

Evolution of Chinese Tea Packaging: From Historical Traditions to Modern Communication Strategies

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Abstract

Since ancient times, tea drinking has been a part of Chinese culture and daily life. However, the packaging of tea is a prerequisite for its sale. Chinese tea packaging communicates cultural, historical, and informational messages between producers and consumers. The objectives of this study were to 1) investigate the communication role of Chinese tea packaging from 1636 AD to the present and 2) better understand the communication state and public demands of Chinese tea packaging. The researchers gathered information regarding the evolution of Chinese tea packaging from museum and collector materials, scholarly literature, and expert interviews. The study looked at China's top 10 selling tea brands in 2022. Three hundred seventy-eight individuals shared information about their tea consumption preferences. The research revealed that tea packaging has become increasingly crucial for cultural expression, corporate identity, and customer involvement. Packaging technology has evolved in tandem with societal developments and market demands, from simple paper packaging during the Qing Dynasty to information-rich packaging in the twenty-first century. Modern packaging integrates traditional motifs and calligraphy, which increases the product's cultural and market appeal. The survey discovered that as consumers desire to understand more about tea goods, there is a greater emphasis on offering full information, such as brewing methods, tea varieties, and stories. Finally, this study sheds light on Chinese tea packaging's history and communicative purposes. Understanding the intricate interplay between packaging design, cultural symbolism, and consumer preferences allows tea manufacturers to develop packaging strategies that appeal to their target demographic while also promoting tea culture and history.

Keywords: Chinese Tea; Packaging Design; Consumer Needs Analysis; Communication Media

Introduction

In 2021, China, Kenya and Sri Lanka had the highest tea export values, reaching US\$2.1 billion, US\$1.2 billion and US\$732.4 million respectively (Workman, 2023). As a historical and cultural symbol, Chinese tea has been China's most important cultural heritage from ancient times to the present (Guo, 2007). In addition, in 2021, China's traditional tea processing techniques and social customs were included in the United Nations Heritage List (UNESCO, 2022). As with most food products, tea is always packaged and sold. Packaging protects tea and is essential to communicating information to customers (Robertson, 2005).

While tea packaging plays a crucial role in conveying information, the majority of studies on tea packaging focus on its visual appeal (Cheng, 2021). However, aside from the aesthetic, it is crucial to prioritize the communicative aspect of packaging. Packaging is a form of communication influenced by society (Agariya et al., 2012). Researchers have seen the developmental challenges arising from the increasing popularity of tea culture in China (Bo, 2023). Tea packaging has a long and rich history in China. Over time, the way messages are communicated through tea packaging has changed. Examining the development of Chinese tea packaging through the lens of communication media can provide a deeper understanding of the importance of tea culture.

As of January 2024, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) has a total of 1,689 published articles specifically focused on the topic of tea packaging. There were only 11 papers that examined the historical shifts in tea packaging in China. Jiali et al. (2021) examined the role of packaging by focusing on the materials used in ancient Chinese tea packing. In a recent study, Zeng (2020) examined the alterations in the visual presentation of contemporary tea packaging spanning four decades. By integrating research on the historical development of tea packaging in China and gaining a deeper comprehension of the transformations in tea packaging communication, we can enhance the informative value of future packaging design.

This study analyzed Chinese tea packaging from 1636 AD to the present from the perspective of consumers and media. The results fill the knowledge gap regarding China's history of tea packaging communication, providing a better theoretical basis for evaluating the communication media of Chinese tea packaging.

Research Objectives

1. Evaluate the role of tea packaging as a means of communication and the evolution of tea packaging communication in China between 1636 AD and 2000 AD.
2. Analyze and discuss the communication design of Chinese tea packaging.

Literature Review

The study team can only obtain packaging for Chinese tea from various historical periods from other museums and collectors. While searching for historical and existing material on Chinese tea packaging, the study team came upon a few intact ancient Chinese tea packages. Currently, the materials and structures in the history of tea packaging in China provide sufficient evidence and understanding of the packaging history (Shi & Chen, 2014; Xie & Zeng, 2020). Related literature chronicles the history of tea packaging, often available as text (Guo, 2007; Heping, 2016). On the other hand, images of Chinese tea packaging from various periods can better depict the evolution of packaging. As noted by Gao, there is cultural significance in contemporary Chinese tea packaging (Gao et al., 2018).

After examining the literature on Chinese tea packaging, the researchers concluded that further detailed research was required. We hope to understand better the history, functionality, and information transfer of Chinese tea packaging through extensive research. Tea packaging is essential for transmitting Chinese tea culture, so examining tea packaging in Chinese history through the lens of communication media is crucial.

Given the importance of tea packaging as a medium for knowledge transmission, tea business stakeholders need reliable information and targeted analysis. A historical review of China's tea packaging, an analysis of contemporary brands, and a consumer analysis can serve this purpose together and provide guidelines for further tea packaging development.

Conceptual Framework

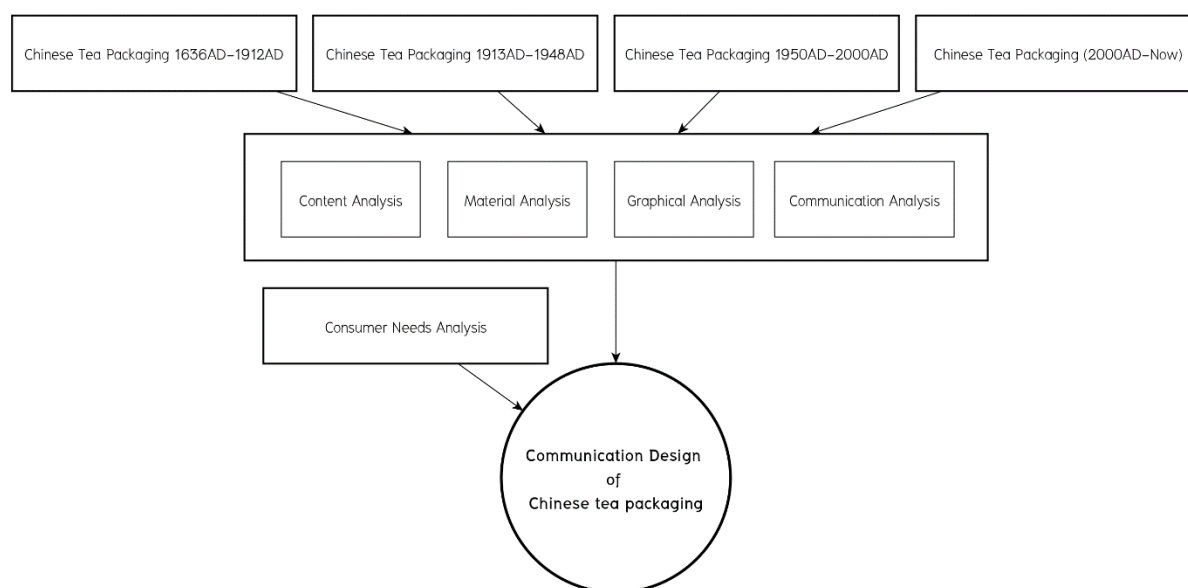


Fig. 1 Study Framework

The study framework shown in Fig. 1 includes content analysis, material analysis, graphical analysis, communication analysis, and customer needs analysis of Chinese tea packaging from different eras to arrive at the communication design of Chinese tea packaging.

Research Methodology

The study used a mixed research methodology to analyze tea packaging as a communication medium in Chinese history. The research team studied both ancient and modern tea packaging and conducted expert interviews to understand the visual language of tea packaging. In addition, the team adopted a quantitative research method by using a questionnaire to examine the public's demand for information on tea packaging in China. We also examined the historical information on tea packaging in China and compared it with information on today's tea packaging. The study underwent ethical review and was approved by the Silpakorn University Institutional Review Board. Approval was granted under reference number REC 67.0122–010–0467, ensuring that the research adhered to ethical guidelines and safeguarded the rights and well-being of participants involved in the study.

Participants and Sampling

The younger generation aged between 20–39, who possess a higher purchasing power, has emerged as the dominant consumer group. According to the China Demographic Website, as of 2020, the population of China in this age group was 390 million (NBS, 2021). To collect data for our study, questionnaires were distributed through an online survey platform called www.wjx.cn. Chinese individuals who were at least 18 years of age and interested in tea were eligible to participate. The study aimed to obtain a minimum of 271 responses, but we received 378 responses in total.

Research Results

Packaging not only protects goods but also acts as a communication medium. As a communication medium, packaging carries the visual and tactile language conveyed to consumers. Tea packaging can protect the tea leaves from damage. Tea packaging was mainly paper packaging at the beginning to wrap and protect tea (Chen, 2019). Later, in addition to focusing on protection, Chinese tea packaging gradually focused on preserving and storing tea.

Tea products must be stored in a dry environment after opening the package. So, the material and shape of the packaging are primarily designed to facilitate tea storage. Metal and plastic packaging protect tea leaves from moisture. Packaging indirectly conveys Chinese people's aesthetic tastes and information needs (Jiali et al., 2021).

Tea packaging in different periods indirectly reflects the market conditions and aesthetic changes. Packaging is also a medium for information transmission, affecting the transmission of relevant knowledge (Robertson, 2005).

China's Tea Packaging Through the Ages

The way tea packaging is communicated in China has changed due to societal influences over time. The history of tea packaging in China is divided into four periods based on the political era: the late Qing Dynasty (1901 AD–1911 AD), the Republic of China period (1912 AD–1949 AD), the second half of the 20th period (1950 AD–2000 AD), and the 21st period (2001 AD–now). The main focus of research and analysis on the history of tea packaging in China are the late Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China period, and the second half of the 20th century.

Qing Dynasty (1636 AD–1912 AD)

Only a few tea packages from this period have withstood the test of time. According to Zhihan Yu, a collector of Chinese tea supplies, during the mid-Qing Dynasty, paper materials

were primarily used for daily consumption, with the introduction of iron box packaging in the late Qing. Paper was the primary packaging material during this time because tea was not widely branded (Chen, 2019). At this point, papermaking and printing were gradually taking shape. Because paper is easy to fold and shape, it is the best option for low-cost packaging. During the Qing Dynasty, paper production and consumption were widespread. During this time, simple color printing was already part of the printing process. The packaging is mostly monochrome, with few color blocks printed. Thus, the packaging includes product names, descriptions, and auspicious patterns (Heping, 2016). However, in some cases, they adhered tea advertising papers to the outside of the packaging box.

Table 1 shows tea packaging during the Qing Dynasty. The table analyzes three Qing Dynasty packaging regarding content, materials, graphical elements and communication methods.

Table 1 China Tea Packaging Information in the Qing Dynasty Period (1636 AD–1912 AD)

	Image	Content	Material	Graphical Elements	Communication
1		Decorate Pattern/ Product Name/ Product Description	Paper	Magical tools used by Chinese gods, Auspicious plants, Ancient architectural accessories	NA
2		Decorate Pattern/ Product Name/ Product Description/ Seals	Paper	Auspicious plant	NA

3		Decorate	Iron	Flowers	Address
		Pattern/ Brand			
		Name/ Brand			
		Description			

Source The data was collected from the China Tea Museum.

As shown in Table 1, the primary communication content of tea packaging is decorative patterns and product descriptions. The textual elements describe both the drinking experience and the origin of the product. Product descriptions are designed to persuade customers that their content is of high quality. Paper was the primary material used in tea packaging during the Qing Dynasty. The primary packaging method is to wrap the tea leaves in paper and tie them together with ropes.

Fig. 2 depicts the traditional Chinese tea paper packaging method. In graphical terms, the pattern elements are predominantly Chinese patterns with auspicious meanings. The patterns frequently feature plants, flowers, and ritual objects. During this time, packaging had no way of communicating with customers. Consumers can only make purchases in stores and communicate verbally.



Fig. 2 Zhang Yi Yuan Traditional Tea Bag

Source: Chinese Jasmine Tea Museum

The period of the Republic of China (1913AD – 1949AD)

Tea developed into a mature product during the Republic of China period, and many tea packages included slogans and product descriptions from tea shops (Hao, Jiang & Guo, 2006). During this time, tea production and sales grew steadily, and paper printing for tea packaging began to incorporate more design elements. During this time, trademarks, contact information, and advertising slogans were added to tea packaging, resulting in a comprehensive packaging design. Merchants focus more on their products' brand image and enhance their anti-counterfeiting function by strengthening the trademark design on tea packaging. Traditional Chinese cultural content, such as mythological story illustrations, auspicious patterns, flower patterns, character portraits, text, and other methods, heavily influences trademark themes (Chen, 2019).

Table 2 shows the six different types of daily tea packaging used in the Republic of China. During the Republic of China, tea packaging's communication content was primarily illustrated and brand-based. During this time, the majority of green tea was packaged in paper or iron boxes. During this time, communication media demonstrated greater versatility. The material used in the iron box reflects the packaging's storage capacity. Many brands use trademarks in their communication media to highlight the brand's role. The brand introduction in the textual material focuses on the brand's history and how to determine the brand's authenticity. It is worth noting that slogans were used on tea packaging during this time to promote the product's features. In terms of graphic materials, illustrations of landscapes and women are the most common elements of media communication. Some brands combine logos and illustrations to help consumers identify their brands more easily. Packages from this period also included store addresses, and some even communicated with customers over the phone. Recipients of the information can access the goods using the address and phone number on the package. Consumer communication is gradually transitioning from oral to written and printed media.

Table 2 China Tea Packaging Information in Chinese Republic Period (1913 AD–1949 AD)

	Image	Content	Material	Graphical Elements	Communication
1		Decorate Illustration, Product Name, Product Description, Trademark, Brand Information, Slogan	Paper	Landscape illustration	Packaging Information
2		Decorate Pattern, Brand Name, Brand Introduction, Brand Information, Slogan	Paper	Leaf pattern	Packaging Information/ Telephone
3		Decorate Illustration/ Product Description, Brand Name/ Brand Introduction/ Brand Information/ Slogan	Paper	Landscape illustration	Packaging Information/ Telephone
4		Trademark/ Brand name/ Tea Introduction/ Brand Information/ Slogan	Paper	Trademark (Scene illustration of many children)	Packaging Information

	Decorate Illustration /	Paper / Metal	Landscape	Packaging
	Trademark/ Brand name/ Tea Introduction/ Brand Information/ Slogan		and woman illustration	Information
				
5		Decorate Illustration/ Brand name/ Brand Information	Paper/ Metal Landscape illustration	Telephone
6		Decorate Illustration/ Trademark/ Brand name/ Tea introduction/ Brand information, Slogan	Paper / Metal Landscape and woman illustration	Packaging Information/ Telephone

Source The data was collected from the China Tea Museum.

The second half of the 20th period (1950AD – 2000AD)

This was the time when China began to implement its planned economy (Xiao, 2017). During this time, most tea packaging focused not only on tea protection, storage, and transportation, but also on information transmission and promotion (Xie & Zeng, 2020). According to Table 3, the tea packaging communication contents primarily include packaging images and production information. The variety of information displayed on tea packages has increased, but the text content has also become more streamlined. The slogan does not appear on tea packages.

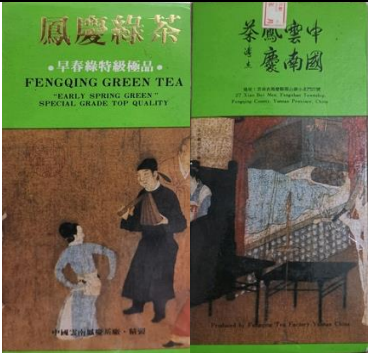
According to market regulations, the Chinese government prohibits using false slogans on packaging to mislead consumers. Similarly, the tea packaging contains production information. Date, shelf life, manufacturer's name, address, and phone number are all part of the production information. Food packaging requirements include more detailed information to ensure consumer

safety. Everyday packaging materials are becoming more diverse. In addition to traditional paper packaging, cardboard, metal, aluminum film, and plastic packaging have been introduced.

The variety of materials gives consumers more options for using them. These graphic materials demonstrate that the visual aesthetics of packaging during this period were primarily Chinese paintings. The introduction of photo printing as a new technology improved the authenticity of information transmission.

During this time, products began to be distributed in large quantities, rather than just in stores of a single brand. During this time, products began to be distributed in large quantities, rather than just in stores of a single brand. Consumers primarily learn about products from packaging information. Much of consumer communication has shifted to print media. This method of communication reduces direct interactions between consumers and brands.

Table 3 China Tea Packaging Information in the Second Half of the 20th Century Period (1950 AD–2000 AD)

Image	Content	Material	Graphical Elements	Communication
1	 Illustration /Product Name/Product Description/ Product Information/ Brand name/ Brand Information/ Brand Description/ Manufacturer Information	Paper	Plant	Packaging Information/ Telephone
2	 Illustration/ Product Name/Product Description/ Product Information/ Brand name/ Trademark/ Manufacturer Information	Paper	Chinese Figure Painting	Packaging Information
3	 Illustration/ Product Name/Product Description/ Product Information/ Brand name/ Trademark/ Manufacturer Information/ Instructions	Metal Case	Chinese Mythological Character Painting	Packaging Information
4	 Illustration/ Product Name/Product Description/ Product Information/ Brand name/ Trademark/ Manufacturer Information	Tin	Landscape and Woman Illustration	Telephone

5		Illustration/ Product Name/Product Description/ Product Information/ Brand name/ Trademark/ Manufacturer Information/ Instructions	Aluminum Foil	Chinese Figure Painting	Packaging Information/ Telephone
6		Picture/ Product Name/ Product Description/ Product Information/ Brand name/ Trademark/ Instructions	Plastic	Tea Picture	Packaging Information/ Telephone

Source The data was compiled by the research.

Modern Days (2001 AD–present)

Tea packaging in China has evolved into a cultural phenomenon, serving as a link between tea production and consumption. Over the years, the Chinese tea market has focused on improving its brand image through standardized production, packaging, and customer interaction. Traditional cultural information is now incorporated into tea packaging, including decorative patterns such as auspicious folk paper-cut designs, plant patterns like plum, orchid, bamboo, chrysanthemum, pine, or lotus, poetry, and calligraphy. According to J. Li (2020) and Zhu Gao et al. (2018), the use of such traditional patterns has contributed to the enhancement of the Chinese tea market's brand image.

Contemporary tea packaging communicates product information, brand concepts, and cultural functions (Zeng, 2020). Due to national packaging design layout requirements, the front information usually includes the product name, brand logo, net content, manufacturer, and product graphics (Xie & Qin, 2022).

The function of packaging is dependent on consumer demand. The impact of packaging on consumer perception and intent to purchase shows that packaging is an essential factor in consumer purchasing behavior and product information communication (Hussain et al., 2015). Packaging can help people understand the current state of contemporary tea and its potential needs by providing a general understanding of the most critical information categories. This study chose ten tea products with high ratings from China's Taobao website. Table 4 depicts the messages most commonly conveyed to consumers through tea packaging media.

Table 4 Ten Brands of Tea packaging Elements Analysis

Element	Type
Graphical Element	Flowers, Chinese Fonts, Traditional Chinese Patterns, Plant Patterns, Tea Picking Illustrations
Textual Information	Brand Name, Product Name, Ingredient, Grade, Standard, License Number, Manufacturer Address, Place of Origin, Shelf Life, Telephone Number, Product Description, Usage Information
Labeling	 Chinese Geographical Indication  China Intangible Cultural Heritage  Chinese Time-Honored Brand  Barcode  QR Code
Extra Links	Brand Website, Anti-Counterfeiting Website, The WeChat Public Account Platform

Notes. Collected, compiled, and analyzed by the researchers.

Graphical Element: Images are used in packaging design to convey additional meaning and product description. This iconographic strategy incorporates abstract design, iconography, and photography (Hu et al., 2019). Tea product packaging often features flowers, Chinese fonts, traditional Chinese patterns, and plant patterns.

Textual Information: Product information is frequently presented as textual information in packaging because it allows consumers to learn detailed information about products. Product information influences consumer purchase intentions and allows manufacturers to better promote themselves (Hussain et al., 2015). Detailed information can help consumers reduce their cognitive biases toward products. Text is better suited for conveying information about the product (Hallez, Boen & Smits, 2022). Tea packaging includes state-mandated text information and usage instructions.

Label: Labels help consumers identify common information. According to Fenko, Kersten, and Bialkova (2016), the type of label and product category are critical in determining consumer reactions to food. Food labeling facilitates significant information transmission between consumers and the food system (Tonkin et al., 2016). Food labeling is important for consumer-food communication, as demonstrated by Wang et al. (2022).

There are four different types of case labeling for tea products. There are primarily geographical, certification, QR code, and barcode labels. Certification labels for Chinese tea packaging include China Intangible Cultural Heritage and Chinese Time-Honored Brand. China Intangible Cultural Heritage is a project certification label that identifies China's intangible cultural heritage. The Chinese Time-Honored Brand is a brand certification label that has a rich history in China. Geographic identifiers improve consumers' perceptions of tea quality, and their use can boost purchase intentions to some extent (Wang et al., 2022).

Cashore, Auld, and Newsom (2004) state that certification is now required for relationship management in the global agri-food industry. Increasing certification initiatives address public concerns about tea product quality, just as they do for other commodities (Raynolds & Ngcwangu, 2010). The barcode is the product's identification label. QR codes are used to provide external links to products.

Extra Links: Links on packaging can provide consumers with additional information. This can be used to link to official product websites, anti-counterfeiting information websites, and the brand's WeChat accounts. Official product websites can be used to provide detailed information to customers who want to learn more about the products. The security code allows customers to

verify the product's authenticity. The WeChat public account platform is becoming an increasingly popular source of information for consumers, as well as a channel for businesses to conduct product marketing and brand communication (Zhou, 2022).

Needs Analysis of Chinese Tea Packaging

Online voluntary participants in China completed questionnaires to assess public views on what they would like to see on a tea packaging. 387 valid responses were used.

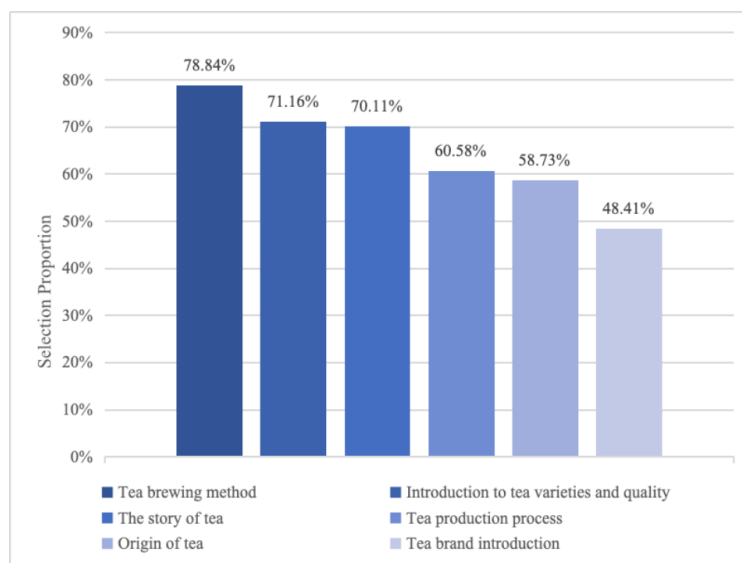


Fig. 3 Ranking of importance of different tea knowledge

Source: Compiled by the researchers, 2024.

Fig. 3 depicts the information that people would like to see included on tea packages. The data show that the top three pieces of information are tea brewing methods (78.84%), tea varieties and quality introductions (71.16%), and tea stories (70.11%). Tea brand introductions are the pieces of information that receive the least attention (48.41%). This indicates the public would rather see tea packaging with tea brewing methods, tea quality introduction, and tea stories.

According to the results of the questionnaire, today's consumers have a higher demand for packaging information. Consumers like tea packaging that includes additional information on tea and its different applications. Although modern tea packaging has expanded the dissemination of information via external linkages, tea knowledge is insufficient to meet the expectations of today's consumers.

Discussion

Tea packaging in China has undergone significant changes over centuries, reflecting evolving consumer preferences and technological advancements. Originally serving as a means to protect and transport tea, packaging has evolved into a powerful communication tool, providing consumers with valuable information about the product and its origins.

Table 5 Roles of Tea Packaging through Different Era.

Era	Elements	Roles
1636 AD–1912 AD	Logo	● Tell what brand
1913 AD–1949 AD	Logo / Contact Information	● Tell what brand ● Tell where to contact
1950 AD–2000 AD	Logo / Contact Information / Tea Information	● Tell what brand ● Tell where to contact ● Provide tea information
2001 AD–Now	Logo / Contact Information / Tea Information / Usage Instructions / Links / Authenticity	● Tell what brand ● Tell where to contact ● Provide tea information ● Teach consumer brewing instructions ● Prove product authenticity

Notes. Analyzed by the researchers.

Table 5 illustrates the evolving roles of tea packaging through different eras, reflecting changes in consumer expectations, technological advancements, and marketing strategies.

1636 AD–1912 AD: During this period, tea packaging primarily featured a logo, serving the basic function of identifying the brand. The main role of packaging was to distinguish one brand from another, aiding consumers in their purchasing decisions.

1913 AD–1949 AD: In the early 20th century, tea packaging began to incorporate both logos and contact information. This development expanded the role of packaging beyond mere branding to include providing consumers with a means to contact the manufacturer or seller directly. This added a layer of consumer engagement and accessibility.

1950 AD–2000 AD: Moving into the mid–20th century, tea packaging evolved further to include not only logos and contact information but also tea-specific details. This phase marked a significant shift towards providing consumers with information about the tea itself, such as its

origin, type, and perhaps some basic brewing instructions. Packaging began to serve as a tool for educating consumers about the product they were purchasing.

2001 AD–Now: In the contemporary era, tea packaging has expanded its role to encompass a wide range of elements. In addition to logos, contact information, and tea details, packaging now includes usage instructions, links to additional information, and features to ensure authenticity, such as QR codes or other authentication methods. Packaging serves not only as a means of communication and education but also as a tool for enhancing consumer experience and trust.

Conclusion

The study on the evolution and communication design of Chinese tea packaging provides valuable insights into China's tea culture, history, and marketing. The study examines tea packaging from various historical periods to show how packaging is an essential communication tool between producers and consumers, reflecting changes in societal values, technological advancements, and consumer preferences over time.

As a communication medium, China's tea packaging has gradually moved from simply displaying a logo on the package to more informative packaging that includes the tea manufacturer's contact information and usage directions. Newer tea packaging contains links that allow users to learn more about the tea and its manufacturer. Based on these trends, packaging is becoming more informative and essential in connecting with customers.

Consumers want modern tea packaging to provide helpful information like brewing methods, tea types, and quality introductions. This demonstrates an increasing desire for educational, entertaining packaging that helps people understand and appreciate tea products. Furthermore, placing QR codes, barcodes, and external links on packaging is an innovative way to provide additional information while avoiding counterfeiting, addressing modern consumers' demands for transparency and authenticity.

Looking into the future, tea packaging is likely to continue evolving in response to shifting consumer preferences and technological innovations. Advancements in digital technology may further enhance packaging's interactive capabilities, allowing consumers to engage with brands in new and immersive ways. Overall, tea packaging will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping consumers' perceptions and experiences, adapting to meet the demands of a rapidly changing marketplace.

Suggestions

Analyzing Chinese tea packaging from a communication standpoint provides a theoretical foundation for the future positioning of Chinese tea packaging, particularly its use of technology. The researchers intend to investigate how emerging technologies, such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), affect tea packaging design and consumer engagement. These technologies are likely to improve storytelling, product visualization, and interactive packaging experiences, resulting in immersive brand experiences for consumers.

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