

# ICON, SYMBOLS, AND MEANINGS: THE SEMIOTICS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE IN PAIN RELIEF PACKAGING

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**Abstract.** This study deals with the semiotics of TCM packaging on pain relief patches, focusing on how visual and symbolic elements bring cultural and therapeutic meanings to products while shaping consumer trust and purchase decisions. Making use of theories from Saussure and Peirce, an analysis of these leading TCM brands, Vita Green, Yunnan Baiyao, and Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie (a traditional Chinese drug of Lingnan region) is drawn, which reflects the use of icons, symbols, and color schemes. Traditional motifs, such as calligraphy, yin-yang imagery, and natural elements, emphasize cultural authenticity and trust for the domestic consumer. Modern design elements, including minimalist layouts, bilingual text, and cooler color palettes, are more suited to international markets, increasing accessibility and global appeal. The findings show that TCM brands equate tradition with modernity when integrating cultural heritage and contemporary branding strategies. This is an effective duality which allows them to reach different types of audiences and penetrate the maze of globalization without compromising authenticity. The study contributes to the understanding of how semiotic elements influence perceptions and provides insight into what directions TCM brands should look for when venturing outward. Future studies could look at consumer responses and the role of emerging technologies in upgrading the semiotics of TCM packaging.

**Keywords:** *traditional Chinese medicine, pain relief patch, icons and symbols, cultural heritage, modern branding strategies, consumer trust*

## Introduction

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has remained a central pillar of health and wellness in Eastern Asia for centuries. Such an approach includes holistic healing centered on natural remedies, philosophical insights, and empirical data (Nestler, 2002). Throughout the centuries, TCM has gradually transformed into an intense system within Chinese culture, symbolizing a harmonious, balanced, and energetic way. Among its many uses, pain-relieving patches hold a unique ground as a contemporary blend of some ancient healing concepts and modern conveniences for consumers. Indeed, these have been widely adopted for their applications in relieving pain, ensuring proper blood flow, and alleviating symptoms stemming from musculoskeletal discomfort. Packaging is dual-tasked, functional utility and cultural storytelling for TCM products entering the global market. Packaging protects and presents the product, but it also plays the decisive role of semiotic text as visual and symbolic elements evoke layers of meaning.

In the case of TCM pain relief patches, designs must balance cultural authenticity with modern-day branding. Icons, symbols, and aesthetic appeals communicate ideas related to tradition, efficacy, and trust, which may influence consumer perception and buying choice (DuPuis and Silva, 2011). In globalization, semiotics of packaging become very relevant for TCM brands as they need to appeal to a wide range of audiences. While traditional motifs such as calligraphy, yin-yang symbols, and images

of nature appeal to domestic consumers, international markets may require minimalist designs, natural color palettes, and bilingual text that aligns with global branding trends. That duality presents an attractive arena for inquiry in that TCM packaging negotiates a space between maintaining cultural heritage and altering to satisfy the expectations of a modern, globalized audience. This study attempts to decode the semiotics of a TCM pain relief patch package to analyze the visual elements and symbols used in packaging by great brands in China. In doing this, the research could identify cultural-therapeutic expression and how it eventually affects consumer trust and choices. The study chose three leading TCM brands, namely Vita Green, Yunnan Baiyao, and Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie, to contribute towards understanding the conjunction of traditional healing practices and modern branding strategies with cultural narratives and how they get reimagined for contemporary consumption.

### ***Research questions***

- (1) What are the dominant semiotic elements of TCM pain relief patch packaging?
- (2) How do these elements signify cultural, therapeutic, and brand-specific meanings?
- (3) How does semiotics affect consumer trust and purchase decisions?

### ***Sub-title/topic***

Originating from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, this body of research about semiotics would provide an initial theoretical structure by which the workings of meaning could be established within signs and symbols. More concretely, Saussure focused the framework on how signifiers were interrelated to the signified, the thing to which it was referring (Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou, 2020). In contrast, Peirce would extend that work by placing signs, objects, and interpretants within a triadic relationship. Together, these theories provide strong instruments for deconstructing the semiotic constituents of packaging design, including its visual, textual, and symbolic language and how they give culture and emotion. The field of packaging semiotics has been richly discussed as an important variable in branding, consumer behavior, and cultural representation. Research scholars have shown the way packaging can become a silent salesman in determining perceptions on consumerist matters, thus establishing how visuals, materiality, and symbolism could play significant roles in making perceptions and emotional involvements or affiliations in alignment with expectations on consumers (Clifton, 2009). Research in this field has shown that functionality is very much blended with aesthetic requirements, especially in products that bear deep cultural importance, such as traditional Chinese medicine (TCM).

Within this domain, the interaction between cultural heritage and modern branding strategies has attracted much attention from scholars. This is because most studies have highlighted the significance of ancient motifs, such as calligraphy, yin-yang, and nature-inspired designs, to lend deeper cultural authenticity and trustworthiness (Liu and Nah, 2021). Such elements speak to the philosophical foundations of TCM and reflect the traditional values of domestic consumers who consider effectiveness. On the other hand, global markets necessitate adaptation of international consumer preferences. These could include minimalist aesthetic appeals, bilingual text, or materials that seem environmentally conscious in their modernity. Consumer psychology research has also expanded on how elements of semiotics can impact consumer purchasing decisions and

brand loyalty (Oswald, 2012). Visual elements, including color schemes and typography, contribute to specific emotional responses to advertisements. Warm colors such as red and gold, often associated with packaging for TCM, connote good fortune, wellness, and effectiveness in Chinese culture. International packaging, on the other hand, uses cooler tones, such as green and blue, which are associated with nature, safety, and modernity in global markets. This shift in semiotic strategy underscores the importance of cultural contextualization in branding.

Despite all these advances, there are still several knowledge gaps in understanding how TCM packages incorporate semiotic elements that would specifically influence consumer perceptions of trust, efficacy, and cultural authenticity. Although individual components, like color symbolism, have been taken into consideration by prior studies, there are very few holistic approaches that involve the integration of semiotics, cultural studies, and consumer psychology. It thus tries to address this gap through an analysis of the semiotic dimensions of the packaging of TCM pain relief patches, based on how those dimensions are developed into meaning and are influential for the behavior of the consumer. Using the examples of leading brands contributes to a more comprehensive debate on tradition-modernity and globalization in branding.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology, which is based on semiotic theory, to understand how the packaging of TCM pain relief patches conveys meanings related to culture, therapy, and brand. It looks at some of the well-known brands in TCM, focusing on how traditional design elements are interrelated with modern branding strategies and affect consumer trust and purchasing decisions. It's a methodology set to allow comprehensive and systematic analysis through the decoding of the semiotics of packaging from visual, textual, and contextual data.

### ***Sample selection***

Since pain relief patches are categorized under traditional Chinese patent medicines, particularly approved by the National Medical Products Administration of China to ensure their authenticity and representativeness, three leading Chinese brands, namely Vita Green, Yunnan Baiyao, and Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie, have been chosen due to their cultural relevance, significant market influence, and the utilization of traditional Chinese medicine ingredients. These brands were picked on account of their popularity and high recognition in the home as well as overseas markets and were thus ideal candidates to explore the balance between traditional beauty and modern influence. All of the chosen products serve the same functional purpose: alleviating pain and improving blood flow. Thus, they enable a concentrated examination of how semiotic elements are used in this category. The selection criteria also included diversity in packaging design so that the analysis reflects the different strategies used by TCM brands to address different consumer segments.

### ***Data collection***

High-resolution images of TCM pain relief patches from packaging available at physical outlets, e-commerce sites, and the official company websites were compiled. This provided the opportunity to collect both domestically and internationally

customized packaging, targeting regional market preference variations. Additionally, secondary data from consumer reviews, marketing reports, and company communications were retrieved to supplement visual data. These sources gave me insights into how people interpret and respond to elements of semiotic packaging, coupled with how branding articulates and expresses its position and identity.

### ***Semiotic analysis***

The core analytical framework is grounded in semiotic theory, with a focus on three primary dimensions of packaging design: (1) Icons: Images of herbs and traditional cultural motifs were content-analyzed to understand their representational and symbolic meanings. Many of these icons are direct indicators of the medicinal benefits of the product and cultural authenticity. (2) Symbols: Some studies were conducted through the examination of traditional symbols and signs, particularly Chinese characters, calligraphy, and seals in order to analyze how they actually carry deeper, cultural, or philosophical meanings and how they signify the identity that the product wants to establish—a trusted TCM heritage. (3) Colors and Typography: The use of color schemes, styles of fonts, and design was explored concerning their emotive and cultural dimensions. The warmth of the color tones, as in the example of the warmth of the tone of red or gold and effectiveness and prosperity, in domestic markets as opposed to international contexts is said to elicit cooler tones—green and blue—associated with natural environment and security appeal.

### ***Data analysis process***

Data was codified and categorized into recurring themes and patterns. Each element, icon, symbol, color, and typography were critiqued based on their cultural, therapeutic, and emotional content. The results were interpreted using the lens of the semiotic theory of both Saussure's signifier and signified, as well as Peirce's triadic model of signs. The methodology aims to explore, in detail, how the TCM pain relief patch communicates meaning and influences consumer behavior through packaging. Integrating semiotic analysis with consumer insights, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the intersection of tradition, modernity, and branding in the context of TCM products. By integrating the analysis of signs with consumer knowledge, the study adds to the wider discussion about the intersection of tradition, modernity, and branding in TCM products.

## **Results and Discussion**

The analysis of the packaging for the TCM pain relief patch discloses that the traditional elements of culture intersect dynamically with contemporary branding strategies. The following presents findings from semiotic analysis organized in key themes and an explication of what these could mean for a broader understanding of how packaging influences perception, trust, and purchasing behaviors.

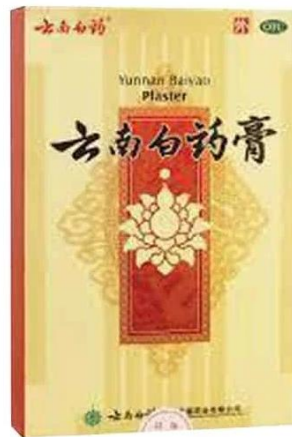
### ***Traditional design elements: Cultural authenticity and heritage***

Traditional design elements are prominent throughout TCM-based pain relief patches, thus evoking cultural authenticity and reinforcing user trust in their effectiveness. Most common motifs involve calligraphy and nature-inspired scenes, as

well as ancient seals across brands. Sometimes, traditional Chinese calligraphy may be used extensively for brand names or important information on the products. The text is elegant; it evokes heritage, authority, and a gateway to knowledge from ancient times. For example, Vita Green employs powerful, traditional fonts to emphasize its rich heritage as an authentic TCM supply company. Natural image use, such as pictures of medicinal herbs, mountains, and other natural features, can represent that the product comes from nature and shares an ideology in the holistic Traditional Chinese Medicine approach. Such icons create visual relationships between the product and natural healing processes. Many medicines of Vita Green includes images of objects that are significant in the Chinese culture and mythology. For example, the relief patch from vita green (*Figure 1*) includes the picture of bamboo, which as highlighted by Li et al. (2024) relates to the idea of flexibility and gracefulness, attaching the picture to the impact of the patch. This high-quality bamboo vinegar stock solution that has been matured for 15 years (*Figure 1*) is advertised for removing dampness and improving physical fitness. It also helps to promote blood circulation and accelerates metabolism, reduces swelling and pain, removes dampness and detoxifies. On the other hand, the Yunnan Baiyao Plaster 5 Patches (*Figure 2*), that helps to relieve aches and pains in muscles and joints and reduce swelling includes images of flowers that have cultural significance in the Chinese heritage. Lotus is considered the symbol of creation and goodness (Ruan, 2023). In addition, cultural motifs include yin-yang symbols, seals, and images of traditional historical figures that evoke the product's identity as part of a time-honored healing tradition. Such cultural elements resonate with the hearts of domestic consumers, who attach value to the country's culture and expect TCM products to carry a relationship to their past. They increase the trustworthiness of consumers since it portrays authenticity, efficacy, and respect for the old ways; the packaging, therefore, strikes a chord with local audiences' expectations.



**Figure 1.** Bamboo Vinegar and Tian Health Patch (24 pieces): Dehumidifying foot patch, quick dehumidification, made of the highest quality Japanese moss bamboo, suitable for swollen feet and face; Vita Green.



*Figure 2. Yunnan Baiyao Plaster 5 Patches.*

### ***Modern design elements: Global appeal and accessibility***

Besides traditional elements, modern design features are being used more and more to appeal to a younger and international audience. Simple layouts, bilingual text, and modern typography are typical of packaging designed for international markets (Poulin, 2018). Minimalist designs replace intricate traditional patterns with clean lines and organized compositions that fit into global branding trends emphasizing simplicity and clarity. These designs reach out to a more general customer demographic, so that the product looks more accessible and less complicated to the customer. For example, the simple and minimal design of Yunnan Baiyao products (*Figure 3*) used for iron injuries, swelling and pain highlights how they use a more general and simple approach for the market. The product helps promote blood circulation, reduce swelling, relieve pain, and helps to dispel wind and dampness. The bilingual text on packaging becomes visible, enhancing international accessibility of the product while allowing it to convey its meaning to consumers to communicate its versatility to other cultures and global marketplaces. As *Figure 3* shows, the brand uses both Mandarin and English language to write the name and use of the medicine, which makes it easier for non-Chinese consumers to trust the brand and familiarize them with the products and ingredients. More modern sans-serif fonts often balance historical lettering. For instance, Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie's simplistic and modern designs make it more attractive to international consumers but still maintain the cultural elements that make it a TCM product. These modern elements help the product appeal to international consumers, making it more accessible and aligned with global design aesthetics. They also help in building trust among non-Chinese audiences by portraying the product as transparent, contemporary, and universally relevant.



Figure 3. Yunnan Baiyao-Plaster (5 pieces).

### Color symbolism: Emotional and cultural resonance

The patterns that emerge, though, can be different when considering domestic markets and international markets. In terms of packaging to be used within domestic markets, warm colors predominate with red and gold. Tones of orange and red evoke the culturally accepted connotation of vitality, luck, and health, and gold represents wealth and high worth. The packaging of Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie products use minimal color with only white and blue (Figure 4). On the other hand, Yunnan Baiyao products (Figure 3) use a combination of off-white and blue, symbolizing immortality and advancement in Chinese culture. These color combinations resonate in a powerful way among Chinese consumers in that they would enhance trust regarding the efficacy and premium quality of the product. These international market-designed packaging use more cool tones, green and blue to project a sense of nature, security, and progressiveness, catering to global needs where naturalness and serenity are more accepted. The thoughtfulness behind colour use is going to make all the difference with the emotional engagement of the consumer with the pack, enabling effective communication of brands in their messages targeting specific consumer categories.



Figure 4. Hong Kong Lingnan Wanyingjinjian Patches [Scientific Research Honorary Product] 6 pieces/pack.

### Brand-specific strategies: Tradition meets innovation

Each of the analyzed brands takes unique approaches in terms of tradition and modernity. Vita Green, for example, being one of the best-known TCM brands, underscores its rich legacy using motifs and calligraphy along with classical designs of packaging. Vita Green Chinese corporate heritage brand that has maintained its traditional imperial identity that has been proved to play a role in satisfying customers and build a relationship with the Chinese users (Balmer and Chen, 2017). International versions have minimal layouts and bilingual labels that bring out deep heritage along with the more modern elements of branding. Yunnan Baiyao, a national treasure with Class-1 protection status, is heavy on cultural symbols such as yin-yang imagery and historical seals to ensure authenticity and historicity. Packaging also emphasizes the unique formulation, catering to both the domestic and international markets. Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie takes on a hybrid approach by using the traditional Chinese aesthetics along with more modern design elements.

Evidence will thereby show how TCM pain relief patches successfully merge heritage with current brand management, tying together some of the great classic designs as the objective, with integrity and reliability among an audience that will remain homebound, to a greater convenience and attractiveness on global platforms. The move here also sheds light upon the flexibility that TCM brands display while facing the multifaceted nuances thrown by globalization. The results emphasize further the effect of color symbolism and brand-specific strategies in packaging that is emotive and culturally relevant for consumers from different walks of life. Therefore, adapting to local market contexts, TCM brands can thus sustain their cultural identity and capitalize on international trends. Based on this knowledge, there is an added insight into how semiotic strategies in packaging impact consumer trust and purchasing behaviors. With this realization, there is greater depth into the way that semiotic strategies of packaging impact the consumer's confidence and purchasing practices. Effective harmonization of factors from the old, middle and modern periods could guide TCM brands to find their way in globalization while upholding their culture. These dual strategies are creating trust and loyalty with cross-segments consumer bases by having products relevant to the domestic consumer base as well as appealing and appealing to foreign markets. Another good example is how TCM brands adapt to the cultural and market-specific demands; this again refers to the greater scope of semiotic strategies in global branding. In that case, it could be very critical for the balance between tradition and modernity to be maintained in brands under TCM, which is a lesson to be taken by any other industry seeking global expansion.

Further studies may be extended based on the current findings into the use of trying primary consumer response or how strategies change over time with the marketplace and cultural trends. Future studies will push ahead into possible future technological developments, such as the potential use of augmented reality in packaging or perhaps a QR code in the packaging can make an even better semiotic landscape with TCM product. Therefore, through consumer interviews or surveys as the primary data sources, such aspects may help illuminate how perceptions are manipulated in the long run to buy through elements of semiotics. Deeper research on tradition, modernity, and globalization in branding dynamics can be provided by focusing on these. In a nutshell, then, the semiotics of TCM pain relief patch packaging proves to be an effective tool in combining cultural heritage with modern branding. Rich in design, TCM brands can pay homage to their traditions even as they seize the opportunities offered by the global market to remain relevant and successful in this ever-increasingly interconnected world.

## Conclusion

This research paper highlights how an important element semiotics is found in the icons, symbols, colors, and design elements while communicating cultural, therapeutic, or brand-specific messages in the case of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) patches for pain relief. This analysis decodes and reflects on the packagings from the topmost TCM brand names, specifically Vita Green, Yunnan Baiyao, and Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie: a conscious blend of heritage elements with modern day branding strategies. It reflects the global play around TCM products in which brands have to meet the expectations of audiences from both countries. Findings reflect the importance of traditional design elements in the creation of cultural authenticity as well as consumer trust. The motifs used such as calligraphy, nature-inspired imagery, and cultural symbols speak to the philosophical and historical legacy of TCM, appealing to the domestic consumers who value tradition and efficacy. These elements also convey that the product is part of established healing practices, thereby making it an even more authentic and trustworthy offering in the market. In addition, modern design features, including simple layouts, text in multiple languages, and new fonts, will appeal to the international consumer's taste. These features make TCM products more accessible and, subsequently, more appealing to the international eye. These are aligned with modern branding trends, where simplified and clear designs dominate. With the use of cooler tones and natural images in international packaging, there is a higher tendency that trust, and familiarity are perceived, thereby showing an effect as if the product is not just effective but also new-age.

The research further indicates a strategic diversity in the approaches of the brands analyzed. Vita Green applies its heritage factor but uses modern design elements for international markets; Yunnan Baiyao applies cultural symbols that make it a national treasure; and Lingnan Wanyingjinjiantie uses a combination strategy that includes traditional and modern imagery, highly aesthetic and smartly carved. These diversified approaches show how TCM brands adapt to cultural and market-specific demands, thus remaining relevant across various consumer segments. In addition to the semiotic analysis of packaging, this research study has very important practical implications for branding and marketing in the TCM industry. It vividly depicts the fact that cultural stories could be very beautifully included in the design of packaging to enhance consumer confidence and loyalty with international potential. Therefore, the findings prove useful for TCM brands desirous of expanding their international presence without losing their cultural position. Thus, future research might study developments in the semiotics of packaging for TCM based on changes in consumer attitudes and market conditions. Primary data, including customer interviews or questionnaires, would facilitate even more comprehensive understanding of the effects of semiotic elements on actual perceptions and purchasing decisions. More about the future is the study on how technology would be advanced- perhaps augmented reality in the packaging or through QR codes-would further improve the semiotic landscape of TCM products. In conclusion, the semiotics of TCM pain relief patch packaging is essential to bridge the traditional and the modern, as such products have to be meaningful in the context of culture yet globally relevant. With strategic design choices, navigating the complexities of globalization, TCM brands can live up to the legacy while embracing the opportunity of this modern, interconnected world.

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## Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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