it is beyond the cognitive scope of ordinary consumers because of the overly professional symbol. This design fails to achieve the original intention of cultural communication and distorts the symbol's original meaning due to misinterpretation, resulting in a counterproductive effect.

Furthermore, product temperament deviation accounted for 2.17%. Some tea packaging excessively pursues a sense of luxury, resulting in a disconnection from the core connotation of tea culture. This design trend ignores the natural and cultural connotations of tea culture and may also convey incorrect brand awareness to consumers. For example, in case 1, the overall color is dominated by gold, creating a luxurious temperament. Blindly following the trend of commercial design may lead to product homogeneity competition. Without a unique cultural expression, it is difficult for tea packaging to establish a differentiated advantage in the market, ultimately affecting the brand's long-term development.

Lastly, invalid symbol listing reflects two main types of ineffective Tai Chi listings. One is that the Tai Chi symbol is presented without innovative design, accounting for 4.34%. For example, in Case 2, the Tai Chi symbol only occupies one-tenth of the total area and is placed in the lower right corner of its packaging. Not only is the size too small and the location hidden, but it also lacks a substantial connection with the product and has become a formal decorative element. The other is to use text elements directly, such as the word "Tai Chi" as the main content of the packaging. This treatment method is easily confused with the product name and may lead to consumers misunderstanding the product's connotation. For example, Cases 33, 34, and 35 directly present the Chinese character "Tai Chi", which is easily confused with the name of the tea product. The use of cultural symbols fails to form an organic connection with product characteristics and can neither effectively convey the essence of tea culture nor establish unique brand recognition.

In conclusion, the research showed four key problems in applying Tai Chi symbols in current tea packaging design. First, layout and structure problems affected symbol recognition. Unreasonable layout strategies and size designs significantly reduced Tai Chi symbols' recognition and visual influence, such as the hidden symbol position, the size of the symbol being too small, the prominent structural deformation problem, and the common disproportion phenomenon. These problems weakened the symbolic meaning of Tai Chi symbols and reduced them to superficial decorative elements, making it difficult to carry the cultural value they deserve. Additionally, visual standardization led to a lack of cultural depth, such as the monotonous expression method, over-reliance on standardized techniques (e.g., black-and-white contrast and symmetrical composition), the simplified philosophical connotation, ignoring the visual transformation of core ideas (e.g., dynamic balance and mutual transformation), the chaotic symbol spectrum, and common mechanical collage with cultural elements (e.g., Bagua and Five Elements). This stereotyped expression method limited design innovation and simplified the cultural depth of Tai Chi symbols, making it difficult to form a deep impression on consumers. Moreover, commercial operation led to value alienation, such as distortion of visual expression (e.g., the use of highly saturated colors to destroy the philosophical conception of symbols), misplaced contextual grafting (e.g., symbols that rigidly implanted into irrelevant conceptual frameworks), and empty cultural connotations (e.g., symbols that have become marketing gimmicks and lacked cultural authenticity). This commercial operation diluted the philosophical depth of symbols and damaged their cultural authenticity. Lastly, homogeneous applications caused brand crises, such as mechanical reproduction of traditional graphics, a lack of innovative interpretation, and excessive superposition of abstract elements, creating obstacles to understanding. These phenomena exposed the superficiality of cultural thinking in current design practice, and there is an urgent need to establish a more systematic symbol application paradigm to achieve innovative expression while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this study breaks through the traditional design perspective, takes semiotics theory as the foundation, reconstructs the form-meaning relationship and ideological system of Tai Chi symbols, and provides methodological support for the modern translation of traditional cultural elements. By revealing the cognitive rupture behind the misreading of symbols (such as structural anomie leading to cultural fragmentation and conceptual flattening that eliminates philosophical depth), the study constructs a binary framework of "cultural authenticity-innovation adaptability", emphasizing the realization of semantic regeneration of traditional symbols in dynamic balance rather than one-way visual appropriation. In practice, for the industry, it is recommended to establish Tai Chi symbol application standards to guide design from "form imitation" to "cultural narrative"; for practitioners, it is necessary to strengthen traditional philosophy research and cross-media design capabilities to avoid symbol stacking and context dislocation; for consumers, interactive packaging design can enhance cultural perception and experience, while standardizing market publicity to prevent excessive commercialization and misleading cognition. This multi-dimensional strategy aims to promote the upgrade of design from "symbol borrowing" to "cultural empowerment", which maintains the spiritual core of traditional wisdom and activates its vitality in modern consumer scenarios.

Limitations and Further Study

This study still has some limitations. The sample coverage was limited, mainly concentrated in the domestic market, with insufficient research on consumer cognition and a lack of cross-cultural comparisons. Comparative research will be further expanded in the future. Future research will make breakthroughs in three directions: innovate symbolic expression, conduct consumer experiments, and establish an interdisciplinary research framework. In short, the core lies in transcending symbolic

representation, deepening philosophical connotations, and realizing the organic integration of traditional wisdom and modern design.

Conclusion

This study reveals the dual situation of Tai Chi symbols in modern tea packaging design through empirical analysis of 46 cases. It has broken through the traditional visual framework and extended to multi-dimensional innovations; additionally, the deformation of the symbol structure weakens the cultural integrity, the simplification of the philosophical connotation leads to the loss of the spiritual core, and the symbol stacking and commercialization tendency cause contextual confusion and cultural alienation, which stem from a lack deep understanding of the dynamic balance of Yin and Yang philosophy. In the future, we need to take cultural authenticity as the foundation, and based on standardizing the symbol form, through innovative paths, build a symbiotic relationship between symbols and tea culture, and achieve brand value enhancement and sustainable dissemination of traditional wisdom.

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