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The Aesthetic Narrative of Beauty Brands from the Perspective of Business Anthropology

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Abstract. At present, the domestic beauty market has formed a parallel development pattern of two tracks.The local beauty brands represented by Huaxizi and Mao Geping focus on traditional Chinese culture, deeply explore the connotation of Chinese aesthetics, and complete the breakthrough of brand culture empowerment and market.International beauty brands such as Estee Lauder continue to enter the Chinese market deeply, integrating local marketing strategies through festival limited series, traditional Chinese packaging design and traditional Chinese visual symbols it is in line with the aesthetics and preferences of local consumers. Chinese aesthetic narrative has become a common centre strategy for domestic and foreign beauty brands to compete for the Chinese consumer market and establish brand cultural influence.From the perspective of business anthropology as the basis of this study, choose the local benchmark brand Huaxizi and the leading international beauty brand Estee Lauder as a case comparison, and use semiotics, cross-cultural communication and orientalist critical theory to form a four-dimensional analysis framework.Systematic comparison of the differences in Chinese aesthetic narrative carried by these two types of brands. This study proves that local brands rely on local culture to achieve endogenic reproduction, while international beauty brands use superficial cultural symbols to make profits. There are many problems such as oriental aesthetic stereotypes and superficial cultural appropriation.This article analyses the intrinsic tension between local cultural construction and transnational symbol appropriation. In view of the limitations of existing research institutes based on a single case or a single discipline, it provides a theoretical and practical reference basis for the fact that local products have not gone to the world market and international brands to achieve positive cross-cultural integration.

Keywords: Business anthropology, Chinese-style aesthetic narrative, beauty and makeup brands, cultural appropriation, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

Since the full rise of China-Chic in 2018, Chinese aesthetics has broken through the niche circles of cultural museums and intangible cultural heritage, and has fully penetrated the beauty and makeup consumption sector. According to the data from the 2025 China-Chic Beauty Industry Consumption Trend Report, the annual growth rate of traditional Chinese beauty products exceeds 25%. Young consumers have significantly increased their willingness to pay a premium for products that embody

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traditional aesthetics, and Chinese-style narratives have become a core competitive barrier in the beauty industry [1]. The domestic beauty and makeup market has formed two development paths.Firstly, domestic brands such as Huaxi Zi and Maoge Ping have abandoned low-price competition and built brand moats with a complete Chinese aesthetic system.Huaxi Zi focuses on Jiangnan scenery, Tang and Song Dynasty makeup, and intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship to create a complete narrative of "Oriental makeup, nourishing makeup with flowers" [2]; Secondly, international brands such as Estée Lauder and Dior have continued their localization efforts, launching limited-edition products featuring the Chinese zodiac for the Spring Festival and traditional Chinese style gift boxes for the Mid-Autumn Festival every year. These products incorporate visual symbols such as auspicious clouds, Paper Cuttings, and the Chinese zodiac, and are paired with local influencers and traditional Chinese style pop-up events to bridge the gap with domestic consumers [3]. Both types of brands utilize Chinese aesthetics, but their underlying cultural logics are distinctly different. Existing research is often limited to a single perspective of marketing and communication, lacking the in-depth analysis of cultural power, the original context of symbols, and consumer identity from the perspective of business anthropology. Furthermore, there is a lack of systematic horizontal comparison between local and international brands. Business anthropology focuses on cultural production, circulation, and negotiation in the consumption field, distinguishing between two modes: the reproduction of local indigenous culture and the appropriation of foreign capital symbols. It possesses unique analytical advantages. This article revolves around four major issues: first, the selection of Chinese aesthetic symbols for two types of brands and the differences in textual criticism logic; second, the distinction between long-term and short-term frameworks for brand aesthetic narratives; third, the cultural infiltration and traffic harvesting paths in omnimedia communication; fourth, the different impacts of the two narratives on the public's perception of Chinese aesthetics and cultural inheritance. The research aims to reveal the Orientalist dilemma of superficial Chinese-style marketing by international brands, summarize the mature narrative experience of domestic products, fill the gap in comparative research in this field, and provide a feasible solution for standardizing cultural narratives in the beauty and cosmetics industry.

2. Literature review

Existing research is divided into three major areas: local beauty makeup China-Chic, localization of international brands, and cultural criticism of Orientalism. The following text combines the analysis of real and searchable literature from CNKI and foreign databases, and points out the shortcomings of existing research and the innovations of this paper.

2.1. Research on Chinese-Chic aesthetics and the spread of China-Chic in local cosmetics

Taking Huaxi Zi as a core case, it is divided into three categories: new media communication, brand symbol construction, and DTC marketing. Zhang Yang's *Exploring China-Chic Brand Building and Communication Strategies in the New Media Era: A Case Study of 'Huaxi Zi'* is included in *New Media Research*. It systematically dissects Huaxi Zi's omni-media matrix, including bilibili documentaries, short video makeup looks, and offline traditional Chinese style spaces, pointing out that the brand awakens youth cultural confidence by dismantling perceivable Eastern symbols and building a channel for the popularization of traditional culture [2]. Chen Xi's article *Analysis of DTC Marketing Model for Domestic Beauty Brands in the Social Media Era* published in *Marketing World* proposes that domestic brands should directly engage with end consumers through Chinese

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aesthetic content, eliminating the distribution chain and directly transforming cultural value into commercial revenue [4]. At the semiotic level, Zhao Yiheng's *Principles and Deductions of Semiotics* systematically defines the dual-layer structure of "signifier-signified" for cultural symbols, pointing out that symbols separated from their original historical context will undergo meaning dissolution, providing a core theoretical tool for the analysis of Chinese traditional makeup aesthetic symbols [5]. In *Art Criticism*, An Jing combines Zhao Yiheng's symbolic aesthetics to propose that Chinese aesthetic symbols possess three attributes: practical utility, visual aesthetics, and spiritual expression. The modern interpretation of traditional patterns and makeup styles in local beauty makeup should take into account these three layers of connotation [6].

2.2. Research on cross-cultural marketing of international beauty makeup localization in China

Wang S Estée Lauder's Marketing Strategy for Its Beauty Products in the Chinese Market, confirmed through four years of market data from 2021 to 2024, reveals that Estée Lauder's core approach to localization involves limited-edition packaging featuring traditional Chinese styles during festivals and short video placements with local influencers. However, its traditional Chinese design only incorporates superficial symbols such as red color and zodiac signs, without a long-term plan for an Eastern aesthetic system [3]. At the domestic industry reporting level, the *2025 Industry Observation* section of People's Daily pointed out that domestic beauty brands are relying on deep cultural narratives to accelerate their global expansion, while international brands only use traditional Chinese style as a temporary marketing tool and have not established a sustainable oriental aesthetic system [7].

2.3. Orientalism and critical study of beauty industry culture

The core theory of Said's *Orientalism* reveals the Western capital's curious, one-sided, and instrumental interpretation of Eastern culture, forming a stereotypical impression of a "superficial and exotic" place [8]. Orientalism in Western Beauty Branding, taking European and American beauty and fragrance brands as samples, confirms that when Western brands incorporate Eastern elements, they deliberately strip away the inherent philosophies such as leaving blank spaces and the harmony between man and nature, only extracting visually complex and festive symbols, which is a typical appropriation of commercial culture [9]. Domestic scholar Zhou Shangqin, drawing from semiotics, proposes that the reproduction of indigenous endogenous culture possesses homologous cultural roots, with symbolic transformation retaining its spiritual core; transnational symbolic appropriation detaches from the original context, narrowing the public's complete understanding of Chinese aesthetics through long-term dissemination [10].

2.4. Existing research shortcomings and innovations of this paper

There are four deficiencies in existing research' firstly, there are multiple single-brand cases, but systematic horizontal comparisons between Huaxi Zi and Estée Lauder are lacking; secondly, there are multiple perspectives from marketing and communication studies, but analyses from the perspective of commercial anthropology, cultural power, and field observation are missing; Thirdly, the critical perspective is weak, with little analysis of the risk of cultural appropriation in the beauty and makeup industry from the perspective of Orientalism theory; fourthly, there is a disconnect between theory and industry practice, with no differentiated optimization paths provided for

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domestic and foreign-funded brands. This article boasts three major innovations 1. Perspective innovation, introducing business anthropology and integrating semiotics and Orientalism critique to build a composite analytical framework; 2. Content innovation, comparing two types of brand symbols, narratives, communications, and core integrity models from four dimensions; 3. Value innovation, distinguishing the underlying tension between local reproduction and transnational appropriation, and providing actionable industry optimization solutions.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Basis for case selection

Huaxi Zi is a benchmark for local mid-to-high-end beauty makeup, with its brand foundation entirely relying on Chinese native culture. It collaborates with intangible cultural heritage craftsmen and classical makeup artists to complete long-term aesthetic construction, representing a typical example of local cultural internal production. Several CNKI documents have identified it as a core sample of China-Chic beauty makeup [2]. Estée Lauder, on the other hand, is a global leading beauty makeup group with a mature localization layout in the Chinese market. It annually launches limited-edition products with Chinese style, but its global product research and development, as well as underlying aesthetics, follow Western standards. Chinese symbols are only used for short-term festival marketing in China, representing a representative case of transnational commercial symbol appropriation [3]. The audience, cultural foundation, price and narrative goals of these two brands are completely contradicted and have strong comparative value.

3.2. Comparison of aesthetic symbols

The symbol of Huaxi Zi originates from four primary domains: the Jiangnan region, makeup styles from the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties, mother-of-pearl/silk intangible cultural heritage, and the folk customs depicted in the Book of Songs. All visual elements have been pre-researched in collaboration with experts in literature, history, and intangible cultural heritage [2]. The screening criteria are "cultural integrity, ancient and modern suitability, aesthetic self-consistency", rejecting fragment culture; abide by "maintaining the core", completely retaining the core of craftsmanship and literary spirit, and simply changing the appearance suitable for modern makeup. For example, the enamel makeup plate retains the inlay technology of Tang Dynasty lacquerware, shrinks the size, and turns the complex grain into a simple appearance, which is more suitable for daily storage. Symbols and product efficacy, brand mother narrative are highly unified, and all product line symbols form a closed loop [6].

The aesthetic symbols used by Estée Lauder are limited to high-visual-impact festive elements such as the Chinese zodiac signs, auspicious clouds, and red lanterns, with minimal use of deeper aesthetic symbols such as classical literature, Song-style blank spaces, and intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship [3]. There is no participation of literary and historical experts in the screening, and only the marketing department selects according to the annual marketing popularity; detached from the original context of the symbol's livelihood, there are only simple printing patterns on the appearance of the product, the product logic and formula are completely produced according to Western standards, and the symbols are only used as decorations for packaging. The annual limited series of symbols are cut off, and there is no unified oriental mother narrative [9].

The symbols of Huaxizi are based, systematic, and closely culturally interlocked. The symbols of Estee Lauder are unfounded, fragmented, and only used to decorate products, which is in line with

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the characteristics of cross-cultural symbol appropriation [8].

3.3. Comparison of narrative logic and periodic architecture

HuaXiZi prioritizes long-term closed-loop narratives in its culture. Its core narrative, "Oriental makeup, nourishing makeup with flowers," guides the entire product category. It features three sub-narratives: Jiangnan scenery, Tang and Song Dynasty makeup, and intangible cultural heritage craftsmanship. Each product is paired with poetry and makeup scenes, forming a three-tier progressive closed loop. Cultural inheritance takes precedence over short-term sales, with long-term investments in makeup restoration, intangible cultural heritage documentaries, and collaborations with traditional Chinese artists, ensuring the narrative has sustainable growth potential [2].

Estée Lauder prioritizes short-term holiday narratives over sales. It does not have a unified narrative centered around the Eastern Mother, and only sets up a temporary short-term narrative about the Chinese zodiac 1-2 months before the Spring Festival. Once the holiday is over, it immediately discontinues related content. Its individual products rely solely on packaging visuals for superficial expression, without accompanying beauty education or makeup systems. It does not invest in long-term projects to restore traditional culture, and its narrative relies on short-term gift box marketing, lacking independent cultural vitality [3, 9].

3.4. Comparison of all-media communication and user interaction

HuaXiZi has established a four-dimensional matrix encompassing long-form video cultural popularization, short video practical makeup tutorials, immersive offline garden stores, and user-generated content (UGC) activities such as #Restoring Ancient Flower Adornments#. This approach integrates cultural education with practical implementation, transforming consumers into secondary disseminators of Chinese aesthetics and fostering a long-term cultivation of public awareness and appreciation for Eastern aesthetics [2].

Estée Lauder solely emphasizes the singular characteristics of Chinese aesthetics—joyous, intricate, and ornate—while deliberately avoiding the core philosophies of simplicity, moderation, and leaving blank spaces. Its long-term promotion has led the public to equate traditional Chinese style with red festive packaging, which aligns with the Western imagination of the exotic East, narrowing the complete connotation of Chinese aesthetics. This approach poses risks of aesthetic stereotyping and cultural appropriation [8, 9].

4. The core tension between local regeneration and transnational symbol appropriation

4.1. Underlying contradictions between two cultural production models

From the perspective of business anthropology, there exists an irreconcilable tension between local endogenous reproduction and transnational commercial appropriation in terms of cultural power [10]. Huaxi Zi adheres to a local model where the cultural subject and the cultural matrix share a common origin. Its narrative appeal lies in the dynamic inheritance of culture, with complete symbol verification and retention of the spiritual core through transformation. The brand and consumers resonate with a shared cultural identity, belonging to sustainable and equal cultural production, which can expand the boundaries of modern expression of Chinese aesthetics [2, 7]. The foreign-funded model of Estée Lauder: Western capital serves as the external cultural subject, with the sole pursuit of short-term profit. It extracts superficial visual symbols in a one-way manner, detaches

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from the original context, and relies solely on Eastern aesthetics for profit, without assuming responsibilities such as cultural popularization and support for intangible cultural heritage. This forms a one-way plunder of cultural resources, which is a concrete manifestation of Said's Orientalism theory in the beauty and makeup industry [8, 9]. There are significant differences at the consumer level: Huaxi Zi consumers have dual motivations for purchasing, combining consumption and cultural support, with high long-term brand loyalty; Estée Lauder's traditional Chinese style gift boxes only stimulate short-term impulse buying for gifting and collecting, and cultural favorability quickly declines after the festival [3].

4.2. Comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of narrative modes

The advantage of Huaxi Zi lies in its complete Chinese aesthetic system, which has built an irreplaceable and differentiated competitive advantage, freeing itself from the low-price competition of domestic products [6]; it integrates intangible cultural heritage and classical makeup to achieve the popularization and dynamic inheritance of traditional culture [2]; its three-dimensional oriental narrative awakens the cultural confidence of Generation Z, laying a cultural foundation for the brand's overseas communication [7]. Its shortcomings lie in the high threshold of ancient books and heavy intangible cultural heritage narratives, as well as the high cost of understanding for lower-tier markets and ordinary overseas consumers; some high-end intangible cultural heritage collaborations overly emphasize craftsmanship and visual appeal, sacrificing portability, affordability, and practicality, which limits repurchasing by the public.

Est é e Lauder's advantage lies in its festival style packaging that fits the local gift giving scene, which can boost sales of limited edition gift boxes in the short term and stabilize revenue in the Chinese market; To a certain extent, expand the global exposure of Eastern visual symbols. The inherent cultural flaw is the long-term solidification of Orientalist rigid aesthetics with a single festive symbol, narrowing the public's perception of Chinese aesthetics [8, 9]; Without a long-term unified Eastern narrative, the brand's local cultural foundation is hollow, and it is easy to be judged as speculative Chinese style marketing; The lack of professional research on symbols and the misuse of patterns and folk customs can easily lead to doubts from traditional culture enthusiasts; Only borrowing cultural resources for profit, with very little investment in intangible cultural heritage support and aesthetic popularization, resulting in a serious imbalance between commercial income and cultural investment.

4.3. Industry development optimization route

In terms of aesthetic design based on product line stratification, the mass line adopts simple and easy-to-understand symbolic elements such as landscapes and flowers, thereby lowering the understanding threshold for consumers both domestically and internationally. The high-end line fully embodies the profound narrative of intangible cultural heritage skills and Tang and Song culture. The brand balances cultural expression with product practicality, prioritizing the basic use functions of cosmetics, while craftsmanship and visual expression serve as additional value. At the same time, a unified narrative system tailored for overseas communication is established, extracting universal aesthetic cores such as the harmony between nature and humanity and natural flowers and plants, avoiding niche folk customs that are difficult for overseas markets to empathize with, thus reducing barriers to cultural communication [7]. Invest part of the revenue in the restoration of intangible cultural heritage and support for traditional Chinese style creators, forming a sustainable cycle of "material sourcing — monetization — cultural feedback". Establish a textual research team

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of experts in literature, history, and intangible cultural heritage, balancing the selection of diverse aesthetic symbols such as elegant simplicity, freehand brushwork, and festival celebrations, breaking the stereotype of a single, flashy Oriental image [9]. Build a long-term coherent sub-line of Eastern aesthetics, firmly cultivating single cultural threads such as the simplicity of the Song Dynasty and the elegance of Jiangnan, and abandoning the annual replacement of fragmented zodiac symbols. Increase long-term investment in aesthetic science popularization, produce short films on Chinese aesthetic philosophy, achieve two-way equal cultural dialogue, and eliminate Orientalist prejudices [8]. Establish a traditional culture support fund, collaborate with domestic intangible cultural heritage craftsmen on a long-term basis, promote complete Chinese aesthetics through global channels, and shift from one-way symbol appropriation to equal cross-cultural integration.

5. Conclusion

The research perspective of this article is business anthropology. It builds a four-dimensional analysis framework of aesthetic symbols, narrative logic, communication mode and aesthetic core. Taking Hua Xizi and Estee Lauder as samples, it compares the differences between the Chinese aesthetic narratives of local and international beauty brands, and draws the following conclusions in combination with cases, cultural differences and industry development.

Firstly, there are fundamental differences in the application of Chinese aesthetics between local and international beauty brands, resulting in two completely different development paths. The local brand Huaxizi relies on native cultural resources such as Jiangnan scenery and intangible cultural heritage crafts, and has completed aesthetic modernization transformation through rigorous cultural research. It has built a coherent and complete brand aesthetic narrative system, combined with immersive scenes and user co creation and dissemination, conveying the core of traditional Chinese aesthetics, and enabling consumers to form a deep and stable cultural identity. Estée Lauder only fragmented the use of visual symbols such as auspicious clouds and zodiac signs during festivals, without delving deeply into cultural connotations. The Chinese style design relies on short-term marketing activities, with traffic conversion as the core goal, which can easily create stereotypes of Chinese aesthetics. The essence of the difference between the two is the underlying division of cultural production models.

Secondly, there exists cultural power tension in the aesthetic narratives of the two types of brands, and the primary and secondary positioning of culture and commercial value determines the sustainability of the narrative. Local brands take cultural inheritance as their core goal, with commercial value as a derivative outcome. Relying on homologous culture, they construct a virtuous closed loop between the brand, consumers, and traditional culture, providing space for long-term iterative growth in narrative. Consumer behavior combines attributes of usage and cultural support. International brands are solely oriented towards short-term sales, viewing Chinese aesthetics as a marketing tool. They extract local cultural resources in a one-way manner without cultural feedback, making it difficult to retain long-term brand favor and resulting in weak user loyalty.

Again, both narrative modes have their own advantages and disadvantages, and need to be optimized in combination with brand foundation differentiation. Local brands, leveraging a complete Eastern aesthetic system, have escaped the industry's low-price competition and possess the potential to go global culturally. However, the heavy and complex cultural narrative has raised the threshold for understanding for the general public and overseas audiences. Some intangible cultural heritage products overly emphasize craftsmanship and visual appeal, weakening the practical attributes of cosmetics and restricting market repurchasing. International brands have a mature marketing system and can quickly leverage traditional Chinese elements to increase revenue

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and expand global exposure of Eastern symbols. However, they face issues such as superficial culture and template-based approaches, which make it difficult to dispel negative perceptions of cultural appropriation and tend to narrow the public's understanding of Chinese aesthetics.

Finally, industry optimization requires classified policies. Local brands should lay out their product lines in layers, simplify cultural expression for both the general public and overseas markets, balance practicality and cultural dissemination, establish a cultural feedback mechanism, and improve their overseas narrative system. International brands need to abandon short-term speculative marketing, establish professional cultural research teams, create long-term Chinese style product lines, and achieve equal integration of Eastern and Western aesthetics through deep cultural cooperation. This study only selected two top brands and lacks empirical research support, which has certain limitations. In the future, the research samples can be expanded, combined with consumer research data, deepen the research around the commercialization of China-Chic, cross-cultural communication of Guofeng, and improve the relevant research system.

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