



Integrated visual culture in Neo-Chinese branding: A semiotic analysis of CHAGEE's packaging and digital campaigns

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Abstract.

The "Guochao" (Neo-Chinese) aesthetic trend has significantly transformed contemporary visual communication by redefining how traditional culture is represented in urban markets. This study explores CHAGEE's visual culture to understand the deconstruction and modernization of historical Chinese elements through design. Utilizing a qualitative case study integrated with systematic digital archiving, the research applies Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze packaging designs (beverage cups) and digital social media campaigns. The analysis reveals that CHAGEE utilizes toile de Jouy motifs and constellation symbols on physical packaging to establish historical legitimacy, while digital media transcodes these elements into urban lifestyle narratives and emotional storytelling. These findings indicate that the synergy between physical and digital domains aims to construct modern myths of "authenticity through origin" and "urban escapism." This study concludes that integrating archaic physical design with dynamic digital narratives allows cultural heritage to be successfully translated into contemporary lifestyle branding that resonates with modern audiences.

Keywords: Guochao, Roland Barthes, Brand Identity, Digital Branding, Packaging Design

Introduction

The acceleration of globalization and the homogenization of visual design in urban markets have paradoxically sparked a resurgence of local cultural identity in brand communication (Nasirov, 2025). As branded products become omnipresent and aesthetically consistent across global cities, a new consumerist movement has emerged in which buyers seek their "cultural soul" in everyday consumption, which is often seen as criticism of mass consumerism (Baudrillard, 1998; Eckhardt et al., 2015). From the perspective of visual design theory, such trends are mostly exemplified by the emergence of the "Guochao" or "Neo-Chinese" style aesthetic movement (Wang, 2022; Zhang & Yim, 2025). This development reflects a dramatic paradigm change in terms of visual communication where traditional motifs, typography, and narratives are adapted to modern minimalist design approaches (Bin, 2019). Within this context, the brand identity is divided into two major parts: the "Guo," referring to revival of the material culture of the past, and the "Chao," integrating contemporary street culture elements to merge East-West aesthetics (Wang, 2022). Hence, the "New Chinese Style" should not be viewed merely as an ephemeral trend but rather as the continuous process of cultural subjectivity and identity negotiation in the digital space (Zhang & Yim, 2025). Contrary to conventional heritage-based branding, which is often represented by archaic symbolism, Neo-Chinese branding uses deconstructed cultural symbols to appeal to the youth generation.

To translate thousands of years of history into a contemporary visual image requires a great amount of effort from the design process. Indeed, many traditional tea brands demonstrate several flaws defined by their excessive and superficial nature which fails to convey true cultural values. According to the recent studies, superficial use of cultural symbols often leads to a misinterpretation

of rich stories and transforms them into simple and shallow visual designs losing its brand value (Huo et al., 2025). In turn, when used in a correct way, certain visual design attributes such as colors, curvatures, and angles significantly influence consumer perceptions of taste and nutritional qualities of the goods (Liu et al., 2025; Spence & Van Doorn, 2022). As an illustrative case of a product brand successfully meeting this challenge, CHAGEE can be mentioned as a company which managed to successfully understand out about the psychology of urban consumers and incorporate cultural values in line with contemporary aesthetic needs (Chen et al., 2024; Z. Huang & Jung, 2024).

In order to conduct an appropriate analysis of the complex heritage depiction involved in the case study, the current research will use Roland Barthes' semiotic theory as the fundamental theoretical perspective. The theory of Barthes concerning the concept of signification in contemporary visual communication design distinguishes between denotation (visual features such as composition and typography) and connotation (cultural and emotional meanings) and can be effectively applied to identify the way in which heritage is modernized. Furthermore, Barthes' notion of myth is especially useful for the examination of the ways in which contemporary brands construct their ideological discourse that seems to be natural for consumers (Barthes, 1972; Holt, 2004).

The results of previous research carried out in Indonesia show the significance of a suitable visual identity and branding approach to ensure local product competitiveness in the market as well as increasing the added value of products due to the redesigning of traditional food brands through the application of local illustrations and modern fonts (Oktavianus & Erlyana, 2024; Wijaya & Erlyana, 2022). Specifically, regarding the premium tea industry, research shows that the new design of takeaway packaging, which includes attractive visual communications and interactive features, plays a significant role in capturing the attention of customers and delivering a special brand image (Erlyana & Hanifah, 2024). Hence, packaging is considered the main tool used in communicating with consumers because, besides functioning as a holder for products, it functions as a visual communication tool. Moreover, current research has shown that premium tea packaging serves as an important means of cultural communication, where the incorporation of cultural symbols into packaging design greatly helps deliver a cultural message and increase identification among customers (Zang et al., 2025).

Despite the prominence of the Neo-Chinese aesthetic, a critical gap remains in the existing visual communication literature. Most of the existing research focuses on the semiotics of packaging, usually highlighting the need for the retention of classical elements (Bin, 2019) or exclusively investigating the digital marketing strategies of tea brands (Jiang, 2024). However, such an atomized approach fails to account for the semiotic fluidity required in the process of branding today. In the present paper, the above-mentioned problem is remedied by focusing on the interplay between these two dimensions and their capacity to create a coherent brand myth. The theoretical novelty of the current study consists not only in enriching the visual palette but also in revealing the nature of visual transcoding. Thus, through the simultaneous consideration of CHAGEE's primary packaging (drinks cups) and the digital marketing campaigns focused on its lifestyles, it is possible to demonstrate how physical objects provide historical legitimacy, which is then transcoded into emotionally appealing stories through digital technologies.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach using a single case study design. A case study is highly appropriate for this research because it enables an in-depth, contextual investigation of a contemporary, bounded phenomenon, in this case, the visual identity of CHAGEE within the Indonesian urban market. Rather than generating statistical generalizations, this design allows for a deep structural reading of how a specific brand translates traditional Chinese heritage into a modern

visual language. The case is strictly bounded to the brand's official visual communications (primary packaging and digital media) produced during its primary expansion phase in Indonesia.

Data Collection and Corpus Bounding

Data collection was conducted through direct visual observation and systematic digital archiving. The term "digital ethnography" is purposefully avoided, as the study focuses strictly on the semiotic reading of official visual outputs rather than analyzing user interactions or online community behaviors. The visual corpus was established using purposive sampling based on visual saturation and thematic relevance to the Guochao aesthetic. The primary data sources were explicitly defined as follows:

1. **Primary Packaging (Beverage Cups):** Physical visual samples were collected from CHAGEE retail outlets in Jakarta, Indonesia. Two specific structural variations were purposively selected: the "Classic Design" and the "Anniversary Design" ("From 8 to Infinity"). These specific cups were chosen because they represent the two core pillars of the brand's visual strategy; the Classic design establishes the foundational heritage identity (the Peking Opera mask and *toile de Jouy*), while the Anniversary design represents the brand's narrative evolution toward global expansion.
2. **Digital Media:** Digital visual data was systematically sourced from the brand's verified Instagram account (@chagee.id) covering a specific 12-month posting period (February 2025 to February 2026). Out of the total posts published within this timeframe, a focused corpus of 15 key visual posts was purposively selected. The selection criteria strictly required the posts to feature major emotional branding campaigns (specifically the "BO·YA" campaign) or lifestyle photography featuring local Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) interacting with the primary packaging. This scope ensures the analysis focuses only on how the physical product is contextualized within modern urban environments.

Analytical Procedure

The collected visual corpus was analyzed using the structural semiotic framework developed by Roland Barthes (1972), supported by established visual methodology principles (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020; Rose, 2022). To ensure methodological replicability, the analysis was not conducted impressionistically, but operationalized into a systematic, three-step coding procedure (see Figure 1):

1. **Denotative Deconstruction (Unitization):** The visual data (both physical cups and digital posts) was broken down into specific units of analysis. This involved cataloging literal visual elements such as line art motifs, typography, color palettes, and layout structures.
2. **Connotative Contextualization:** Each identified visual unit was then interpreted based on its socio-cultural associations. This interpretive step involved linking the visual signs to historical Chinese material culture (e.g., porcelain aesthetics, the Tea Horse Road) and mapping them against contemporary global design trends.
3. **Mythical Synthesis:** Finally, the connotative meanings across the physical and digital domains were synthesized to reveal the overarching 'myth' or ideology constructed by the brand. This step evaluated how the specific arrangement of signs naturalizes broader cultural narratives, such as "modern oriental luxury."

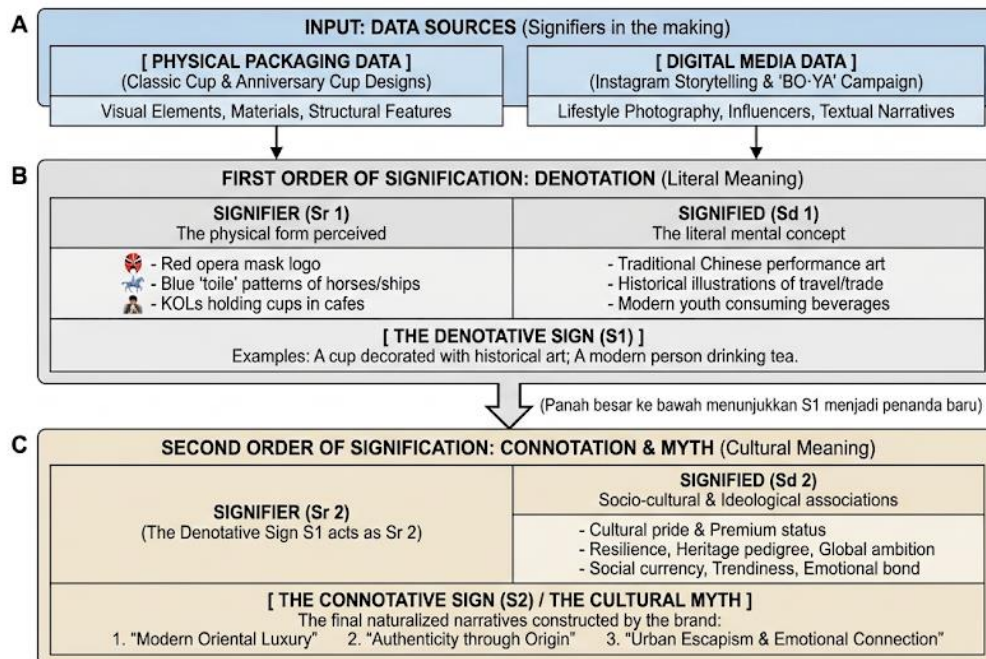


Figure 1. The structural semiotic analysis framework based on Roland Barthes' theory
Source: Adapted from Barthes (1972) and researchers' own analysis

Data Validation

Because the data sources (packaging and official Instagram) remain internal to the same brand ecosystem, traditional empirical source triangulation was not applicable. Instead, to ensure the rigor and credibility of the qualitative reading, this study utilized investigator triangulation and theoretical matching. The three authors independently coded a representative subset of the visual corpus using the predefined three-step semiotic procedure. Interpretive discrepancies were discussed and resolved through peer consensus to minimize subjective bias. Furthermore, the semiotic findings were continuously validated by cross-referencing them with established academic literature on the Guochao aesthetic and emotional branding, ensuring the visual reading remained structurally sound and theoretically grounded.

Result and Discussion

The results of this study present a detailed semiotic deconstruction of the visual, structural, and narrative elements found across CHAGEE's primary physical packaging (beverage cups) and official digital media platforms. This is followed by a critical discussion using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to unpack how these interconnected signs commodify and recontextualize traditional cultural narratives for modern urban consumption.

Semiotic Analysis of Physical Packaging 1: The Classic Design and Identity Establishment

The visual evidence shows that there is a well-thought-out incorporation of historical references into the packaging of CHAGEE's core products. CHAGEE's use of a monochromatic color palette of blue and white references the style of Chinese porcelain, and the image uses an arrangement based on the toile de Jouy style, which is known for its intricate line drawings of historical or pastoral scenes in monochrome on a white ground. By making this choice, CHAGEE has created a connection between cultures visually. The cup design is centered on brand building. As shown in Figure 2, it has a white background with intricate blue line drawings and a red circular logo in which a simplified image of a Peking Opera mask can be seen.

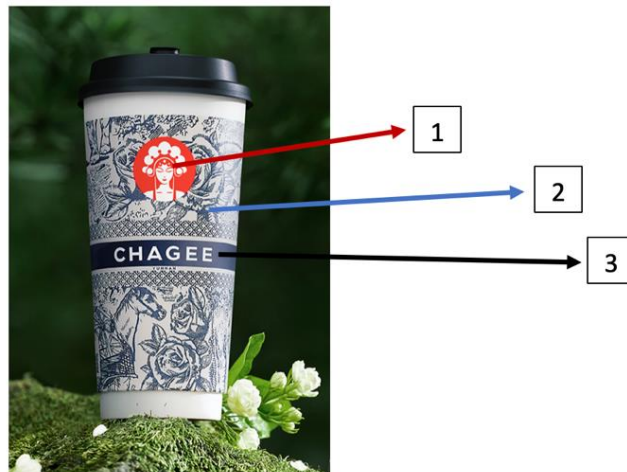


Figure 2. Visual mapping of key semiotic elements on CHAGEE’s classic beverage cup
 Source: Adapted from CHAGEE official packaging (2025); semiotic mapping by the researchers

Table 1. Semiotic Matrix of CHAGEE’s Classic Physical Packaging

Visual Attribute	Denotation (Physical Element)	Connotation (Cultural Meaning)	Visual Function & Myth
1. Primary Red Emblem (Peking Opera Mask)	A vibrant red circular focal point featuring a minimalist silhouette.	Cultural pride, brand vitality, and the energy of performance art.	Function: Focal point for brand recognition. Myth: "Modern Oriental Luxury".
2. Blue-and-White 'Toile de Jouy' Motif	Intricate monochromatic line art illustrating the ancient Tea Horse Road.	Historical endurance, artisanal craftsmanship, and cross-cultural fusion (East meets West).	Function: Narrative canvas and aesthetic elevation. Myth: "Authenticity through Origin".
3. Modern Sans-Serif Typography ("CHAGEE")	Clean, bold, and highly legible English typography layered over traditional art.	Contemporary relevance, global accessibility, and confidence.	Function: linguistic bridge to modern consumers. Myth: "Accessible Premium Lifestyle".

Source: Semiotic analysis of CHAGEE official primary packaging (2024)

The movement from elements of denotation to larger brand myths is not carried out in a vacuum; it involves a calculated Barthesian process whereby historical signs are taken out of context and used to promote capitalist ideology. Myths listed in Table 1 are not predetermined conclusions but are created using specific images. First, the myth "Authenticity through Origin" is created by using the elements of toile de Jouy. In terms of denotation, they show horses, characters, and nature. On the level of connotation, however, these images allude to Tea Horse Road, symbolizing artisanal quality and historical significance. As a myth, this image is designed to legitimate the authenticity of CHAGEE. Using the imagery of a historical trade route as packaging helps obfuscate the mass production process and makes the consumer believe that buying CHAGEE means entering a continuous chain of historical events instead of simply consuming tea.

Secondly, the myth of "Oriental Luxury for Modern Consumers" is immediately created after the creation of the first myth to balance it. It occurs with the help of placing the red mask of Chinese Peking Opera. On the level of denotation, this symbol represents traditional Eastern performing art. However, on the level of connotation, its minimalistic shape placed against the bright white background creates an image of a high-end fashion designer piece. Thus, instead of representing traditional heritage, this mask is presented as a cultural artifact fit for contemporary urban use.

Finally, the myth of an "Accessible Premium Lifestyle" is implemented through typography. Denotatively, the name "CHAGEE" is represented in the minimalistic sans-serif English type placed

directly above traditional art. Connotatively, it imitates the style of typography employed by famous global luxury brands. On the Barthesian level, this symbol acts as an ideological vehicle translating deep Eastern symbolism to a form of culture appreciated by the Western consumers.





Semiotic Analysis of Physical Packaging 2: The Anniversary Design and Global Expansion

As an evolution of its identity, CHAGEE released a second cup design for its 8th-anniversary campaign titled "From 8 to Infinity." This variant reverses the color scheme, featuring a solid deep-blue background with white line art forming a constellation. This design strategically removes the dominant red logo and fragments the overarching Tea Horse Road narrative into specific, digestible individual symbols, shifting the brand myth towards global expansion, as visualized in Figure 3. The specific denotations and connotations of these anniversary motifs are deconstructed in Table 2.



Figure 3. CHAGEE’s "From 8 to Infinity" anniversary cup design featuring constellation motifs. Source: @chagee.id Official Instagram (2025)

Table 2. Semiotic Deconstruction of the Anniversary Packaging Motifs

Visual Motif (Denotation)	Connotation & Symbolic Meaning	Semiotic Function within the Brand
The Horse 	Resilience, connection, and the ancient carriers traversing the Tea Horse Road.	Establishes historical pedigree and the brand's mission to bridge different cultures.
The Ship 	Openness, maritime exploration, and the journey of carrying tea to the world.	Communicates the brand's global ambition and the expansion of its horizons.
The Asian Elephant 	A nod to the rich biodiversity and natural environment of the Yunnan region.	Reinforces the geographical origin and environmental authenticity of the raw materials.
The Yunnan Rose 	The heart of the identity and the core raw material.	Acts as a geographical anchor, paying tribute to the brand's rich heritage and origin.

The Tea Leaf



A structural, perforated section revealing promotional codes, connoting interactive gamification and digital rewards.

Separates symbolic heritage from functional marketing; designed to capture younger demographics through behavioral engagement.

Source: Adapted from CHAGEE official primary packaging and visual campaigns (2024); semiotic analysis by the researchers

Unlike the classic packaging that relies on a continuous historical scene, the anniversary design operates through visual fragmentation. In Barthesian terms, the historical Tea Horse Road is deconstructed into isolated, modular icons (the horse, the ship, the elephant). Stripped of their complex historical context, these motifs become "floating signifiers" repurposed as sleek, constellation-like badges of authenticity. The ideological myth constructed here is one of "Global Cultural Boundlessness." By framing these cultural and geographical markers within the visual language of a constellation, the brand suggests that its heritage is not confined to the ancient East, but is a universal, expanding force (represented by the ship). Furthermore, the physical juxtaposition of these cultural symbols alongside the 'Tear & Win' mechanism starkly exposes the underlying capitalist logic of the packaging. The traditional heritage is quite literally "torn open" to reveal a modern digital discount code. This structural feature vividly illustrates the premiumization and gamification of tradition, where cultural signs are ultimately mobilized to drive behavioral consumer engagement.

Semiotic Analysis of Digital Media and Emotional Branding

While the physical packaging anchors the brand in historical legitimacy, the digital media strategy, analyzed through CHAGEE Indonesia's official Instagram (@chagee.id), shifts the semiotic focus from historical origins to contemporary lifestyle consumption. This is not merely a promotional display; it is a highly curated representation of modern urban identity. Figure 4 showcases examples of this digital storytelling, while Table 3 maps the semiotic translation of these digital attributes.

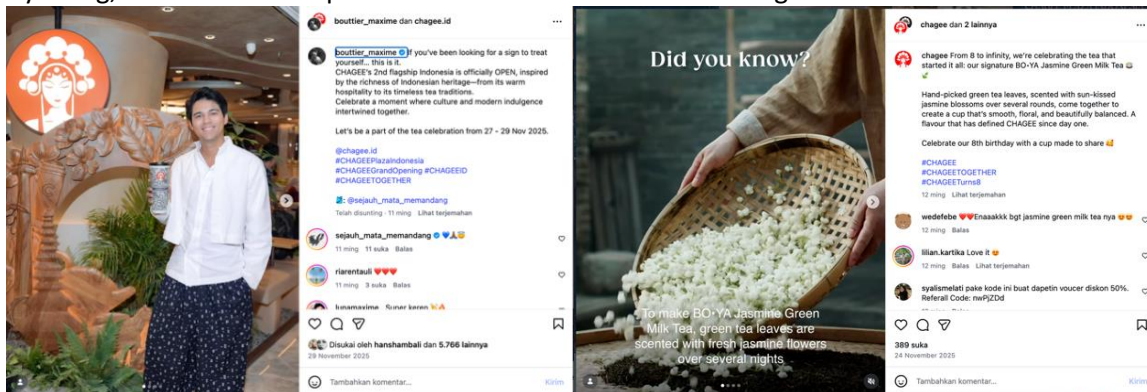


Figure 4. Digital storytelling featuring local influencers and the BO-YA campaign.

Source: @chagee.id Official Instagram (2025)

Table 3. Semiotic Matrix of CHAGEE's Digital Media (@chagee.id)

Visual Attribute	Digital Media & Emotional Branding
Denotation	High-resolution photography featuring local Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in contemporary fashion, posing with relaxed gestures in brightly lit, minimalist urban spaces. The strategic textual renaming of the Jasmine Green Milk Tea to "BO-YA."
Connotation	Aspirational middle-class leisure, social currency, and the aestheticization of daily life. The term "BO-YA" connotes a classic Chinese legend of deep friendship (<i>Zhi Yin</i>), signaling intimacy and cultural poetry.
Visual Function	Contextualizing the physical product as a lifestyle prop and shifting the focus from literal product ingredients to emotional resonance.
Consumer Myth	"Urban Escapism" and "Tea as an Emotional Connection."

Source: Semiotic analysis of @chagee.id official Instagram visuals (2025)

To transition from these digital denotations to the overarching myths, this analysis critically problematizes the brand's representational strategies, drawing on foundational theories of representation (Hall, 2025; Machin & Mayr, 2023) within the context of contemporary digital visual discourse (Men, 2026; Zhang & Yim, 2025). The digital visuals actively construct a specific class discourse. Denotatively, the KOLs are never depicted in traditional, dimly lit tea houses; instead, they are placed in highly curated, gentrified urban environments characterized by minimalist architecture and bright lighting. Connotatively, this photographic framing deliberately distances the product from the "archaic" or "slow" stereotypes of traditional Chinese tea ceremonies. It aligns the beverage with the aesthetics of globalized coffee culture, thereby naturalizing the product as a marker of aspirational, middle-class youth identity.

Furthermore, the gestural and stylistic composition of the KOLs plays a critical ideological role. The subjects are consistently styled in neutral, modern wardrobes, holding the classic or anniversary cups with relaxed, effortless gestures. The cup is no longer just a container; it functions semiotically as a lifestyle prop, a piece of social currency that signals the consumer's cultural capital and aesthetic awareness. The visual narrative suggests that consuming CHAGEE is an act of seamless integration into a trendy, fast-paced urban lifestyle, reinforcing the myth of "Urban Escapism" where tradition is consumed effortlessly on the go.

Finally, this visual aestheticization is heavily reinforced by textual transcoding, most notably through the "BO·YA" campaign. By renaming a standard Jasmine Green Milk Tea to "BO·YA" (evoking the ancient Chinese idiom of *Zhi Yin*, or finding a soulmate who truly understands your "music"), the brand executes a strategic example of emotional commodification. It shifts the consumer's focus away from the literal, physical transaction of buying flavored tea, transforming it into the consumption of an emotional experience. The traditional narrative of deep, historical friendship is repackaged to serve modern commercial interests, successfully finalizing the myth of "Tea as an Emotional Connection." Through these coordinated digital strategies, cultural heritage is systematically stripped of its historical friction and sold as an accessible, emotionally resonant modern lifestyle.

Discussion: The Synergy of Visual Culture and the Commodification of Heritage

The analysis demonstrates that CHAGEE's visual strategy successfully integrates physical design with digital storytelling. However, from a critical visual culture perspective, this synergy reveals a deeper ideological tension: the strategic commodification and premiumization of cultural heritage for contemporary urban consumption.

The primary packaging acts as the foundational semiotic anchor. By employing the *toile de Jouy* aesthetic, CHAGEE utilizes logo complexity to shape a luxurious brand image. The intricate monochromatic line art creates a perception of high craftsmanship, which has been empirically shown to enhance brand luxuriousness (Tang et al., 2025). This aligns with Zang et al. (2025), who argue that integrating traditional cultural elements with modern design transforms packaging into a powerful cultural carrier. Furthermore, the use of clean sans-serif typography over these complex backgrounds ensures visual consistency while signaling modern premium values (Lelis et al., 2022).

The transition from the classic to the anniversary design further illustrates a shift toward modular visual fragmentation. This deconstruction of heritage into isolated icons functions as symbolic imagery that requires specific cognitive processing to shape consumer evaluation (C. H. Huang et al., 2026). Moreover, the strategic use of layout and visual texture in the "From 8 to Infinity" design mirrors contemporary findings where specific typographic and textural cues are utilized to convey product quality and luxury perception (Iseki et al., 2025). This prevents the heritage messaging from feeling archaic, functioning instead as a curated educational canvas.

However, physical packaging alone is insufficient to shed the archaic stigma often associated with traditional tea in a highly saturated market. As suggested by Spence and Van Doorn (2022), specific visual design features such as color and layout significantly mediate consumer associations with product properties. CHAGEE bridges these physical attributes with digital realms through structural packaging innovations like the "Tear & Win" concept. Rather than claiming this directly

dictates consumer behavior within this specific case study, the strategy is visually and structurally aligned with empirical evidence showing that Generation Z consumers place a greater emphasis on sensory novelty, creativity, and originality in brand experiences (Erlyana & Lim, 2025b, 2025a). This design choice starkly exposes the capitalist logic operating behind the Neo-Chinese aesthetic: traditional symbols are utilized to establish authenticity, while modern gamification is employed to drive transactional engagement among younger demographics.

Through its digital presence, CHAGEE positions itself not merely as a seller of tea, but as a purveyor of emotion. The strategic renaming of their product to 'BO·YA' shifts the focus from literal botanical ingredients to an emotional narrative. This framing leverages aesthetic modernity and emotional resonance, elements that are central to the dialectical interaction between national heritage and modern civic practice in the digital era (Fu et al., 2026), and are heavily favored by algorithmic recommendations to construct public consensus (Wang, 2025). According to Fu et al. (2026), the vitality of contemporary cultural narratives depends on this sustained negotiation between top-down cultural frameworks and bottom-up consumer behaviors. In CHAGEE's case, the brand's use of local Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in curated settings reconstructs traditional aesthetic connotations through *visual transcoding* to foster symbolic identification (Men, 2026). As previously noted, celebrity endorsement on social media is a recognized strategy to enhance a brand's indirect influence (Uribe et al., 2022); it validates the product as a modern lifestyle necessity that aligns with the public's search for cultural soul.

Ultimately, the consistency between the culturally anchored packaging and the dynamic digital presence ensures that CHAGEE's heritage is represented as an actively lived experience, aligning with industry trends where traditional brands achieve rejuvenation through integrated digital platforms (Cheng, 2024). This effectively drives cultural identity by mitigating consumer anxiety and fostering cultural pride through emotional self-regulation mechanisms (Meng et al., 2025). By mastering this synergy, CHAGEE successfully packages cultural authenticity into the contemporary myths of "Urban Escapism" and "Tea as an Emotional Connection."

Conclusion

This study set out to systematically decode how the "Guochao" (Neo-Chinese) aesthetic trend is operationalized within contemporary visual communication design, specifically investigating how traditional Chinese heritage is modernized to construct urban brand identities. Through an integrated semiotic analysis of CHAGEE's primary physical packaging and digital media campaigns, this research demonstrates that translating cultural heritage requires more than the superficial application of archaic symbols; it necessitates a synergistic mechanism of visual transcoding.

The visual and textual analysis reveals that CHAGEE's primary packaging establishes historical legitimacy through specific denotative choices, such as *toile de Jouy* illustrations and blue-and-white porcelain aesthetics. However, to mitigate the archaic stigma of traditional tea, these physical anchors are actively transcoded by the brand's digital media strategy into contemporary emotional narratives. By contextualizing the product within gentrified urban spaces and renaming it to evoke classical legends (e.g., the "BO·YA" campaign), the brand constructs the contemporary cultural myths of "Authenticity through Origin" and "Urban Escapism." Ultimately, this study demonstrates semiotically how cultural heritage is commodified and packaged as an accessible lifestyle prop for the modern urban demographic.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. First, this is a qualitative inquiry based on a single-case study bounded to CHAGEE's official visual outputs during a specific period. The findings are highly contextual and may not universally apply to all Guochao brands. Second, the methodological scope is strictly limited to the semiotic interpretation of brand representation. It does not measure actual market effectiveness, brand equity, or empirical audience reception. The

conclusions drawn reflect the *intended* ideological construction of the brand, rather than verified consumer behavior.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes an analytical perspective to the discourse on visual communication design and cultural branding. It provides practitioners and researchers with an interpretive lens to critically evaluate how traditional symbols are repurposed to serve modern commercial ideologies. Future research should expand upon these findings by employing quantitative or mixed-methods approaches, such as consumer reception surveys or ethnographic interviews, to empirically test how different generational cohorts (e.g., Generation Z versus Generation Y) actively decode, accept, or resist these Neo-Chinese cultural representations in their daily consumption practices.

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