



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# An Analysis of the Current Application and Innovative Exploration of Packaging Pattern Elements for Traditional Chinese Medicine under Semiotic Semantics: A Case Study of Spleen and Stomach Pills from Beijing Tongrentang

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**ABSTRACT**

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This thesis aims to explore effective pathways for innovative design of traditional graphic elements within the semantic framework of semiotics, using the packaging of spleen and stomach-related pill medications from Beijing Tongrentang as an example. It delves into in-depth considerations regarding the innovation of patterns in packaging design. The researcher rely on the semantic characteristics of modern semiotics, analyzing the application of common packaging patterns and exploring innovative approaches to pattern symbols. This is done by combining existing research findings with design cases to explore and analyze the integration and innovation between traditional TCM culture and modern design. TCM culture is an integral part of China's outstanding traditional culture, and its dissemination is both urgent and necessary. Through innovative thinking rooted in tradition, exploring multiple approaches to the design of packaging patterns for traditional Chinese medicine can subtly integrate TCM culture into people's daily lives through packaging as a medium. This not only revitalizes the time-honored, richly connotative TCM culture by bringing it back into the public eye in a new form but also imbues it with renewed charm.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The semiotic significance of "Beijing Tongrentang"

As a "time-honored Chinese brand," Beijing Tongrentang has become a trusted classic brand among consumers through its historical accumulation, rigorous quality control, continuous innovation, and the process of "crowd-selected canonization." Its brand effect and drug quality are the primary factors that have always driven consumers to choose it.

In his article "Two Types of Classic Updates and Semiotic Biaxial Displacement," semiotic scholar Zhao Yiheng writes: The public's "crowd-selected classicization" is a process of selecting classics based on accumulated numbers through forms such as voting, clicking, purchasing, and viewing. This selection mainly relies on repeated media coverage, word-of-mouth from friends and family, and anecdotal reports that build popularity (Zhao,2007) . The primary characteristic of "crowd-selected classicization" is the shift from focusing on individuals to specific objects (a particular brand, a literary work, a variety show, etc.). People no longer focus solely on individual achievements or performances; instead, they concentrate their attention on specific objects, such as brands, literary works, or variety shows, which are considered classics due to their unique value or influence. This shift also reflects the intrinsic value and significance of the objects themselves in the process of becoming classics.

Beijing Tongrentang, with its 349-year history and global reputation as a "China Time-honored Brand" (Figure 1), is a prime example of "crowd-selected classicization." Since it began serving imperial medicine in 1723, Tongrentang has spanned eight dynasties, providing medicine to emperors for 188 years. This historical accumulation has endowed Tongrentang with a unique cultural heritage and brand value. At the same time, Beijing Tongrentang has always adhered to strict pharmaceutical production standards and quality management systems. Although imperial supervision is long gone, Tongrentang still maintains rules such as "three weight checks and four inspections" to ensure the quality of its products. This relentless pursuit of quality has made Tongrentang's medicines highly effective, earning the trust of a wide range of consumers.

Despite being a long-established enterprise, Tongrentang has not become complacent. Adhering to its business philosophy of "putting people first and winning by quality," the company simultaneously emphasizes innovation, constantly introducing new technologies and equipment to bolster its research and development capabilities as well as production efficiency. This spirit of innovation allows Beijing Tongrentang to keep pace with the times and meet the ever-changing needs of consumers. These are the factual bases for Beijing Tongrentang's status as a representative of "crowd-selected classicization." Evidently, brand effect and product quality are the primary factors that have led audiences to consistently trust and choose Tongrentang.



Figure 1: Beijing Tongrentang LOGO from the internet

## 2. THE BRAND TYPICALITY OF BEIJING TONGRENTANG

The relationship between a brand and its audience is a dynamic process of mutual influence and shaping. In the previous paragraph, the researcher pointed out that aspects such as the development history of Beijing Tongrentang, its product quality, performance, pricing, and external image serve as symbolic elements of its brand. These factors help shape the audience's perception and impression of "Beijing Tongrentang." Its brand recognition and reputation can effectively guide consumers through a series of behaviors, including selection, decision-making, purchasing, and evaluation. To some extent, as an industry benchmark, Beijing Tongrentang not only has the capability and conditions but also the obligation to utilize its brand influence to promote and expand the impact of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) culture through various channels such as product image, advertising, public relations, and social media. This would correctly guide consumers, allowing more people to understand and accept TCM culture, and promote the healthy development of the TCM industry.

Packaging design, though a relatively small aspect of the process, serves a vital function as the primary channel for delivering product information, boosting brand image, and spreading TCM culture. Its importance should not be underestimated. Its value should not be underestimated. However, based on preliminary data collection and analysis, Beijing Tongrentang, as a leading TCM brand, lacks a comprehensive design strategy for the packaging of its various regular products. It selectively focuses on packaging design for highly representative and special products (such as Beijing Tongrentang Angong Niu Huang Pills) and high-profit, high-end health supplements that follow a gift-box series route (such as the Beijing Tongrentang American Ginseng series). Take the early classic packaging designs of products such as Beijing Baifeng Pills, Angong Niu Huang Pills, and the children's series, for example; all of these were created by the renowned graphic designer Ms. Zhuang Shuying. The "Beijing Baifeng Pills" gift box packaging won the National Silver Award, and "Angong Niu Huang Pills and Beijing Baifeng Pills" won the Beijing Export Award. Additionally, in 2016, a team led by experienced domestic designer Mr. Li Huaqing rebranded Beijing Tongrentang, creating a rational and effective store image and high-quality customer experience terminals, which

greatly enhanced the in-store experience. This design plan was recognized as a "TCM National Gift." Furthermore, packaging designs for Beijing Tongrentang's series such as herbal powder, Chinese herbal slices, and American Ginseng were also crafted by this team.

### **3. ANALYSIS OF COMMON PACKAGING PATTERN SYMBOLS OF BEIJING TONGRENTANG**

Nevertheless, given the extensive product range of Beijing Tongrentang, packaging designs created by well-known designers are in the minority. The primary research focus of this study is the packaging design of regular, low-cost products that are updated frequently, typically designed by Tongrentang's in-house design team. These designers may include graphic designers, packaging engineers, or marketing personnel, with varying levels of aesthetic judgment and professional skills. They are constrained by corporate guidelines in their design process, needing to maintain brand consistency, comply with pharmaceutical regulations, and manage time, labor, and other cost factors. As a result, the demand for "quantity" in packaging design often outweighs the pursuit of "quality," leading to many regular products in pharmacies having packaging designs that are aesthetically unpleasing and highly homogenized. The specific individuals and teams responsible for these packaging designs are not publicly disclosed. However, the relevant information about these designers is not of research value in this study; rather, the focus is on the cases themselves.

#### **3.1 Application and analysis of common packaging patterns under semiotic semantics**

For gaining a clearer and deeper understanding of the visual characteristics of Beijing Tongrentang's existing traditional Chinese medicine packaging and to identify its design patterns and issues, this study focuses on the packaging of spleen and stomach pill products. The research scope has been narrowed down to 31 prescription and over-the-counter products currently available on the market, all of which are intended for conditioning the spleen and stomach. A detailed review and further analysis of the visual elements on their packaging have been conducted. The clear and straightforward identification of issues lays a solid foundation for seeking more reasonable and effective packaging design approaches in the later stages of the research.

The researcher has organized, categorized, and analyzed the visual elements of the packaging for 31 Beijing Tongrentang spleen and stomach pill products (See Supplementary materials available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14191148>). It is evident (Figure 2) that the packaging material, form, and typography have a relatively high degree of compatibility with the pharmacological properties of the products or the target audience. However, while the packaging patterns and colors effectively differentiate the types of medicine, their relevance to the intrinsic attributes of the products is relatively weak. Compared to colors, the selection and application of packaging patterns are particularly problematic. Among the 31 cases, 15 packaging designs have a zero correlation between the pattern and the medicine itself, accounting for 50% of the total. Additionally, 6 cases have a weak correlation, while only 6 cases have a fully matching correlation, comprising just one-fifth of the total cases ((See Supplementary materials available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14191148>)).

This figure provides a clear and straightforward assessment of the correlation between the five major visual elements of the 31 packaging designs and the medicines themselves. The use of rectangular color variations effectively illustrates the changes in the "Relevance" values across different medicines and visual elements. Additionally, the researcher has provided a detailed analysis of the issues and improvement suggestions for the visual elements with weaker correlations in the initial table (See Supplementary materials available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14191148>). From a semiotic perspective, the study also analyzes and interprets the 6 packaging patterns with a high correlation to the product attributes, affirming their value and rationality. These insights provide visual cues for better developing design strategies for traditional Chinese medicine packaging patterns moving forward.

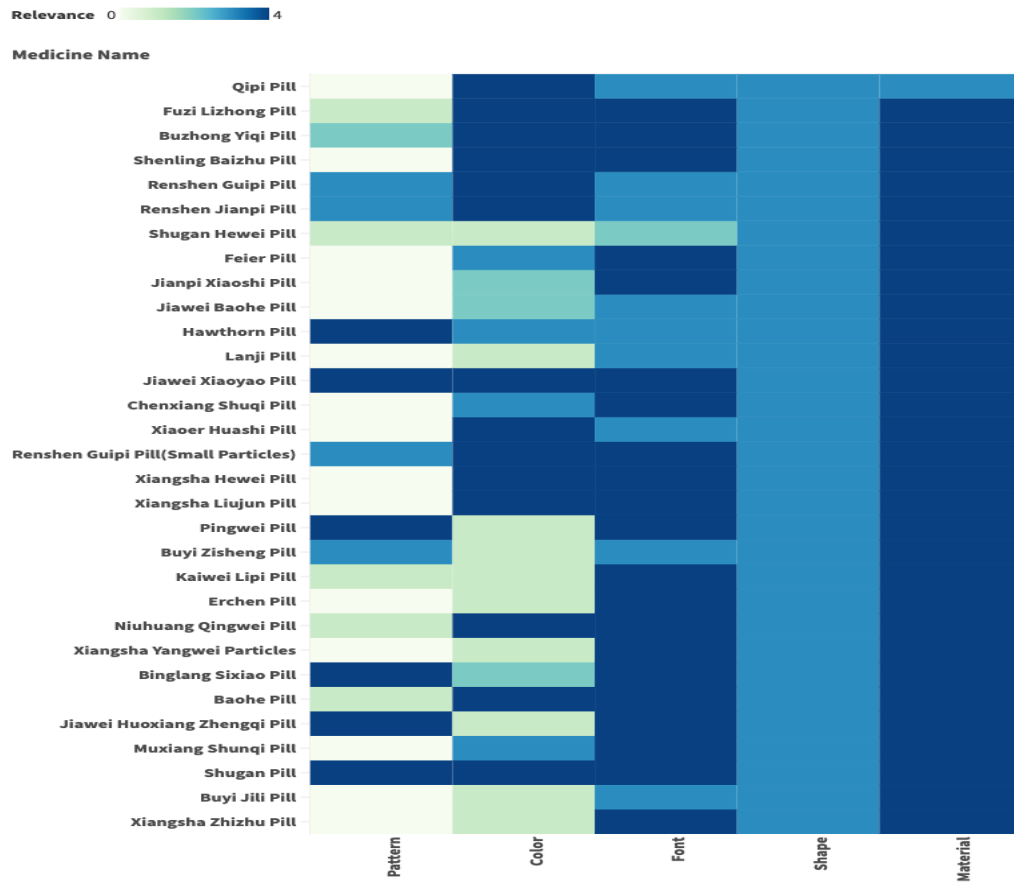


Figure 2: Statistical analysis of the correlation between visual elements and medicine attributes in 31 medicine packaging cases by flourish

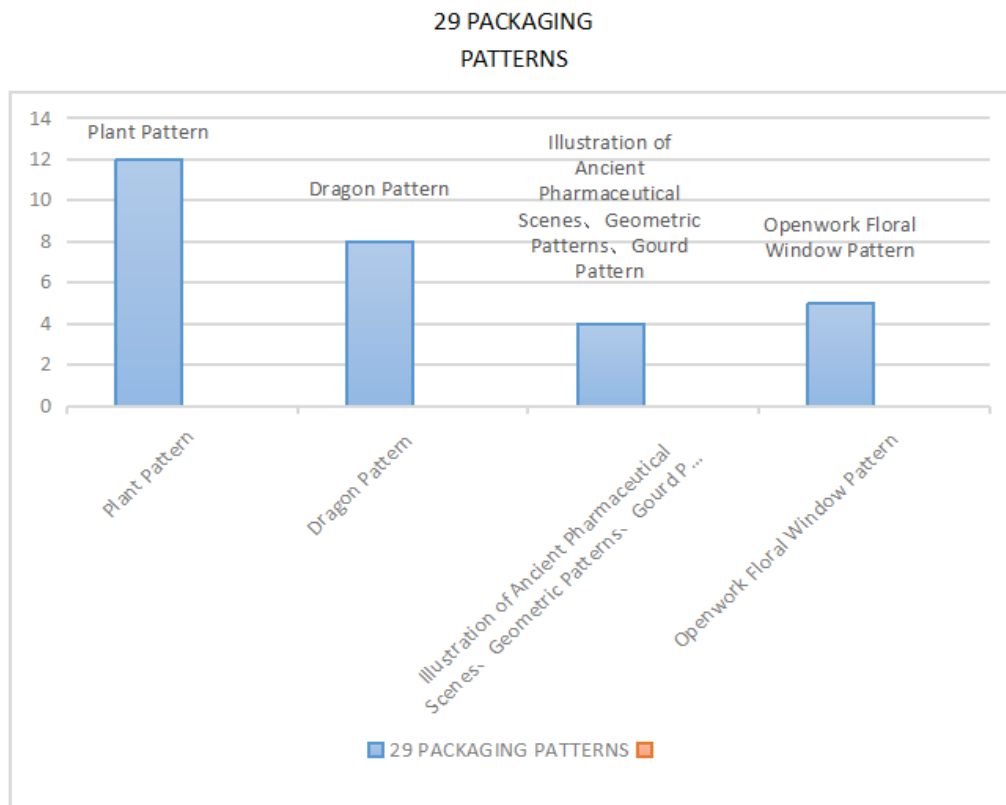


Figure 3: Classification and statistics of packaging patterns by flourish

Among the 31 cases, 2 packaging designs did not use any patterns and were therefore excluded from the category proportion statistics. As shown in the above figure (Figure 3), the most commonly used patterns are plant motifs, appearing in 12 cases, which account for 41% of the total. This is followed by dragon motifs, which appear in 8 cases, representing 28%. Other patterns with auspicious meanings appear in 4 cases, accounting for 14%, and finally, 5 cases use hollowed-out window patterns, representing 17%, which is comparable to the proportion of other auspicious patterns (See Supplementary materials available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14191148>). In terms of specific content, these types of patterns constitute the mainstream elements in the basic packaging design of traditional Chinese medicine by Beijing Tongrentang and are widely used. The researcher will now provide an in-depth analysis and explanation of these four categories of pattern content.

### 3.1.1 Plant patterns

In this context, plant patterns primarily refer to the original forms of medicinal herbs. Firstly, these patterns provide an immediate and intuitive display of the medicine's ingredients. Through these patterns, consumers can identify the main herbal components of the product, such as ginseng, hawthorn, and honeysuckle. This straightforward presentation helps consumers quickly recognize and understand the core ingredients of the product. Particularly for consumers with basic knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), they can identify the fundamental effects of the product through the herbal patterns. For example, a honeysuckle pattern may suggest that the product has heat-clearing and detoxifying effects, hawthorn might indicate stomachic and digestive benefits, while ginseng and astragalus patterns could imply the product has qi-boosting and blood-tonifying properties. Clearly, the skillful use of patterns can establish an initial image of the medicine and reinforce consumer awareness of the product's efficacy.

Secondly, herbal patterns represent the essence of traditional Chinese medicine culture. Using these patterns on packaging conveys that the product is derived from ancient TCM formulas and sourced from nature, emphasizing safety and minimal side effects. This is because traditional Chinese medicine has developed a relatively comprehensive evaluation system for efficacy and safety over its long history of use. Therefore, the use of herbal patterns helps enhance consumer confidence in the safety of the product.

The use of herbal patterns varies and cannot be universally applied. For example, astragalus acts as the "primary" herb in Buzhong Yiqi Pills (see Figure 4), forming the core of the medicinal strategy. Using it as the main visual element on the packaging is reasonable in terms of content. But for most consumers, even those with basic TCM knowledge, it is rare in everyday life to be fully familiar with the physical forms and pharmacological properties of medicinal herbs. Consumers typically encounter astragalus in its sliced form (Figure 5) and rarely have the opportunity to see the whole plant. Ultimately, while patterns can serve as symbols to convey information, not all symbolic patterns are widely recognized or understood by the audience. The audience's comprehension, cultural background, and experience all influence their understanding of the patterns. Thus, such singular and ambiguous plant patterns, lacking necessary textual prompts, are likely to affect consumers' judgment of the product. In conclusion, while herbal patterns on packaging are theoretically consistent with the product's tone, the key to truly high-quality TCM packaging lies in the correct selection and use of these herbal pattern elements.



Figure 4: Packaging of Buzhong Yiqi pill from the internet





Figure 5: Huangqi slices from the internet

### 3.1.2 Dragon patterns

From a semiotic perspective, the Chinese understanding of the dragon is a complex and multifaceted process. The dragon is the most representative auspicious creature in Chinese traditional culture, symbolizing good fortune. As an important symbol in traditional Chinese culture, the dragon not only carries rich symbolic meanings and cultural connotations but has also continuously developed and refined its image throughout history. The history of dragon patterns is deep and complex, with their evolution spanning multiple periods of ancient Chinese culture. Dragon patterns encapsulate and reflect the culture, systems, aesthetics, psychology, craftsmanship, and wisdom of various ethnic groups in China. The forms of dragon patterns are diverse, and their symbolic meanings are equally varied, encompassing aspects such as auspiciousness, imperial authority, cultural symbolism, and national identity. These meanings highlight the significant role and importance of dragon patterns in traditional Chinese culture and reflect people's aspirations for a good life.

The dragon patterns that appear in the cases are all *tuánlóng* patterns, characterized by a circular arrangement where the dragon's form is configured within a circle, creating a suitable round motif. The edges of *tuánlóng* patterns are often adorned with additional elements such as water waves, ruyi motifs, or grass dragons, which enhance the pattern's elegance and vibrancy while symbolizing good fortune and beauty. The *tuánlóng* pattern symbolizes power, nobility, and honor. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it was exclusively used for architectural decoration in imperial palaces or royal gardens, embodying the majesty and dignity of imperial power. Additionally, the *tuánlóng* pattern signifies the dispelling of disasters and the bringing of good fortune, embodying people's aspirations and pursuit of a good life. It is not only a form of decorative art but also a cultural symbol and spiritual emblem, reflecting the Chinese people's reverence and admiration for the dragon.

Using the full, perfectly symbolic *tuánlóng* pattern on traditional Chinese medicine packaging can not only reflect the cultural heritage and brand characteristics of the product but also emotionally enhance consumers' sense of identity and belonging. The grandeur, elegance, and vibrancy of the *tuánlóng* pattern can improve the visual appeal of the product, while also providing consumers with a powerful positive psychological suggestion. However, the special attributes of the *tuánlóng* pattern also necessitate careful consideration of several factors before its use, such as the medicinal properties of the product, market positioning, consumer psychology, and even relevant laws and regulations. It should not contradict the actual characteristics of the product or market demands. For instance, the *Liuwei Dihuang Wan* series (Figure 6) by Beijing Tongrentang, a renowned formula for kidney nourishment.



Figure 6: Packaging of Liuwei Dihuang pill in Beijing tong Ren tang from the internet

The primary function of *Liuwei Dihuang Wan* is to nourish the yin and tonify the kidneys, making it effective in treating various symptoms caused by kidney yin deficiency, such as tidal fever, night sweats, blurred vision, tinnitus, and weakness in the lower back and knees. It is suitable for both men and women. From a semiotic perspective, the dragon, as a totem with extremely strong vitality, is the best embodiment of the phrase “full of vigor and vitality” (*shēnglóng huóhǔ*). It symbolizes a state of energy and vitality, conveying the hope that after taking the pills, patients will be as vigorous as a dragon and as powerful as a tiger, representing a sincere wish for the patient's speedy recovery. Additionally, the use of a bright yellow color further symbolizes celebration, nobility, abundance, and power, providing consumers with great psychological satisfaction and increasing their confidence in the medicine's efficacy. Therefore, the appearance of dragon patterns on the packaging of *Liuwei Dihuang Wan* is both appropriate and reasonable.

Another example is the *Angong Niu Huang Wan* produced by Beijing Tongrentang and Nanjing Tongrentang (Figure 4.53). Due to the scarcity and difficulty of obtaining its core ingredient, natural bezoar, *Angong Niu Huang Wan* is known for its quick effectiveness in treating emergencies such as stroke, coma, high fever, and inflammatory infections. In critical moments, it can be life-saving. Additionally, with the brand's premium pricing, the medicine is positioned as a high-end product and is sold at a high price. The *Angong Niu Huang Wan* from China's two most renowned traditional Chinese medicine brands features extensive use of dragon patterns on the packaging, paired with the yellow representing central authority and the auspicious red associated with celebration in China. Whether in embroidered silk boxes or tin boxes, the packaging is rich in detail and exudes nobility and grandeur, offering consumers significant psychological satisfaction. This implies that the medicine's efficacy matches its price, which in turn aligns with the consumer's prestigious social status.

The renowned semiotician Charles Morris conducted research on pragmatics, exploring the relationship between symbols and their receivers. He studied the conditions under which receivers accept symbols and the meanings that arise. These two packaging examples are the best manifestations of this theoretical research. The dragon patterns on the packaging enhance the self-affirmation and recognition among consumers who can afford expensive medicines. Simultaneously, the dragon patterns provide greater reassurance and a sense of security to those who choose these emergency medicines.

Therefore, the dragon patterns on such medicine packaging are important symbols of Chinese national identity and cultural confidence, making them the designer's optimal choice. Under the combined influence of efficacy, price, and market positioning, the dragon patterns and the overall presentation of the medicine packaging complement each other perfectly.



Figure 7: Packaging of Angong Niu Huang pill in Nanjing Tong Ren Tang from the internet



Figure 8: Packaging of Angong Niu Huang pill in Beijing Tong Ren Tang from the internet

In a word, the use of dragon patterns on traditional Chinese medicine packaging is reasonable. However, to apply them appropriately and harmoniously, one must thoroughly consider factors such as the medicine's ingredients, efficacy, and market positioning. When used effectively, dragon patterns can serve as the best interpretation of the product itself, providing consumers with positive psychological cues. Conversely, if used improperly, these incongruent pattern elements can obscure the objective advantages of the medicine, clouding consumer judgment and causing uncertainty about whether to choose the product.

### 3.1.3 Hollowed-out window patterns

Among the 31 cases, 5 utilize the exact same hollowed-out window pattern, with identical composition and similar typography, differing only in color. Hollowed-out window patterns hold a significant place in traditional Chinese architecture and decorative arts, and they carry profound meanings in Chinese culture. Designed to resonate with the traditional desires for blessings and good fortune, these patterns typically revolve around themes of auspiciousness, beauty, and well-wishing. While these meanings align with the ideals of health, longevity, and well-being sought by traditional Chinese medicine, there are countless traditional patterns in China that convey similar auspicious and positive connotations. The hollowed-out window pattern is primarily associated with traditional architecture, and if the pattern's content does not have a specific reference, it is not the optimal choice. Taking Qipi Pills as an example, the primary target audience is children. The packaging design should take into account both the medicinal properties and the preferences of children to bridge the gap between the product and its audience, while also alleviating children's fear of taking medicine. Design that adheres strictly to tradition for tradition's sake or uses decoration merely for the sake of aesthetics is a major pitfall. Such use of traditional patterns in herbal medicine packaging may superficially enhance the cultural atmosphere but fails to impart any emotional value to the product itself.

### 3.1.4 Other types of patterns

In this category, the pattern content is more diverse, including motifs such as ruyi patterns, gourd designs, and scenes of herbal gathering, medicine preparation, and medical practice. First, let's discuss the ruyi pattern. The ruyi pattern originates from the ancient “爪杖” (a type of jade object used to scratch an itch, reaching places that hands could not), named “ruyi” because it functioned as desired. Over time, ruyi evolved into a decorative pattern, integrating various cultural elements and symbolizing good fortune, prosperity, longevity, and the pursuit of a good life. While traditionally applied to clothing, architecture, furniture, and ceramics, as a visual symbol, its elegant and fluid form is its “signifier,” while its connotations of auspiciousness, prosperity, and longevity are its “signified.” Compared to dragon patterns, the ruyi pattern is uniquely charming yet more relatable, making it more compatible with the design of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) packaging. Although the ruyi pattern does not directly convey the properties of the medicine, it offers consumers a powerful suggestion of “harmony and well-being, free from illness,” providing positive emotional value. This further proves that the use of ruyi patterns in TCM packaging design is reasonable.

Next, the gourd motif and scenes of herbal gathering, medicine preparation, and medical practice are classic symbols of TCM culture.

**Gourd:** The gourd, with its homophonic resemblance to “福祿” (happiness and prosperity), symbolizes good fortune, happiness, and longevity. Its round shape, with a small mouth and large belly, represents inclusiveness, wealth accumulation, and fertility. Due to its unique form and rich cultural connotations, the gourd has become an important symbol in TCM culture. In many film and television works, gourds are often depicted as magical containers holding life-saving elixirs, which can quickly cure various ailments, showcasing the profound depth of TCM culture and the noble spirit of the healer. This depiction not only enhances the fantasy and appeal of the story but also promotes a positive image of TCM, strengthening the audience's recognition and trust in TCM culture. Furthermore, these scenes reinforce the gourd's symbolism of mysticism and healing power in TCM culture, allowing viewers to deeply sense the magical power embodied by the gourd and the healer's superior medical skills. In contemporary design, symbols are key elements. The process of developing and applying symbols involves extracting, categorizing, and translating visual elements



so that the audience can clearly understand the conveyed information, meaning, and emotions (Qi, 2020). At this moment, the gourd as a symbol, embodied in various artistic forms, truly becomes a tool for expressing meaning—a tangible object that can be perceived.

**Herbal gathering and medicine preparation:** TCM culture has always included rich practices of herbal gathering, medicine preparation, and medical practice. Renowned physicians like Hua Tuo and Sun Simiao ventured into the mountains to gather herbs and personally prepared medicines to treat patients. One can imagine a healer with a medicine basket on their back and a herbal hoe in hand, traversing the mountains in search of herbs, or at a simple clinic or home, where the healer carefully cleans the collected herbs and slowly simmers them over a low fire, filling the room with the fragrance of medicine, symbolizing the hope and possibility of recovery. Alternatively, the healer might be seated at a table, diagnosing and treating a patient with great care, with the patient gradually recovering under the healer's attentive care, expressing deep gratitude. These scenes featuring characters or settings foster a strong sense of identification and trust among consumers, showcasing the unique charm and value of TCM culture in modern society.

Finally, there is only one example where a minimalist style is employed, using abstract points, lines, and surfaces to complete the TCM packaging design. Traditionally, TCM packaging design has tended to favor the use of traditional Chinese elements, such as plants, animals, and various patterns, to reflect the traditional characteristics of TCM culture and the spirit of the enterprise. However, with the continuous development of modern design concepts, TCM products need to break away from stereotypes, balancing cultural heritage with aesthetic innovation. By flexibly using basic elements like points, lines, and surfaces, it is possible to design TCM packaging that combines traditional cultural connotations with modern aesthetic standards. The researcher believes that this type of pattern content is the most difficult to master in terms of interpreting the product's tone. A slight misstep can result in designs that resemble Western medicine packaging. This issue was highlighted during preliminary interviews, where experts pointed out that “many TCM packaging designs are similar to those of Western medicine,” indicating that this is a significant issue that warrants attention and needs to be addressed urgently. For example, in the case of the *Sanjiu Zhengtian Wan*, the researcher believes that the new packaging design represents a breakthrough in pattern design, which is commendable (Figure 9).



**Figure 9: Comparison of old and new packaging designs for 999 Zhengtian pills from Xiaohongshu**

(New Packaging Designs Created by CR Sanjiu & JiaYi Design, 2023)

Packaging design is widely recognized as a complex creative process that involves careful consideration of multiple elements, including patterns, colors, typography, composition, materials, and structural design. However, in terms of pattern type, the case of *Zhengtian Wan* represents a bold departure from the original packaging design concept (Figure 9). The Chinese obsession with circular shapes stems from traditional culture, philosophical thought, artistic aesthetics, and daily life. This fixation reflects not only the Chinese people's aspiration for a good life but also showcases the unique cultural charm and wisdom of the Chinese nation. The three circles on the packaging are not only a literal representation of the shape of the pills but also symbolize the pursuit of perfection and completeness.

These circles are not perfect; their slight irregularity gives them a rustic and unique charm, unlike the smooth, predictable shapes usually seen. The two extremely fine black lines do not crudely divide

the main display area of the packaging into three sections. Instead, their delicate and flexible nature helps balance the overall composition while subtly enhancing the design details of the packaging. Finally, the negative space created by the white circular "figure" against the khaki-colored "ground" adds dynamism to the entire visual presentation. This is particularly effective when multiple packages are displayed side by side. Although the number of visual elements is minimal, the design does not feel overly simplistic or dull. This illustrates that an evocative, interpretative approach is far more intriguing than one that attempts to cover all bases—an idea that is at the core of Chinese aesthetic philosophy. Of course, this packaging case is not without its flaws. For example, the readability of the typography could have been better considered. Nonetheless, the breakthrough in pattern design style in this case is worth further study and emulation.

### 3.2 Innovative approaches to pattern symbol design

Objectively speaking, there are no absolute prohibitions against using herbal patterns or other types of traditional motifs on traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) packaging. In other words, "anything can be used," but the key lies in how and when to use them. The crucial factor in improving the quality of packaging patterns—and even enhancing the overall packaging design—is to thoughtfully select pattern content and presentation styles based on the medicinal properties, target audience characteristics, and market positioning of the product. Additionally, the creative process may involve reimagining or reinterpreting these patterns, which is essential for elevating the design standard.

To achieve breakthroughs in design, the researcher believes that one should not be confined to the realm of TCM packaging design alone. Any design case that shares roots with TCM or Chinese medicine culture can serve as a source of inspiration and learning. By broadening one's perspective, it becomes possible to apply these insights across different contexts. The following section will analyze and summarize some high-quality cases, focusing on the creative approaches to pattern design, without being restricted to the packaging design field.

Figure 10 is a graphic design where Chinese medicinal herbs serve as the primary creative elements. The designer cleverly captures the detailed characteristics of the raw herbal forms, employing a method of heterotopic isomorphism,  $A+B=C$ , to blend them with traditional Chinese landscape painting. The natural textures of the herbs perfectly align with the unique *cun* technique used in Chinese paintings to depict mountain peaks and ridges. This innovative approach to pattern design breaks down the barriers between artistic painting and TCM culture. Although these two belong to entirely different cultural domains, they both share a common lineage rooted in traditional Chinese culture. By merging these two cultural symbols, which most effectively reflect the profound heritage and philosophical thought of Chinese culture, the designer presents a pattern that invites viewers to engage in deeper reflection and contemplation.

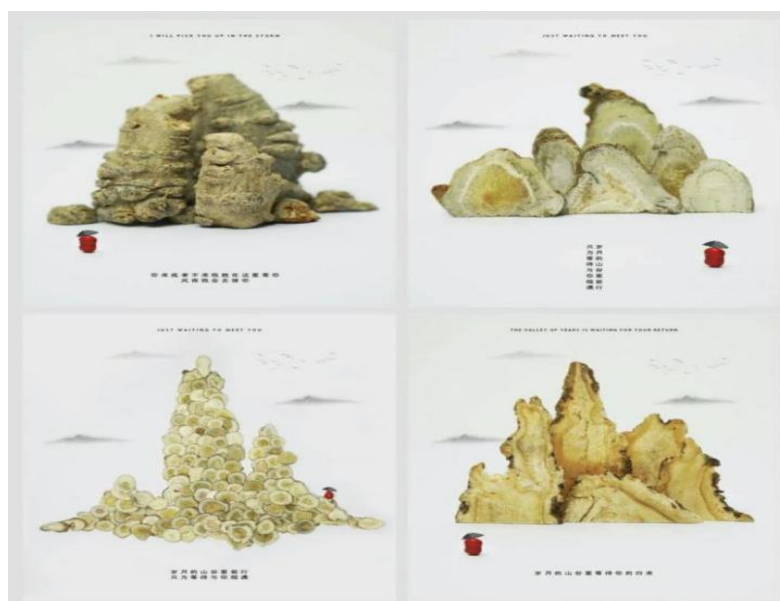


Figure 10: Creative graphic works on the topic of Chinese herbal medicine from Xiaohongshu

(The Posters created by “腔调 vic”, 2023)

**Figure 11** is an installation design placed at the entrance of the "Herbal Wisdom" herbal scent exhibition hall. It also employs the creative method of heterotopic isomorphism,  $A+B=C$ , by cleverly combining medicinal herbs with the gourd pattern, which symbolizes the inheritance of traditional Chinese medicine culture. The herbs are arranged in a fish scale pattern to form the shape of a gourd. This can be interpreted as a gourd filled with life-saving elixirs, where the medicine effectively cures ailments and brings good fortune, while also vividly expressing the gourd's connotation of "saving lives and helping the world." Moreover, the various forms of medicinal herbs layered within the gourd add a wealth of detail, enhancing the pattern's sense of depth and form. The design encapsulates the symbolic meaning of the gourd as a vessel of healing and prosperity, with the arrangement of herbs further reinforcing the three-dimensional and stylistic aspects of the pattern.



**Figure 11: Gourd installation design at the three gorges museum from Xiaohongshu**

**Figure 12** showcases the packaging design for *Lianhuan Yihe Tang* saffron, created by an independent designer (Figure 12). The primary element of the pattern is the begonia motif, celebrated as a "super symbol" of Chinese aesthetics, symbolizing auspiciousness, nobility, and wealth. The begonia pattern is widely used in the windows and doors of traditional Chinese gardens, and the designer's ingenuity is precisely reflected here. Through the elegant and distinctive Chinese begonia window, one glimpses the vibrant, delicate saffron flowers, their petals fine as silk, dynamic, and distinct. The designer uses a decorative painting technique to present this lively and vigorous scene to the viewer.

The hollowed-out window pattern captures the details and charm of the Chinese begonia window perfectly, enhancing the viewer's sense of immersion, as if opening the window reveals a vista of blooming flowers. This pattern design is both narrative and meaningful, clearly conveying the product's essence while exquisitely expressing the simplicity and elegance of Chinese aesthetics. Beyond the main begonia motif, there are no unnecessary embellishments; this interplay of solidity and void makes the design even more pure, reflecting the subtle temperament of the Chinese people and the designer's thoughtful attention to detail. The result is a composition rich in artistic beauty. This example demonstrates that seemingly unrelated pattern elements, such as hollowed-out window motifs, can still enhance a design when used appropriately. The thoughtful application of such patterns can add depth and meaning, making the design more engaging and aesthetically pleasing.



**Figure 12: Packaging design of Lianhuan Yihetang from Xiaohongshu**

(The Packaging Design by Zhu Xiaoyuan, 2023)

**Figure 13** features a tonic product packaging design by Juling Design (Figure 13). This design incorporates linear geometric patterns that balance the rhythm and detail of traditional Chinese motifs with the dynamism and grandeur of modern composition. The result is a refined and exquisite visual effect. The design uses a circular flower motif and a grid-based continuous pattern as the "skeleton," with lines arranged in varying densities to create a balanced and harmonious "flesh." This innovative and intricate approach to pattern design represents a true reinvention of traditional motifs, offering a creative method that is both fresh and ingenious. It serves as an exemplary model for all designers to study and learn from.



**Figure 13: Packaging design of nourishing product from Xiaohongshu**

(The Packaging Design Created by Juling Design)

In her research, scholar Dong uses the packaging design of Xijiantang's traditional Chinese medicine as a vehicle to express the brand's philosophy, target audience, and visual identity. The design effectively conveys the principles of the Five Elements theory, such as "water nourishes wood," "fire benefits earth," "earth generates metal," and "metal and water generate each other." Dong Siqi achieves this by extracting and reinterpreting the traditional floral element known as *baoxianghua* to create a new artistic form that combines the simplicity and conciseness of modern design language with the rich cultural heritage and emotional imagery of life.

*Baoxianghua*, also known as the golden lotus or the flower of the world, is a floral motif deeply embedded with cultural significance and auspicious connotations, symbolizing people's aspirations for a better life. Xijiantang's auxiliary graphics involve the deformation of the *baoxianghua* in the brand's logo, extending the representative graphics of the Five Elements. Each element of the Five Elements is designed with a corresponding *baoxianghua* motif, which is then appropriately applied to the packaging design (Figure 14). This visualizes the medicinal information through graphic symbols, pairing the packaging with corresponding organ patterns to subtly convey and promote the Five Elements attributes of the medicine, thereby enhancing the general audience's understanding of TCM culture. For example, the *Qiju Dihuang Tablets*, representing the "water nourishes wood" treatment method (Figure 15), utilize a principle where nourishing kidney yin helps to control liver yang. The "water nourishes wood" graphic is composed of leaves and ripples arranged from the inside out, with the two elements interweaving to depict the relationship where water nourishes and promotes the growth of wood. The water element's design, paired with a gradient color treatment, gives the impression of ripples on water, while the leaf motif, symbolizing wood, is treated with an outer glow effect, making the entire graphic appear softer and more dynamic. The combination of green and deep blue not only reflects the attributes of water and wood but also alludes to the saying "green comes from blue," implying growth and development. Additionally, Dong Siqi attempts to present the five organs that *Qiju Dihuang Pills* benefit on the side of the box in the form of graphics. This approach directly informs the audience that the pills can nourish the kidneys and liver, alleviating symptoms such as dizziness, tinnitus, and photophobia. This significantly improves the audience's understanding of the medicine itself and their recognition of TCM culture.





图 6.2 曦间堂辅助颜色，从左到右为木、火、土、金、水

图片来源：笔者设计



图 6.3 曦间堂辅助图形

Figure 14: The symbolic colors and symbolic graphics for the Xijiantang from Xiaohongshu

(The Symbolic Colors and Symbolic Graphics Created by Dong Siqi)



Figure 15: Packaging design for Qiju Dihuang pill and the design of the "nourishing water and cultivating wood" pattern from Xiaohongshu

(The Packaging Design Created by Dong Siqi)

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As the most direct medium for disseminating traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) culture, packaging can effectively utilize visual elements to establish TCM culture within pharmaceutical brand design. The graphic symbols in herbal medicine packaging design help consumers quickly and accurately identify and select the medicines they wish to purchase. By examining and categorizing existing herbal medicine packaging designs from a semiotic perspective, one can uncover their meaningful connections and identify design issues.

An important contemporary challenge is how to preserve and highlight the value of TCM culture through innovative means in a modern context, creating pattern designs with depth and significance. From a semiotic viewpoint, applying traditional patterns that embody TCM culture in creative and diverse ways to herbal medicine packaging design is one effective approach to fostering a broader understanding and acceptance of TCM culture. These designs allow TCM culture to subtly permeate everyday life through packaging and help this ancient, rich cultural heritage re-enter the public consciousness in a new and captivating way.

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