

The roots of traditional Chinese cigarette packaging design

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Our world is changing everyday; it is replete with confusions and deceptions, antiquated structures and modern values - not even the People's Republic of China has been spared this rapid progress. To get a better idea of the emotional world of the Chinese, just pause for a moment at one of the many kiosks or mobile showcases along the roads and take a look at the traditional packaging design of the countless cigarette brands. In the shabby huts of rural China or the monotonous, anonymous concrete jungle of the more urban areas, individuals here do not enjoy the many freedoms we have all learned to take for granted. The colourful little scenes on the Chinese cigarette packs tell a wholly different story and suggest an intact, sugar-coated world.

What does an army of 350 million people smoke and what are their special preferences?

Records show that the Chinese prefer mild filter-tip cigarettes with a low tar content; this segment accounts for roughly 87 per cent of total sales. But what exactly do these abstract statistics say about smokers in the Far East? Do they present an accurate profile? Do they make the Chinese smoker more transparent, easier to ascertain? Hardly. Cigarette manufactures rely heavily on appearance, i.e. on the packaging design, to plug their products. In China, a successful sales strategy for products such as cigarettes depends on factors which may seem strange to Western marketing experts with their logical, rational approach and their target group research.

Traditional Chinese brands - primarily sold as soft packs at reasonable prices - present a veritable kaleidoscope of Chinese art and culture. The illustrations on cigarette packs are like a microcosm of the entire range of packaging design in China. There is hardly an image which has not found its way onto one of the many hundred Chinese packages in one form or another - in short, a fascinating paradise for those hunters and gatherers with a penchant for packaging design and a keen interest in investigating the Chinese soul from an ethnological standpoint.

When you line up several dozen random packages from various Chinese provinces, you get the feeling that the Chinese cigarette industry has been commissioned to promote the country's many tourist attractions. The packs show exquisite landscapes full of gorges and waterfalls, bizarre rock formations and gnarled trees as well as imposing architectural monuments with serene temple grounds. The artistic variety found in these packs openly mirrors the patriotism of China's citizens.

One can also see the wonders of the animal kingdom on the cigarette packs, while many of the Earth's species shown here are clearly not of Chinese origin: dogs and cats, tigers and rhinoceros, roosters and oxen, butterflies and eagles as well as fish and penguins, dromedaries and dinosaurs. Mythical creatures such as garudas, dragons and phoenixes round off the colourful array. Animals are popular images among the Chinese because of the positive associations evoked by specific characteristics they have, such as strength or speed, and due to the fact that many animals, particularly goldfish, are said to bring luck.

Another interesting variation on packaging design deserves special mention: designs that have their roots in the political propaganda before and during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to dams and bridges, trains and skyscrapers, department stores and ships, high voltage power lines and derricks, even images of smokestacks billowing out smoke grace the packaging of day-to-day household products, symbolising how proud the Chinese nation is of their technological achievements and documenting the country's progress for the outside world. The "highlight" of this type of packaging design inspired by socialist thought is the "Sheng Li" (Profit) brand from the 1970s, which shows the mushroom cloud of a nuclear bomb.

The brand names are as full of fantasy and emotion as the designs themselves: consumers may choose between "Golden Bridge" and "The Great Wall". The "Silver Elephant" is competing with the "Powerful Lion" and the "Dragon's Shadow". Would you rather have "Fun" when you are smoking or is it more a question of "Pride"? In any case, everyone can identify with "Progress" and you know you want to "Double Your Luck" whenever you can!

The brand "Little Family" may bring you eternal happiness, as suggested by the typically Western single-family house on the pack which you are sure not to find anywhere in China. Alternatively, young couples are likely to choose "Hong Dou" which literally means "Red Beans", a popular idiom for lovers in Chinese literature. The romance promised by this brand is further underscored by the silhouette of a couple against a large red heart on the package.

The illustrations on many packages seem to reflect the dreams and longings of the average man in the street. Many Chinese people's lust for independence and unlimited freedom - including the freedom to travel - are mirrored in the images found on cigarette packs, such as sunsets, palm trees and sailboats. For just a few yuan, consumers can pocket a piece of this dream.

One of the most recent packs from Shanghai decided to do without a brand name all together, relying instead on a pack design which looks like a roll of American 20 dollar bills - design according the principle "Less is More". This principle was most likely also applied to the brand designed to express the predominant philosophy in Hong Kong: its name - short and to the point - is simply "Kung Hei Fat Choi" (Be Happy - Get Rich).

In contrast to Western packaging design, the images portrayed on Chinese packaging often have no relation to the actual product inside. You may find pictures of mangoes and antique coins, grapes and ginseng roots, bodybuilders and table tennis bats, princesses and pirates, sabres, lanterns and blooming flowers as well as basic household goods and ancient cult artefacts. To round out the collection, some packs have even been known to portray Sherlock Holmes and the Madonna, mother of Christ.

Many Chinese cigarette manufacturers simply use specific colours and symbols - e.g. the country's traditional favourite colours, red and gold, and the symbols of luck already mentioned above - to help the consumer identify a particular product and make his or her selection. It is rather rare that one finds a really professional brand image with a unique profile and a striking design intended to stand out from the competitor.

Of course, there is also a new generation at work in the cigarette industry of the Far East and you will find packaging which emulates contemporary Western design, packaging designed to appear up to date. Abstract art is the watchword for these packs which feature lines, geometric patterns and colourful matrix designs - no longer the naturalistic, concrete images from "back-woods" rural areas. Instead, these brands bear names such as "President" and "Tomorrow" or simply "Yes". They represent an entirely new generation of products dead set on distinguishing themselves from the old, traditional China; products that attempt to identify with the world of progress, of modernity, of foreign lands. They copy the style and appearance of foreign brands directly and hope to achieve more sales as a result. As the income and the purchasing power of the Chinese population grow, so does the willingness and the opportunity to consume high-end brands that have a Western appeal. Everyone who can, of course, would rather buy the foreign original instead.

It is a question of prestige. Just as with clothing, where some in China purposely leave the label showing on the sleeve so that everyone can see which Italian couturier made their jacket or dress, the right cigarette brand shows the entire world that you have become someone in the course of the reform.

That does not mean, however, that you should underestimate the local patriotism and frequently noticeable anti-Western stance. Surveys have shown that very many Chinese prefer Chinese products to foreign ones.

Strong products also require strong packaging which practice in terms of technology what it preaches in appearance. This varies heavily in China, everything is possible: from a cheap soft pack from Shanghai for under 1 yuan (approx. USD 0.12), such as "Da Qian Men" (Great Portal), to a high-end luxury pack such as "Yun Yin" (Smoke of the Clouds) which sells for 98 yuan (approx. USD 11.80).

The lowest category includes printed soft packs with loose tax stamps, crookedly glued corners and poor printing quality. In parallel, there are an amazing number of extremely professionally manufactured hinge-lid packs which meet the same quality standards as their Western counterparts.

What is more, they sometimes offer a much higher standard of design and technology. Relief embossing and gold foil embossing, mirrored films, metallic colours and holograms are used quite frequently, as the Chinese love optical effects and enjoy experimenting with the many possibilities in high end printing.

Does that mean that traditional Chinese packaging design is doomed? Has it lost its raison d'etre in today's world? I say no, and there are two reasons why. In Western terms it may seem so much kitsch, but the endearing design wins many an admirer. Consumers are able to identify with the colourful pictures, something that cannot be said for the highly professional packages of the "New China". But precisely that emotional connection plays a major role in consumer behaviour in China - and provides a strong incentive to purchase a particular brand.

Nevertheless I am quite convinced that the current generation of packaging in China is only a transitional phase. During the social, political, economic and cultural upheaval in China, goods are very likely to become increasingly westernised. This not only applies to an overall increase in quality, but also to the adoption of Western packaging design.

But - some day - when the Chinese return to the roots and traditions of their own cultural history, they will use it as a basis for their very own individual style. Then they will be able to exploit the potential slumbering in their exotic designs and inundate the Western markets with even more products carrying the "Made in China" label. Chinese design may even become the industry standard. Who knows, China itself may become the economic power it was some one thousand years ago, when it was known as the Middle Kingdom.

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