Social Sciences and Humanities
ISSN Print: 3104-4328
ISSN Online: 3104-4336
CD ISSN: 3104-4344
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9117

"Oriental Aesthetics" as Discursive Construction and Branded National Identity: A Study of Contemporary New Domestic Beauty Advertisements in China

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How to cite this paper: Xu, P. (2026). "Oriental aesthetics" as discursive construction and branded national identity: A study of contemporary new domestic beauty advertisements in China. Social Sciences and Humanities, 4(3), 64–69. ISSN Print: 3104-4328, ISSN Online: 3104-4336.
https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9117
Published: 2026-07-07

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Abstract

This study examines the advertising practices of new domestic beauty brands against the backdrop of the Guochao movement. It investigates how these brands discursively construct "Oriental aesthetics" and explores the interplay between this discourse, consumer culture, and emerging consumer nationalism. In today's context, "Oriental beauty" is not merely visual but has become a vehicle for cultural confidence and a symbol of identity for younger generations. Through highly stylized visual symbols and cultural narratives, these advertisements appeal to consumers eager to assert their cultural identity. The analysis reveals that these brands employ a hybrid discourse of "ancient wisdom + modern technology," along with visual codes of "artisanal craftsmanship" and "imperial grandeur," to transform their products into cultural symbols. However, consumer culture profoundly shapes this expression, making branded nationalism ambivalent: it challenges Western aesthetic hegemony yet risks a curated "Self-Orientalism"; it evokes cultural pride while potentially instituting a new "Chinese aesthetic discipline" that must be fulfilled through consumption. Ultimately, these advertisements serve as a microcosm for examining the intersections of identity, consumerism, and cultural nationalism in contemporary China.

Keywords

Oriental Aesthetics; Discourse Analysis; Consumer Nationalism; New Domestic Brands; Advertising and Identity

1. Introduction

For decades, the global beauty market was dominated by Western aesthetic standards, with Western brands defining "luxury" and "fashion." However, since the 2020s, a shift has occurred: an Eastern aesthetic force is rising, driven by the

Guochao wave that has swept through consumer sectors. This is not merely a commercial change but reflects deeper cultural identity transformations, and the beauty industry serves as a key lens for observing this shift.

Guochao is now a socio-cultural phenomenon, propelled by economic growth, cultural confidence, and generational change. Generation Z and millennials, who grew up in an era of national strength, possess stronger cultural pride and identity, and they express their aesthetic and cultural preferences through consumption. New domestic brands no longer imitate Western marketing; instead, they tap into local cultural resources to craft brand narratives that blend historical heritage with modern sensibilities.

Brands like Florasis, Mao Geping, and Herborist have made notable strides by positioning "Oriental aesthetics" at their core. Their advertisements, across social media and e-commerce platforms, consistently employ poetic allusions, traditional motifs, and narratives of craftsmanship, constructing a distinctive Oriental aesthetic discourse. This discourse not only pursues visual beauty but also conveys cultural attitudes, challenging Western-dominated paradigms.

This study explores how new domestic beauty advertisements use textual and visual strategies to construct a compelling "Oriental aesthetics" discourse system. This aesthetic expression resonates with branded national identity, yet behind commercial success lie cultural tensions and social implications. Through discourse analysis, this paper reveals the complex interplay among identity, consumer culture, and cultural nationalism in contemporary China, while critically examining the dynamic between cultural empowerment and commercial appropriation.

2. Literature Review

Advertising is a highly condensed text that functions as a site for constructing, disseminating, and contesting social values and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). Discourse is a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by society (Fairclough, 1995). Advertising discourse conveys specific meanings through language, images, and narratives, linking commodities with cultural significance and influencing consumer behavior. Van Dijk (2001) notes that advertisements alter mental models, thereby reproducing power structures. Cosmetic advertisements frequently employ vague, exaggerated, or metaphorical language to stimulate desire (Cui, 2014). Studies on female consumer goods highlight women's emotional and detail-oriented shopping tendencies (Yan, 2009), yet rational appeals are also effective for functional products (Chen, 2012).

Consumer nationalism refers to the practice of linking consumption choices with national interests, emotions, and identity (Gerth, 2003). Contemporary Guochao represents a new form of consumer nationalism, distinct from earlier defensive nationalism. It is driven by younger consumers who feel strong pride and cultural confidence (Wang, 2020). Commodities possess "social lives" (Appadurai, 1986)

and are repeatedly imbued with meaning; "domestic products" gain a "political life" beyond their use value.

Edward Said's (1978) Orientalism reveals how the West constructs a stereotyped "Orient" through knowledge and power. Building on this, Lau (2003) proposes "Self-Orientalism," describing how non-Western actors selectively present indigenous cultural images to construct uniqueness. This study employs this lens to question whether the "Oriental aesthetics" in new domestic advertising represents a genuine revival or a Self-Orientalist spectacle serving market competition. Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) "invention of tradition" is also relevant: many "authentic traditions" are modern inventions. Brand narratives frequently invoke "ancient formulas" and "traditional techniques," but these are marketing tools rather than authentic reproductions.

3. Research Design and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Multimodal Discourse Analysis. CDA goes beyond linguistic relations to examine culture, power, and social reality behind discourse (Fairclough, 1995). The research asks not only what advertisements say but also what they "do": how they construct identity (what is an "Oriental" woman?) and reproduce cultural values, and how these influence consumer psychology.

Given the multimodal nature of digital advertising—images, colors, layouts—multimodal analysis is essential. Visual elements are crucial for conveying "Oriental aesthetics" (e.g., Florasis' carved lipsticks or Mao Geping's imperial-style packaging). Thus, this study examines how different semiotic modes combine to construct the grand narrative of "Oriental aesthetics."

Purposive sampling was used to select three brands positioned as "Oriental aesthetics": Florasis, Mao Geping, and Herborist. They represent different cultural imaginaries: Florasis emphasizes artisanal refinement and literati aesthetics; Mao Geping invokes imperial grandeur and authority (collaborating with the Forbidden City); Herborist draws on traditional Chinese medicine and herbal philosophy. Comparing these cases provides a panoramic view of how Oriental aesthetics is discursively constructed.

Primary materials are 10 advertising images (slogans, product ads, celebrity endorsements) from Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Tmall. Analysis proceeds in two layers: (1) textual discourse—keywords (e.g., "ancient formula"), rhetorical strategies (metaphor, allusion), and narrative strategies; (2) visual discourse—packaging, models' makeup and attire, color palettes, and composition. The synergy between text and image is then interpreted.

4. Cultural and Historical Relations: The Deep Logic of Image Construction

New domestic beauty advertisements construct a coherent meaning system of "Oriental aesthetics" that defines products, people's appearances, lifestyles, and identities."

4.1. Textual Discourse: Translating "Ancient Wisdom" and "Eastern Philosophy"

A common textual strategy is to invoke the past to legitimize products. Florasis' slogan "Oriental makeup, nourishing with flowers" directly defines its discourse: it connects cosmetics with natural, ancient floral ingredients, constructing a chain: "Oriental = natural = safe = skin-nourishing." This evokes collective memory and frames industrial products as gifts from nature. Herborist's slogan "Beauty from the roots, nourishing with a method" and phrases like "moisturizing with the essence of heaven and earth" employ Daoist and TCM vocabulary, elevating skincare to a holistic practice of balance and wellness. Skincare becomes not mere hydration but a philosophy of internal-external harmony, catering to modern wellness aspirations while cloaked in Eastern veneer.

4.2. Visual Codes: Three "Oriental Imagery" Paradigms

Paradigm 1: Imperial Aesthetics as "National Treasure" (Mao Geping)

Mao Geping's advertisements bind the brand with the Forbidden City and royal symbols, creating a sense of nobility and authority. The "Oriental Aura" series features models with elaborate makeup against blurred palace red walls, asserting the brand's authority in defining "Oriental beauty." Product packaging displays dragons, clouds, and lattice patterns, resembling precious jewelry. By co-opting imperial symbols traditionally associated with male power, the ads psychologically empower female consumers: "You can control your beauty." The gold-red color palette amplifies sensations of dignity and possession.

Paradigm 2: Artisanal Craftsmanship as "Art Object" (Florasis)

Florasis focuses on microscopic craftsmanship: its embossed palettes display intricate carvings such as "phoenixes paying homage to the king." These visual spectacles transform consumable cosmetics into collectible artworks, communicating "craftsmanship," "refinement," and "heritage." For consumers seeking quality, "craftsmanship" signals high value, justifying premium pricing. Consumers feel they purchase not just makeup but a cultural artifact.

Paradigm 3: Philosophy of Balance as "Holistic Beauty" (Herborist)

Herborist's "Tai Chi·Sun and Moon Essence" ad divides the screen into "day" and "night," represented by a traditional Tai Chi master (stillness) and a modern dancer (motion). This visual duality embodies the Tai Chi philosophy of opposition and balance, translating the product's "daytime energizing, nighttime repairing" function. The choice of both traditional and modern spokespersons itself creates a dialogue, extending beauty from face to holistic harmony.

4.3. Hybrid Discourse: Co-opting "Tradition" and "Technology"

Alongside traditional appeals, these brands also employ technological language in product details, such as "ultra-fine powder technology" or "patented extraction." However, technology serves as a footnote to tradition, not its main theme. This hybrid discourse strategically balances emotional and rational appeals, avoiding consumer distrust of purely rational claims, and reinforces the idea that tradition is authentically realized through modern science.

5. Conclusion

The analysis shows how new domestic beauty brands construct three variants of "Oriental aesthetics" through textual and visual discourse. These findings resonate with and extend existing scholarship on consumer nationalism.

First, these advertisements rarely use overt political slogans; instead, they evoke cultural pride through refined aesthetics (Wang, 2020). This represents a shift from earlier defensive nationalism (boycotting foreign goods) to a confident, "cool" cultural assertion. Consumption becomes a means of expressing identity and belonging, activating a "social life" for commodities (Appadurai, 1986) and imbuing them with collective memory.

However, critical scrutiny reveals that this "Oriental aesthetics" is a selective, purified version. For instance, one Florasis advertisement appropriated ethnic minority costumes, simplifying complex cultural attire into exotic decoration. This exemplifies Self-Orientalism (Lau, 2003): to appear unique in a globalized world, brands create and commercialize an imagined "authentic" culture. The frequent emphasis on "ancient formulas" can also be seen as an "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983), serving market needs rather than historical truth. Thus, this discourse, while imagining "national rejuvenation," simultaneously reflects self-alienation.

Second, this discursive system imposes a new "aesthetic discipline." While challenging Western hegemony, these ads unconsciously institute a normative "Chinese standard" of beauty—whether Mao Geping's "Eastern bone structure" makeup or Florasis' "cool and elegant" classical look. Through algorithms and KOL endorsements, these become recognized standards. Consumers are implicitly told: "You need this product to look beautiful and gain cultural recognition in this circle." This turns culture into a consumption imperative, re-inscribing beauty within a purchase cycle, disguised as cultural empowerment.

6. Discussion

This study, through CDA and multimodal analysis of new domestic beauty advertisements, explores the construction strategies and cultural significance of "Oriental aesthetics" discourse. It reveals that these brands are not merely selling products but producing and disseminating a systematic aesthetics discourse. By

invoking ancient wisdom and deploying visual codes of imperial grandeur, artisanal craftsmanship, and balance philosophy, they transform products into resources for identity construction. Consequently, the “Oriental aesthetics” discourse represents a negotiation between consumerism and cultural nationalism, reflecting both an authentic quest for cultural confidence and a paradox of commercial simplification. These commercially successful yet critically contentious products paint a vibrant but contradictory picture of the era.

However, this study only analyzed production-side texts, not consumer reception. Future research could adopt audience studies (interviews, netnography) to understand how consumers perceive, embrace, or resist these “Oriental” aesthetics in their daily lives.

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