

# Translating cultural values into packaging design: The case of Ningxia eight treasures tea

## ABSTRACT

*'Eight Treasures Tea' (NETT), a unique herbal tea from Ningxia province, China, is renowned for its distinctive recipe, medicinal properties, and long history, yet public awareness of its cultural and nutritional value remains limited. Preliminary observations suggest that the current packaging design lacks the necessary visual and verbal elements to effectively convey NETT's cultural values (CVs). This study aimed to address this gap by translating NETT's CVs into creative packaging using a practice-based research approach, conducted in three phases. In the first phase, a visual analysis of 12 existing NETT gift packages revealed limited differentiation in terms of colour, graphics, and typography, with minimal communication of CVs. The second phase involved semi-structured interviews with five experts, identifying eight sub-themes related to NETT's historical, health, artistic, and spiritual dimensions: historical origin, historical context, health concept, dietary habits, brewing process, drinking method, emotional expression, and cultural interpretation. Findings highlighted the Yellow River as a key symbol of NETT's historical significance, the artistic merit tied to making and tasting the tea, and the spiritual value shaped by Ningxia's inclusive and diverse ethnic culture. In the third phase, creative and reflective practice was employed to explore and reconstruct the visual and verbal elements of NETT packaging, representing its multidimensional CVs. The study evoked the interconnectedness of research and practice, highlighting the critical role of the practitioner as a researcher. The creative process and outcomes offered new insights into packaging design, enhancing the communication of NETT's cultural values to potential consumers.*

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## Introduction

Eight Treasures Tea originated along the Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty and serves as a significant testament to the prosperity of trade and commerce in ancient China. Traveling traders would boil tea with dried fruits to combat fatigue, marking the beginning of Eight Treasures Tea's evolution. Over time, it has become an influential symbol and cultural legacy of Ningxia province, China (Cao et al., 2018b; Zhang, 2022). A unique formula has developed over the

years, offering a wide range of nutritional benefits and flavours (Bai, 2010). Traditionally, the original Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea (NETT) consisted of eight to ten ingredients, known for their edible and medicinal properties. It is prepared using a scientific approach, with tea leaves as the base and at least eight other ingredients, such as goji berries, walnuts, cinnamon, sesame seeds, raisins, jujubes, or rock sugar. Through the practical exploration of the people of Ningxia, additional ingredients like chrysanthemum and rose have been incorporated into various NETT brands to

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enhance both taste and health benefits (Wang, 1988; Huang, 2007; Bai, 2010). According to the NETT Industry Research Report (Zhang, 2022), Eight Treasures Tea, as a representative of Ningxia's Intangible Cultural Heritage, is one of the province's signature items. Cao et al. (2018b) noted that NETT has long been an integral part of local dietary habits, commonly served to guests and used in celebrations of major festivals.

Cultural objects can be defined as products, uses, and disseminations of media that communicate intangible values, such as financial, educational, or health benefits, through a process of 'objectification' (Mangone, 2018). Griswold (1994) proposed that "The cultural object may be defined as shared significance embodied in form. In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible, or that can be articulated" (p. 11). What sets cultural objects apart from ordinary objects is their 'cultural worth,' or what is referred to as 'cultural value' (Lipe, 1984). Cultural value is a multifaceted concept, meaning that different cultures will value individual items for various specific reasons (Lipe, 1984). According to previous studies (e.g., Lipe, 1984; Griswold, 1994; Mangone, 2018), these factors can be interpreted as: (1) historical importance; (2) health benefits; (3) artistic worth; and (4) spiritual significance. From these perspectives, the unique features of NETT, including its historical origins, rituals, customs, and health attributes, can be considered different dimensions of cultural value within the context of a cultural object.

## State of the Art

Over the years, the importance of packaging has been recognized by many designers and experts across various fields. Packaging was described as 'the silent salesman' (Pilditch, 1961), creating a product's identity closely interconnected with its development. Attractive packaging helps differentiate products in the marketplace (Kuvykaite, Dovaliene & Navickiene, 2009). Lv, Shi & Yu (2006) proposed that packaging is a practical art, created by people to meet the needs of both production and daily life. Packaging design attracts consumer attention to a specific trademark, enhances brand image, and shapes consumers' perceptions of a product (Rundh, 2009). It represents the visual form that consumers will recognize, seek out, and be drawn to. As Ambrose & Harris (2018) noted, "Packaging provides a surface upon which to communicate information about the product" (p. 10). In other words, packaging creates a unique visual image that helps consumers identify the product among hundreds of other brands (Ranjbarian, Mahmoodi & Shahin, 2010).

Packaging is a significant visual tool that not only conveys a product's identity through unique visual forms but also enhances product recognition through different design

elements and influences consumer perceptions. Some literature emphasizes that differentiated packaging can be used to gain consumer preference by portraying and communicating a culture (Underwood, Klein & Burke, 2001; Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Stewart, 1994). This suggests that culture also offers more opportunities for packaging design. Mirzoeff (2002) mentioned that visual culture is a means of interpreting the world visually, and the artistic model of culture relies on distinguishing the culture of one ethnicity, nation, or people from another. This implies that packaging, as an artistic model of culture, can also represent the cultures of different nations. These perspectives suggest that packaging and culture can interact with one another. Based on this, packaging design can potentially serve as an effective medium to visually convey cultural values (CVs) and features of specific 'cultural objects.'

Packaging design elements have garnered interest from both customers and designers. Several studies have highlighted that the components of packaging are diverse. The theoretical model proposed by Silayoi & Speece (2004) categorized packaging design elements into two main groups that influence consumer purchasing decisions. The first is the visual component, including layout, colour, photography and illustration, typography, and pack size and shape. The second is the informational component, which includes product information and package technology. Similarly, Dovaliene & Navickiene (2009) argued that packaging design elements are divided into visual elements—such as colour, form, size, material, and graphics—and verbal elements, including the brand, manufacturer, and country of origin.

The colour element is one of the visual components that has received extensive attention. Strong associations created by colour combinations help shape the image of the product (Garber, Burke & Jones, 2000; Gofman, Moskowitz & Mets, 2010). Barchiesi, Castellan & Costa (2018) study revealed that colour elements enhance packaging attractiveness and convey a clear and credible message. Packaging design should incorporate colour codes that relate to specific product categories (Stewart, 1994). Kauppinen-Räsänen & Luomala (2010) emphasized that the colour of packaging can influence consumers' expectations and perceptions of food products. It is important to fully consider colour preferences developed in different cultural contexts when designing the visual elements of packaging (Madden, Hewett & Roth, 2000). Silayoi & Speece (2004) noted that graphics can influence decision-making for both high- and low-involvement products. Since graphics represent the product to varying degrees and add value to the packaging, they can drive consumer choices (Ksenia, 2013). Graphic elements, such as product photographs and illustrations, stimulate consumers' perceptions and encourage them to try the product (Silayoi & Speece, 2007).

The combination of creative colours and well-designed graphics creates an emotional appeal to consumers (Ksenia, 2013). According to Velasco & Spence (2019), typography is an essential component of multi-sensory packaging design. Not only is it a ubiquitous feature of product packaging, but in some cases, the choice of typeface can even influence the consumer's experience of the product. The shape and size of packaging also impact purchasing decisions, with consumers concerned about convenience and usability (Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Krishna, Cian & Aydinoglu, 2017). Consumers can judge a product's volume by combining the elements of shape and size, reflecting whether the packaging is easy to use and carry. Effective packaging shapes can subtly communicate messages and generate expectations through design (Ksenia, 2013).

Kuvykaite, Dovaliene & Navickiene (2009) found that the verbal elements of packaging, such as product information, brand, and country of origin (COO), were most important to consumers' purchase decisions, even more so than visual elements, especially when consumers are pressed for time. It was difficult for consumers to identify product attributes when most visual elements of packaging shared similar styles or sizes (Ambrose & Harris, 2018). Therefore, verbal elements often serve as the entry point for consumers when observing packaging. General product information includes details like weight and measurements, ingredients, and recyclability (Ambrose & Harris, 2018). The country of origin signifies where the product was originally made (Yeong et al., 2007) and is a powerful marketing tool for building the image of a regional or national product (Tseng & Balabanis, 2011). Kamaruddin, Mokhlis & Othman (2002) noted that consumers often prioritized the COO over information about the manufacturer. However, both Hausman (2000) and Silayoi & Speece (2007) argued that it is consumers' 'experiences' that simplify their product choices based on verbal elements. Although visual messages in advertisements generally attract more attention and are noticed before verbal messages (Bolen, 1984), empirical evidence in marketing suggests that images are often more accessible or usable than verbal stimuli (Underwood & Klein, 2002). As a result, it can be challenging to determine whether visual or verbal elements are more important in packaging design. However, it can certainly be argued that both types of elements must be carefully considered in packaging design studies and practice.

Semiotics is commonly employed to analyse information recorded in various forms of expression, such as a combination of signs (e.g., text and images). The essence of this expression can be understood through the physical materials of the medium, including photographs and printed material. The use of these mediums has significant implications for influencing the meaning potential of signs.

As a research method in packaging, semiotics principally interprets packaging as a subject (Ni Luh Desi In Diana Sari, 2016). This subject embodies practical functions, techniques, production, and economic aspects, while also encompassing informational and communicative elements as a medium (Piliang, 2010). Visual and verbal signs are interpreted separately and then categorized and explored for interpretive links through the semiotic process of the Peirce semiotic model (Tinarbuko, 2009). Ni Luh Desi In Diana Sari (2016) argued that the use of visual and verbal elements in packaging—the signifiers that attract consumers—constitutes a process of communication and semiotic phenomena. The presence of semiotics suggests that the rich information or specific meanings of a product can be conveyed to the target consumer through the symbolism of design elements in the packaging (Cavassilas, 2007).

Culture and packaging design interact to establish the unique visual identity of a cultural object. Indeed, integrating cultural elements into the visual and verbal components of packaging design has gained increasing attention over the last decade. Numerous studies have demonstrated that a 'cultural concept' plays a significant role in shaping the visual style and information presented in packaging (Min & Idris & Yusoff, 2018; Yang, 2018; Wan & Razali, 2019; Celhay et al., 2020; Hu, 2020). Packaging can stimulate the interest of potential consumers when various cultural characteristics and information are depicted (Silayoi & Speece, 2004). Different cultures can be communicated to consumers through the visual and verbal elements of unique packaging design (Ambrose & Harris, 2018).

A considerable amount of literature has focused on investigating the application of the 'cultural concept' in packaging design. These studies have advanced the understanding of the creative process and the impact of applying cultural values (CVs) and related elements in packaging design, contributing new marketing insights to product promotion. In a study by Wan & Razali (2019), a meaningful packaging solution was offered by combining indigenous Malaysian cultural elements with traditional graphics, utilizing a contemporary style. This packaging was created for a Malaysian medicinal bath product brand. Hu's (2020) study developed a practice-led process for visualizing traditional cultural symbols.

According to Hu (2020), this practical approach to incorporating traditional Chinese symbols into the design elements of tea packaging effectively represents cultural identity in contemporary visual communication design. Several researchers (e.g., Min & Idris & Yusoff, 2018; Celhay et al., 2020) have suggested that conveying desired cultural meanings and aesthetic styles using visual symbols in packaging can eliminate linguistic and cultural barriers. This means that consumers from different regions or cultures can more easily

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comprehend meanings through visual symbols, even if they are unfamiliar with the cultures depicted.

Chinese Health Concerns Big Data (2019) indicated that wellness has become a popular issue, with significant potential for wellness products, especially in China's post-90s and post-80s consumer markets. Similarly, a report by Yu & Yang (2018) suggested that the total sales of NETT exceeded 300 million yuan in 2018. Despite the increasing popularity of NETT in the market, Cao et al. (2018a) noted that the general public in Ningxia and other regions of China has an insufficient understanding of NETT. In light of this, several experts (Cao et al., 2018b; Yu & Yang, 2018) recommended exploring more effective promotional channels to highlight the unique cultural characteristics of NETT as a potential solution to enhance public awareness.

In relation to the above, a report by CBNDData & Tmall Tasty (2020) indicated that packaging was ranked as the third most important factor, following quality and taste, when people select tea products. This suggests that packaging could be strategically utilized to promote the CVs of NETT to potential consumers. Supporting this view, previous studies (e.g., Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Siwei, Cheng & Zhe, 2019; Hu, 2020; Celhay et al., 2020) have suggested that packaging design can serve as a crucial vehicle for conveying the cultural characteristics of cultural heritage. If the visual elements (e.g., shapes, sizes, materials, graphics, colours, typography, and layout) and verbal elements (e.g., product information, brand information, and country of origin) are properly designed, packaging can potentially enhance a product's recognizability and distinctiveness.

However, a preliminary observation conducted by the authors of this study indicated that the visual representations of the existing NETT packaging designs were relatively similar in terms of the choice of visual elements, such as colour and graphics. Moreover, only basic information was included on the packaging. In other words, the cultural values of NETT have yet to be adequately explored and integrated into the visual and verbal elements of its packaging design. Consequently, both Yu & Yang (2018) and Zhang (2022) highlighted that the competitive advantages of NETT are not distinctively represented in local and international markets today. Therefore, there is a need for an in-depth investigation into how the cultural values of NETT could be more effectively reflected in its packaging.

Furthermore, to the best of the authors' knowledge, there is limited literature on the different dimensions of NETT's CVs, which creates difficulties and challenges for successful integration. It is therefore imperative to gather additional insights from relevant stakeholders to gain a better understanding of NETT's cultural values before initiating the creative process.

Given the gaps in the existing literature, the overall purpose of this study is to effectively translate the multidimensional cultural values of NETT into its packaging design. Correspondingly, the specific research questions addressed by this study are:

1. How are the visual and verbal elements represented in the existing packaging design of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea?
2. What cultural values related to the historical, health, artistic, or spiritual dimensions of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea are identified from the perspectives of selected experts?
3. In what ways can the cultural values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea be effectively translated into the visual and verbal elements of its packaging design?

Practice-based research was employed as the overall research methodology for this study. Muratovski (2016) stated that practice-based research is distinctly different from qualitative and quantitative research in terms of its purpose. This methodology is intrinsically oriented toward refining creative practice and outcomes and serves as a powerful tool for initiating change (Crouch, 2012). In practice-based research, a wide variety of data collection methods can be utilized flexibly to achieve research objectives meaningfully (Meyer, 2000). Hu (2019) developed a practice-oriented research design by applying mixed methods in his study to investigate the contemporary visualizations of traditional Chinese symbols. To answer the research questions posed in this study, Hu's (2019) research design was adapted. Specifically, the study was divided into three phases: visual research, semi-structured interviews, and creative and reflective practice. This approach aimed to explore more effective means of translating the CVs of NETT into its packaging design.

## Phase One: Visual Research

Visual research is the process of interpreting objects and evaluating the quality of works through connoisseurship of the visual information presented. It plays an invaluable role in understanding the meaning of images and their ability to convey information (Muratovski, 2016). Also referred to as compositional interpretation, this research method relies primarily on the researchers themselves to describe the visual appearance of selected image samples using relevant terms (Rose, 2022). For practitioners, this approach is grounded in the knowledge and experience of the researchers (Muratovski, 2016).

In the first phase of this study, visual research was conducted to analyse both the visual elements (shape, size, material, graphic, colour, typography, layout) and verbal elements (brand information, product information, country of origin) of existing packaging designs for NETT.

This analysis aimed to determine whether the current packaging designs effectively represent the characteristics of NETT through the application of diverse elements and whether they offer a differentiated visual representation. Additionally, the visual research process sought to validate the findings from the preliminary observations conducted by the authors.

As noted by Muratovski (2016), the sampling process in visual research can be quite subjective, allowing researchers to identify and select the most relevant visual samples to meet their research objectives. In the Ningxia market, there are over 200 NETT manufacturers and brands. To identify the most relevant visual data, field visits were conducted at four supermarkets, three teahouses, and three tea boutiques in the Ningxia region (see Table 1). Brief conversations and observations with customers and staff indicated that a total of 30 gift packaging designs of NETT were currently preferred by consumers. The ideal purposive sampling situation involves identifying objects with target features and then randomly selecting a sample of these objects (Hibberts, Burke Johnson & Hudson, 2012). Consequently, a random sample of 12 packaging designs was selected from the 30 purposive samples for final visual analysis.

A set of photos was utilized to document the finalized samples for visual analysis. This phase concentrates on analysing the visual and verbal elements of the existing packaging design for NETT. Consequently, collecting relevant photographs or images was an essential prerequisite for conducting the visual analysis (Gray & Malins, 2004). The profiles of the selected packages are detailed in Table 2 and Table 3.

The analysis of the 12 NETT gift packages (P1 to P12) reveals consistent patterns in their visual and verbal elements, focusing on shapes, materials, graphics, colours, typography, and layout. The packaging comes in both square and rectangular boxes, with sizes varying according to the product quantity.

Larger packages can hold more tea bags, which are individually sealed in plastic to prevent spoilage. Most packaging (e.g., P1, P2) uses high-quality cardboard, providing good protection during transport and practical usability.

Graphically, some packages, such as P4, P5, and P6, incorporate simple illustrations with motifs inspired by the Gaiwan (teacup) and the ancient Silk Road to reflect the origins of Eight Treasures Tea. However, the designs of P1, P2, P5, P8, and P9 are relatively homogeneous, with similar graphic elements that lack differentiation and fail to convey the tea's multi-dimensional cultural values.

Traditional Chinese motifs, such as clouds and cranes, are prevalent in designs like P1, P2, and P3, but they do not create a unique cultural identity for NETT. While P6 and P7 attempt to visually present the health benefits of the tea, the graphics are often limited in richness and integration with artistic and spiritual values.

Colour schemes across the packages are dominated by highly saturated red, often paired with gold, black, or white, as seen in P1, P2, P5, P6, P10, and P12. Red is a favoured choice in Ningxia, symbolizing tradition, but its frequent use can lead to visual fatigue. However, P4 and P6 demonstrate successful diversification of colours, creating richer cultural contexts and enhancing the emotional experience for the consumer.

Typography in the packaging emphasizes the product name, typically presented in large, bold Chinese calligraphic fonts, complemented by Song font (e.g., P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9) and Hei font (e.g., P7, P10, P11, P12) for additional information. This combination reflects Chinese tradition and improves readability. Most designs, such as P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P10, P11, and P12, maintain a vertical layout, aligning with traditional Chinese writing practices. These designs also tend to be symmetrical, achieving visual balance and ensuring a clear hierarchy of information.

**Table 1**

A Summary of Sites for the Field Research

	Field Research Sites	Remarks
Supermarkets	1. Hyper Market	The largest local supermarket chain in Ningxia.
	2. Vanguard Mart	One of the largest retail chains in China.
	3. Wu Mart	The first Chinese chain to have 100 supermarkets in the northern region.
	4. Metro	Retain and wholesale supermarket group from Germany with supermarkets in 32 countries.
Teahouses	1. Ma Yixin Teahouse	One of the most popular teahouses in Ningxia's busy business district.
	2. Liu Sandu Teahouse	Ningxia's first NETT experience hall.
	3. Ma Yi Teahouse	A well-known traditional NETT teahouse.
Tea Boutiques	1. Ma Yixin Babaocha	A popular tea boutique in the local shopping centre of Ningxia.
	2. Liu Sandu Babaocha	The brand with the largest number of the NETT of tea boutiques in China.
	3. Fei Yi Babaocha	A new tea boutique that has opened in recent years with a full range of products.

Textual elements on the packaging usually cover basic product details, such as names, brands, weights, and ingredients. Some packages, like P4, P7, and P9, also highlight the product's origin and its health benefits. However, most packaging does not provide comprehensive textual content, particularly regarding

NETT's cultural values.

Only P5 and P6 include limited bilingual information, suggesting that future designs should incorporate more detailed and bilingual descriptions to better communicate NETT's cultural significance.

**Table 2 (part 1)**

The Profile of the Selected Packaging on Visual Elements

Code	Image	Visual Elements								
		Shape	Size (L x W x H) cm	Materials	Graphics	Colours	Typography			Layout
							Calligraphic Fonts	Chinese Song Font (Serif)	Hei Font (Sans Serif)	
P1		Rectangular	38 x 26 x 10	Paper Cardboard Cloth	Illustration of a Gaiwan (a set of teacups) with simplified auspicious cloud patterns as the background.	Gold Red Black	√	√	-	Vertical orientation: from top to bottom, exhibiting vertical symmetry.
P2		Rectangular	42 x 28 x 12	Cardboard	Illustration of a Gaiwan bordered with auspicious cloud motifs.	Red Green Beige	√	√	-	Horizontal orientation: from left to right, demonstrating a tendency towards vertical symmetry.
P3		Rectangular	40 x 24 x 10	Paper Cardboard Plastic	Crane illustrations accented with simplified auspicious cloud motifs.	Gold Red White Blue	√	√	√	Vertical orientation: from top to bottom, exhibiting vertical symmetry.
P4		Rectangular	40 x 20 x 8	Paper Plastic	Camel illustrations featuring Silk Road motifs in a circular pattern.	Beige Black Blue	√	√	-	Vertical orientation: from top to bottom, displaying asymmetry.
P5		Rectangular	28 x 28 x 10	Cardboard	Simplified outline of the Gaiwan alongside a simplified outline of the Silk Road.	Red Golden	√	√	-	Vertical orientation: from top to bottom, displaying asymmetry.
P6		Rectangular	38 x 28 x 8	Cardboard	Vivid colour illustration of an open-lid Gaiwan, complemented by landscape illustrations.	Red Golden Black	√	√	-	Vertical orientation: from top to bottom, showing a tendency towards vertical symmetry.

**Table 2 (part 2)**

The Profile of the Selected Packaging on Visual Elements

Code	Image	Visual Elements								
		Shape	Size (L x W x H) cm	Materials	Graphics	Colours	Typography			Layout
							Calligraphic Fonts	Chinese Song Font (Serif)	Hei Font (Sans Serif)	
P7		Rectangular	24 x 16 x 7	Paper Plastic	Background illustration of the ingredients with rectangular line patterns.	Gold Black White	√	√	√	Horizontal orientation: from left to right, demonstrating a tendency towards vertical symmetry.
P8		Rectangular	38 x 24 x 10	Cardboard	Photo of a Gaiwan, surrounded by circular lines and patterns.	Red Yellow Black	√	√	-	Vertical orientation: from top to bottom, displaying asymmetry.
P9		Rectangular	34 x 26 x 10	Cardboard Plastic	Photo of a Gaiwan with decorative circular patterns.	Black Red Beige	√	√	-	Vertical orientation: exhibiting asymmetry.
P10		Rectangular	33 x 24 x 5	Paper	Simplified scalloped patterns combined with circular lines.	Red Golden Black	√	√	√	Vertical orientation: showing a tendency towards vertical symmetry.
P11		Rectangular	30 x 22 x 5	Paper Plastic	Background illustration of the ingredients featuring auspicious cloud pattern lines and circular patterns.	Yellow Grey Black	√	√	√	Vertical orientation: showing a tendency towards vertical symmetry.
P12		Rectangular	26 x 18 x 12	Cardboard	Auspicious cloud pattern lines arranged in a rectangular pattern.	Red Gold Black	√	√	√	Vertical orientation: showing a tendency towards vertical symmetry.

## Phase Two: Semi-structured Interviews

The second phase of this study utilized semi-structured interviews (SSI). In this approach, conversations were centered around predetermined themes, incorporating a mix of closed and open-ended questions (Adams, 2015). This method allowed for relevance to the topic while avoiding overly standardized questions. SSI enabled researchers to explore unanticipated issues while maintaining high participant engagement (Merton &

Kendall, 1946; Morse & Field, 1995; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Participants had the freedom to respond to open-ended questions in their own way, and researchers could probe these responses with follow-up questions. This flexibility is a distinctive feature of the semi-structured interview approach. According to Adams (2015), SSI is particularly useful when researchers have a solid understanding of the topic's domains and components but cannot predict all possible responses. The SSI aimed to gather insights from five purposively selected experts regarding the specific CVs of NETT and to obtain new perspectives on the existing packaging design.

This facilitated an in-depth exploration of the unknown and unanticipated characteristics of NETT, supplementing

the data collected in the first phase of the study. Table 4 presents the profiles of the informants.

**Table 3**

The Profile of the Selected Packaging on Verbal Elements

Code	Image	Verbal Elements							
		Brand Information		Product Information					Place of Origin (Ningxia)
		Brand Name (Logo)	Brand Slogan	Quantities	Ingredients	Health Instructions	Historical Introduction	Brewing and Drinking Methods	
P1		√	-	√	√	-	√	-	√
P2		√	√	√	-	-	√	-	√
P3		√	-	√	√	-	√	-	√
P4		√	√	√	√	-	√	-	√
P5		√	√	√	-	-	-	-	-
P6		√	√	√	√	-	-	-	-
P7		√	√	√	√	√	√	-	√
P8		√	√	√	√	-	-	-	-
P9		√	-	√	√	√	√	-	√
P10		√	-	√	√	-	-	-	-
P11		√	-	√	√	-	-	-	-
P12		√	-	√	√	-	-	-	-

**Table 4**

Experts' Profile

Code	Position	Work Location	Experience	Relevant Achievement
P	University Professor	North Minzu University	Teaching and research in the subject of tourism management for nearly 15 years.	Published two papers on NETT
D	Director of the Cultural Centre	Ningxia Cultural Centre	Nearly 25 years in the promotion of cultural heritage projects	Responsible for over twenty Ningxia cultural heritage products
H	Head of the Department of Commerce	Ningxia Commerce Department	Engaged in the promotion of Ningxia commodities to the public for nearly 30 years	Represented the Ningxia government at over a hundred international trade conferences
F	Founder and Manufacturer of the local NETT Brand	Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea Co.	Almost twenty years in the NETT industry	Building the brand into Ningxia's highest selling NETT
M	Tea Master of NETT	Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea Co.	Over 10 years as a NETT master	Attended hundreds of NETT brewing demonstrations throughout China

Seven (7) questions were developed based on the four dimensions of cultural values (CVs) of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea (NETT), adapted from Lipe (1984), Griswold (1994), and Mangone (2018). Following the guidelines of Brinkmann & Kvale (2015), the interview questions were phrased in everyday language to ensure comprehensibility for the participants. Since the participants were non-English speakers, the questions were translated into Chinese. To ensure content validity, the questions were reviewed by three experts from the academic field who provided feedback and guidance based on their backgrounds and work experiences.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data with the assistance of NVivo software. The findings from the semi-structured interviews were organized according to the themes generated from the interview questions. A total of 153 raw statements and 38 related concepts were produced during the open-ended and axial coding processes in NVivo. As illustrated in Table 5, selective coding further identified eight subcategories, or sub-themes, grouped according to the frequency of occurrence of the data and aligned with the four dimensions of the CVs.

**Table 5**

The selective coding of developing the 8 sub-themes in Nvivo

Core Dimension	Sub-dimensions	Frequency
Historical Importance	Historical Origin	12
	Historical Context	12
Health Benefits	Health Concept	12
	Dietary Habits	17
Artistic Worth	Brewing Process	19
	Drinking Method	11
Spiritual Significance	Emotional Expression	16
	Cultural Interpretation	23

The sub-dimensions extracted from the four dimensions of the CVs of NETT were reviewed and reconfirmed by the experts. Achieving their consensus was essential to ensure the accuracy of the findings before proceeding with the creative practice.

## Phase Three: Creative and Reflective Practice

In professional and academic fields, 'creative practice' combines the act of creating novel things with the essential processes and techniques inherent to a particular discipline (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Design output is central to creative practice and plays a crucial role in generating new understandings (Candy, 2006; Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Insights gained from creative practice can directly inform the design itself (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). Thus, creative practice is characterized not only by the focus on producing something new but also by the process of making, which leads to shifts in ideas and practices resulting in continually renewed outputs (Candy & Edmonds, 2018).

For practice-based researchers, the insights gained through reflection significantly contribute to the outcomes of creative practice (Candy & Edmonds, 2018). When practitioners engage in reflection, the object of reflection encompasses a diverse system of knowledge. This reflection may involve strategies and theories implicit in patterns of behaviour, feelings toward the practice, and approaches taken to solve problems (Schön, 1983).

Reflection-in-action is a reflective form of knowing-in-action. Action and reflection are complementary; 'doing' extends 'thinking,' while 'reflection' facilitates both 'doing' and its results (Schön, 1983).

Moreover, reflective practice serves as a highly applicable structured self-evaluation method that can be deployed throughout the design process (Thompson, 2008). This process can produce unexpected shifts in practice, adding new perceptions and enabling responses to emerging issues. Reflective practice often leads to greater achievements than anticipated or described in advance (Schön, 1983).

Based on the above arguments, creative and reflective practice were employed in the third phase, with findings presented as creative outputs. This method encourages thinking, reflecting, and practicing an understanding of the CVs of NETT, which continually feeds back into the visual representation and allows for developments in packaging design for specific themes.

In the second phase, the consensus among experts validated the key elements within the four dimensions of NETT's CVs and reaffirmed its long evolutionary journey into becoming an authentic cultural object of Ningxia. The distinctive historical development, geographical location, humanistic sentiments, and artistic atmosphere of Ningxia Province have collectively contributed to the cultural background and significance of Eight Treasures Tea. Consequently, the finalized design concept was 'Tea Trip to Ningxia.' This concept aims to convey the CVs of Eight Treasures Tea by shaping the identity of a unique tea product that represents the Ningxia region. Additionally, the process of perceiving the CVs embedded in the packaging is framed as a tea trip, providing a sense of scenario and experience that enhances interaction with potential consumers.

## The Creative Processes of Translating of Cultural Values into Verbal and Visual Elements

According to previous studies (Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Kuvykaite, Dovaliene & Navickiene, 2009), the verbal elements considered in the packaging creative process include brand information, product information, and country of origin. In this section, the majority of these elements are expressed bilingually to ground the design in a broader international perspective.

Corporate branding or identity is the primary concern that designers or researchers must address when embarking on any packaging design. The packaging of NETT, which conveys CVs, should align with its brand identity. A dummy brand named 'Yuncha' was created to facilitate the creative process and outcomes of the study. In Chinese, 'Yun' signifies containment, often embodying deep cultural and emotional connotations. Accordingly, 'Yuncha' was envisioned as a local Ningxia brand dedicated to raising awareness and understanding of Ningxia's renowned cultural heritage, particularly through Eight Treasures Tea.

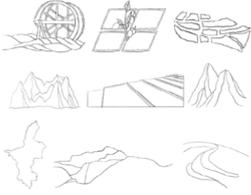
In the first phase of the study, visual analysis findings indicated that existing NETT packaging typically included product information such as size, weight, content details, ingredient lists, efficacy, and product type. As a result, product information was prioritized in the creative process. However, since the packaging design aimed to convey the multidimensional CVs of NETT, it was essential to tell a meaningful story about the product. Consequently, the slogan 'Experiencing the Cultural Value of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea' was developed. This narrative, which encompasses the four dimensions of CVs, is presented as a 'Tea Trip Guide.' To enhance the experiential significance of the packaging, additional instructions describing the brewing and drinking methods of NETT were included. Furthermore, the introduction of 'Gaiwan' and 'Picking Joy' illustrates an artistic approach to making a cup of tea.

Ningxia Province, China, recognized as an influential origin and development site for Eight Treasures Tea, has been repeatedly validated in this study. Therefore, the label 'NINGXIA materials & made' was incorporated throughout the packaging design.

On the other hand, the development of the visual elements of the packaging primarily focused on size, material, shape, graphics, color, typography, and layout (Silayoi & Speece, 2004; Kuvykaite, Dovaliene & Navickiene, 2009). The creative process was documented through diagrams, tables, sketches, and computer-aided prototypes. Simultaneously, it involved a reflective process of continuous integration, execution, evaluation, and modification. Highlights of how the identified CVs were translated into graphic elements, style, color, font selection, and other aspects are illustrated in Figures 1 to 4.

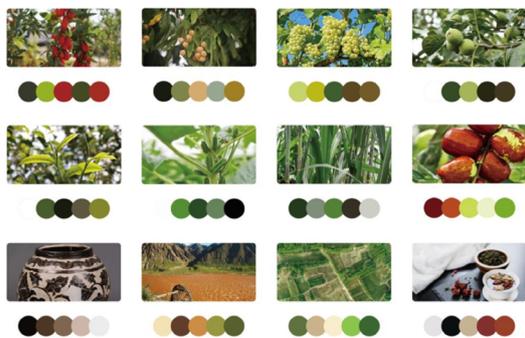
Ingredients	Development of Graphics				
Gujberry					
Cinnamon					
Sesame					
Tea Leaf					
Jujube					
Sultana					
Walnut					
Rock Sugar					

» **Figure 1:** Development of Graphic and Style on Different Ingredients

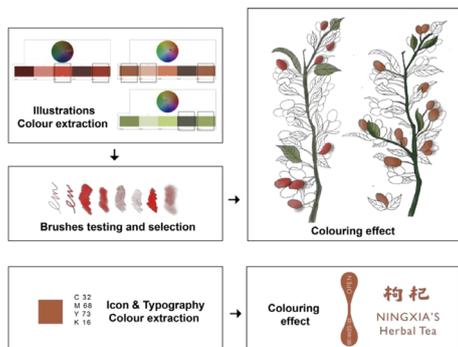
Other Ideas on the CVs	Development of Graphic
<b>Historical Importance</b>   Land Location  The Silk Road	
<b>Health Benefit</b>  Dried fruits	
<b>Artistic Worth</b>  Gaiwan  Picking the Tea	
<b>Spiritual Significance</b> Home Tea Welcome Tea Morning Tea	



» **Figure 2:** Development of Supporting Graphics



» **Figure 3:** Colour Inspirations



» **Figure 4:** Colours and Fonts Testing Process

## The Creative Output

As illustrated in Figure 5, the outer packaging is primarily constructed from wood. The design features an illustration inspired by the CVs of NETT, alongside verbal elements such as the origin and slogan.

These visual and verbal components are crafted to emphasize the concept of 'Tea Trip to Ningxia.' When consumers encounter the outer packaging, it signifies the beginning of their journey to explore the CVs of NETT.



» **Figure 5:** The Outer Look of the Packaging Design

Upon opening the outer packaging, the introduction to the tea journey immediately captures the consumer's attention. As shown in Figure 6, it summarizes the four dimensions of the CVs of NETT: history, health, art, and spirituality. Following this introduction are the product packages containing the ingredients for NETT.



» **Figure 6:** The Intermediate Packaging Design

The ingredients are housed in metal tins, each labeled with one of eight distinct illustrations (see Figure 7).

In addition to the essential product and brand information, the tins display the slogan 'Experience the Cultural Values of Ningxia's Eight Treasures Tea.'



» **Figure 7:** The Inner Packaging Design

One of the most striking features is the travel guide presented in the form of a letter. As depicted in Figure 8, a stamp design on the front enhances the travel theme. Upon opening the envelope, consumers will find four different cards, each specifically describing the CVs of the eight teas, accompanied by rich graphics.



» **Figure 8:** *The Design of the 'Tea Trip Guide'*

As illustrated in Figure 9, Pickingjoy is crafted from cloth and features graphics of the eight ingredients printed on it. Consumers can easily measure different amounts of ingredients based on the size of the graphics. This packaging also includes specific instructions, while the Gaiwan is securely encased within Pickingjoy.



» **Figure 9:** *The Design of 'Gaiwan' and 'Pickingjoy'*

Additionally, Figure 10 showcases the eco-friendly bag, which offers enhanced protection for the packages and is designed for easy portability.



» **Figure 10:** *The Design of the Eco-friendly Bag*

## Discussion

### The Visual and Verbal Elements of the Existing NETT Packaging Design

Past studies (Huang, 2007; Cao et al., 2018b; Yu & Yang, 2018) have indicated that NETT is a cultural object unique to the Ningxia region. However, its cultural characteristics have not been deeply explored or effectively communicated to the general public through promotional channels (Cao et al., 2018b).

Some studies (Yu, 2018; Wan & Razali, 2019) suggest that the appeal and communicative ability of packaging can be enhanced by leveraging visual representations, such as graphic and colour elements related to cultural factors. In this context, this study distinguishes itself by aiming to create more effective packaging for NETT that integrates visual and verbal elements to better convey its CVs.

To achieve this, it was essential to evaluate existing packaging in Ningxia's market to assess their effectiveness in communicating cultural characteristics. Visual analysis was employed in the first phase of the study. Overall, the visual and verbal elements of the current packaging were found to be relatively incomplete in articulating the four dimensions of NETT's CVs. This one-sided consideration poses challenges for the public to fully understand the cultural characteristics and connotations of NETT through the existing packaging design.

The findings indicated that the existing packaging designs of NETT shared similar visual presentations in terms of colour schemes, graphical styles, and typography. While some designs addressed the historical and health values of NETT, they often lacked rich imagery and context, making it challenging for potential consumers to appreciate the cultural significance of NETT in its entirety.

According to Silayoi & Speece (2007), graphics and colour elements are crucial in packaging design. The analysis revealed a predominant use of red in the existing NETT packaging. While a large plain colour background can create a neat and orderly visual effect, allowing for easy access to product information, the overuse of a single colour may fail to generate sufficient appeal and could lead to visual fatigue. Additionally, the excessive repetition of one colour may diminish the distinctiveness of a particular package compared to others. A well-considered colour palette in packaging should build a harmonious visual atmosphere while reflecting the cultural context and characteristics of the product.

Out of the twelve packaging designs examined, seven drew inspiration from the Silk Road and tea cups, which have been repeatedly validated as important expressions of NETT's historical dimension.

However, the relatively singular design style fails to evoke an emotional atmosphere or transport the consumer back to the historical origins of NETT, leading to a potential homogenization of visual imagery. Four designs represented the health benefits of NETT, yet their presentation was straightforward, often relying on simple photographs or textures. Six of the packages incorporated traditional Chinese motifs, such as auspicious clouds, fans, and cranes. However, these motifs are common across various Chinese products, and there is limited evidence to prove their specific relevance to the cultural identity of NETT. The spiritual and artistic values associated with NETT were also underrepresented or neglected, resulting in graphics that provided minimal information.

The primary function of packaging is to protect its contents (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2010). It is noteworthy that the visual elements, such as shape, material, and size, of the existing packages performed well in safeguarding the products, with most cardboard-based outer packaging being convenient for shipping and recycling. However, these packages contained all eight ingredients in one packet for ready-to-drink purposes, potentially overlooking the unique experience and artistic value that NETT offers during the brewing process.

As Squire, Willberg & Forssman (2006) noted, typography is fundamentally about communicating information. Typography design is crucial in conveying product messages, as it transforms verbal elements into powerful visual representations. The visual analysis revealed that traditional Chinese calligraphic and Song fonts were used across all packaging. While these fonts effectively differentiate primary and secondary message aspects based on size and boldness, the limited use of typography may not sufficiently create an orderly visual structure.

The analysis indicated that most packaging effectively conveyed verbal elements, covering essential brand and product information. However, considering the specificity of this study, the effective use of verbal elements is also vital in evaluating the relevance of existing packaging in conveying NETT's CVs. The examination found that only four existing packages addressed health and historical values through verbal elements, but the brief content may not be deeply accessible to the general public. Furthermore, the packaging did not utilize bilingual expressions to create a more diverse or international perspective.

## Experts Views on Cultural Values of NETT

Based on the findings from the SSI in the second phase of the study, it can be confirmed that NETT possesses significant CVs in four key areas: history, health, art, and spirituality. The Ancient Silk Road and the Yellow River emerge as pivotal icons that underscore NETT's histor-

ical significance. The health benefits are emphasized through the natural and medicinal properties inherent in the eight ingredients. Additionally, a cohesive brewing and drinking process reflects the artistic value of NETT, while its spiritual significance is rooted in the customs and social environment of the local people in Ningxia.

These findings are partially consistent with previous studies (Huang, 2007; Cao et al., 2018b; Yu & Yang, 2018) and elucidate the CVs embodied in four specific aspects of NETT as a cultural object. While these meaningful insights suggest that a design concept for the packaging has begun to take shape, it is crucial to recognize that the emergence of these design ideas does not imply that the 'right' design approach has been identified. Rather, they represent the aggregation of perceptions gathered from a group of experts regarding the CVs of NETT.

## Translating CVs into NETT Packaging Design

In this context, the researchers aim to explore their dual role as both researchers and practitioners in this study. It is crucial not only to continuously reflect on the multi-dimensional connotations of NETT's CVs but also to consider its visual externalization in packaging design through a more comprehensive creative practice.

The semiotic analysis was employed to examine the signs and use visual signifiers to express specific meanings to interpreters (Ni Luh Desi In Diana Sari, 2016; Celhay et al., 2020). Given that semiotics has been extended to graphic design, it can similarly be applied to packaging design (Celhay et al., 2020). The integration of various visual signifiers—such as colour, graphics, typography, and text—can effectively convey meaningful concepts related to the product. Bobrie (2018) argued that all elements of the text are simultaneously embedded within the viewer's visual field, contributing to the overall meaning of the brand. However, initial findings from the creative practice indicated that the complexity of NETT's four dimensions made it challenging for the packaging design ideas to encompass all CVs. To address this, perspectives from five experts were extracted and summarized, revealing that the text could be systematically integrated with several visual signifiers across the four dimensions. These verbal and visual elements worked together to create a meaningful sign and communicate it to the perceiver.

According to the findings, the design concept of 'Tea Trip to Ningxia' could be layered throughout the packaging, allowing consumers to perceive the CVs of NETT as they open each layer. Furthermore, the importance of interactive packaging design in conveying the CVs was emphasized by three experts in the second phase of the study.

The types of packaging can be classified based on their functions: outer, intermediate, and inner packaging.

The shape, size, and materials of each type serve essential characteristics of protection, convenience, circulation, and preservation. Ambrose & Harris (2018) noted that packaging is used to wrap, secure, and store products while also identifying and differentiating them. Several rounds of evaluation revealed that wooden outer packaging effectively demonstrated the natural and medicinal characteristics, particularly the health value, of NETT. Additionally, the hermeticity of the product packaging plays a vital role in preserving the ingredients. This design differs from existing ready-to-drink gift packs of NETT, as it allows for the separate packaging of ingredients along with a tea grasping tool. This design choice invites customers to enjoy the artistic and pleasurable aspects of NETT while grasping different ingredients, thereby creating a more sensory drinking experience. The 'Tea Trip Guide,' presented in the form of a letter attached to the packaging, echoes the design concept and provides extensive information. Through this interactive process, consumers can empathize with and experience the unique appeal of NETT.

Andrea (2016) pointed out that colour is the most emotionally responsive element in packaging design. Participants suggested a shift in the application of colour for NETT packaging. Findings indicated that a colour palette derived from the eight ingredients of NETT could better highlight its health values. Moreover, this colour scheme diverges from the predominant red palette currently used in existing packaging designs.

Stewart (1994) argued that packaging design should utilize various colour codes related to specific product categories, as colour elements contribute to consumer recognition of the packaging (Barchiesi, Castellán & Costa, 2018). The findings suggest that illustrations featuring a rich colour palette are expected to enhance the visibility of NETT packaging in the consumer market. The visual effects created by the graphics, combined with the extracted colours, help to effectively demonstrate the four dimensions of NETT's CVs.

According to Dabner, Calvert & Casey (2012), typographic decisions relate to the hierarchy of information; in any design, some information must be prioritized over others. The findings indicate that classifying verbal elements into primary, secondary, and tertiary categories based on their importance facilitates typography that effectively isolates information and defines the visual structure.

Textual information was distinguished by different Chinese calligraphic handwriting, serif, and sans serif fonts in the creation of verbal elements. More importantly, in addition to the basic information present in existing packaging designs, textual material on the CVs was integrated throughout the graphic elements, which benefits customers by deepening their understanding of the culture of NETT through visual cues and flows.

Additionally, the specific challenge of bilingual systems remains for designers to create layouts that enrich the global dialogue while preserving local cultural identities (Baki, 2013). Riaz et al. (2015) revealed that labels featuring a foreign language capture consumer attention and significantly impact purchase intention. Reflecting on these findings, this study argues that the use of bilingual forms enhances the understanding of packaging design as a form of communication or an intercultural tool. This approach opens new possibilities for expressing the CVs of NETT in international markets.

## Implications of the Study

Limited literature and resources are available on the CVs of NETT within the context of China. This study provides a comprehensive and systematic review and analysis of NETT's CVs, summarized into four dimensions: historical, health, artistic, and spiritual values.

This summary aims to identify factors for cultural research in the tea industry. Specifically, the study addresses the lack of awareness about NETT's culture within academic circles while effectively communicating the core CVs of this cultural object in a manner that is more relevant to contemporary society.

The contribution of this study lies in providing theoretical knowledge about semiotics as a method to express the relationship between thematic packaging design and CVs (signs) in determining the object (NETT) and the interpreter (customers). Packaging design serves as a visible signifier that combines visual and verbal elements organized on a surface to convey specific meanings to consumers. The study implies that NETT can be perceived as a cultural object embedded within the visible field of the interpreter (consumers) through its packaging design, thereby influencing consumers' perceptions.

The creative outcome of this study is a set of original packaging designs for NETT, which provides a platform for promoting Ningxia's regional culture and local heritage products. For manufacturers, incorporating cultural attributes into packaging innovation enhances market competitiveness and brand visibility.

Thematic packaging designs that reflect CVs are expected to attract consumers' attention, thereby increasing purchase intentions. For consumers, NETT is presented with a more vibrant image through concepts such as 'Picking Joy' and 'Eating Tea.' The study strives to create designs imbued with experiential elements that narrate the story of this tea to a broader audience. In particular, the packaging design encourages the younger generation to appreciate the charm of this traditional cultural object, thereby fostering public recognition of the unique tea culture and preserving traditional customs.

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## Limitations and Recommendations

Although this study provides valuable insights and design outcomes for various stakeholders, several limitations warrant consideration. The first limitation concerns the samples used for visual research in the initial phase of the study. To evaluate whether the existing packaging design of Eight Treasures Tea in the Ningxia market effectively conveys the four aspects of CVs, visual analysis was employed to assess the visual and verbal elements of 12 popular gift packaging items available on the market.

However, these selected samples were insufficient to illustrate the broader issues associated with the existing packaging of NETT. A larger sample should be visually analysed to refine the findings from phase one and provide a more meaningful background for subsequent phases. Additionally, the findings derived from the SSI were limited by the small sample size. While the insights provided by five participants regarding the four dimensions of CVs were extensive, Creswell (2014) notes that a larger participant pool enhances the reliability and comprehensiveness of findings. Furthermore, the SSIs were conducted in Chinese. Despite efforts to accurately translate the collected data into English, minor translation inaccuracies may have occurred.

Another limitation pertains to the research methodology employed in the study. The 'practitioner-researcher' role is complex, and challenges may arise due to limited time and potential lack of research experience and confidence. In this study, the researchers were required to function as reflective practitioners, collecting and analysing data while translating CVs into appropriate visual and verbal elements for packaging design. This reflection involved diverse systematic knowledge, including the multidimensional CVs, visual representations, and design strategies that needed to be considered throughout the cycles of evaluation, modification, adaptation, and refinement before achieving the final outcome. Although reflection is central to being a practitioner-researcher, it presents challenges, including the potential for one-sided views or a lack of absolute objectivity during the design process.

Future research should include consumer and client engagement, as they are significant stakeholders in the NETT industry. While the SSI captured insights from experts in the Eight Treasures Tea field regarding the CVs and thematic packaging concepts, the researcher did not interact with consumers to gain insight into their needs in the consumption market for these cultural objectives. For example, Borgman, Mulder-Nijkamp & Koeijer (2018) employed conjoint analysis to determine the specific design elements upon which consumer decisions about packaging are based.

Therefore, it is strongly recommended that future research adopt quantitative methods such as questionnaires or conjoint analysis to examine consumer perceptions and preferences for packaging designs with cultural attributes. Specifically, future studies could compare different design elements that convey CVs in packaging, allowing for testing of purchase intentions in various contexts and realistic market environments to enhance existing findings.

Moreover, it would be intriguing to explore how CVs from different cultural heritages can be incorporated into visual representations to convey broader dimensions of cultural characteristics through innovative design means, thus contributing to the development of traditional cultures across different countries.

Ranjbarian, Mahmoodi & Shahin (2010) noted that packaging serves as a unique visual image of a product, helping consumers identify it among numerous brands. Wan & Razali (2019) considered packaging design as a distinctive visual and verbal representation of a brand, analyzing selected brands according to Kapferer's (2004) Brand Identity Model, in which culture represents the origin of the product.

Consequently, it would be meaningful for future research to verify whether the enriched CVs expressed through packaging design can confer a unique identity to a brand and cultivate respect and loyalty among target consumers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, thematic packaging design that incorporates cultural elements has gained significant attention from designers and researchers (Yang, 2018; Hu, 2019; Wan & Razali, 2019).

However, the cultural characteristics of NETT, as a signature cultural object from Ningxia province, have not been adequately reflected in its packaging design, limiting the public's understanding of its rich cultural connotations. The various phases of this study aimed to develop a fresh and meaningful packaging solution for NETT, focusing on effectively conveying its cultural values through visual and verbal elements. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the development of the Eight Treasures Tea industry in Ningxia, promoting its growth, expanding its influence, and enhancing public recognition in the future.

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