

Chinese Yunnan Pu-er Tea Ecological Branding Design for the Japanese Market

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ABSTRACT

Chinese tea culture, deeply rooted in history, is facing challenges in contemporary markets, particularly in appealing to younger consumers. Yunnan A Chang Pu-er tea, originating from a region with a long tradition of tea production, seeks to enter the Japanese market amidst China's vast tea industry yet weak branding. Japan also has a long history of tea culture, and a growing interest in health and beauty benefits of tea. A survey conducted by Itoen Corporation reveals increasing health consciousness among Japanese consumers, particularly in their 20s, with green tea's health benefits gaining prominence. This trend is reflected in a rise in tea consumption, driven primarily by health considerations. Despite the dominance of green tea in Japan, there is potential for introducing Chinese Pu-er tea to cater to evolving consumer preferences. Furthermore, the study highlights the enduring interest of young Japanese women in healthy tea consumption, a trend unaffected by time. Considering Japan's focus on eco initiatives, the study aims to conduct research of Pu-er tea's brand new image for Japanese market with environmentally friendly packaging, leveraging QR code technology to enhance consumer engagement and storytelling about Chinese tea history.

Keywords: Tea culture, Chinese tea, Tea industry, Tea package design, Pu-er tea, Ecological design, Yunnan province, Cross cultural study

INTRODUCTION

Chinese tea culture has a rich and extensive history dating back thousands of years. The history of tea in China is closely intertwined with its cultural, social, and economic development. Tea consumption in China can be traced back to ancient times, with legends suggesting that the discovery of tea dates back to around 2737 BCE during the reign of Emperor Shen Nong. Tea became an integral part of Chinese society, celebrated for its medicinal properties, aesthetic appeal, and social significance. One particular category of Chinese tea that holds a unique place in tea culture is Pu-er tea. Pu-er tea is named after the town of Pu-er in Yunnan Province, which has been a center for tea production and trade for centuries. Yunnan A Chang Pu-er tea is considering to enter the overseas market, however, in recent years, traditional Chinese tea packaging design has gradually lost its favor among young

people. In this Yunnan area, people have produced Pu-er tea for Chinese tea companies for a long time, but they do not have their own brand, so they are thinking to create brand-new tea brand to enter Japanese tea market. This is because in Japan, tea culture is prevalent, and the Japanese public's concern for the health value and the effect on diet of traditional Chinese Pu-er tea are gradually increasing especially for young women. On the other hand, only Oolong tea and Jasmine tea are widely sold in Japan, so there is a chance to bring Pu-er tea into Japanese market. In addition, it is noteworthy that recently the Japanese market is actively promoting eco-packaging to demonstrate Japan's concern for protecting environment of our planet, such as eco-clean technology.

Pu-er Tea

Pu-er tea is made from the leaves of the *Camellia Sinensis* plant, the same plant used for all true tea, but what makes Pu-er unique is its post-fermentation process (Wei Jia et al., 2022). Pu-er tea can be broadly classified into two types: raw (sheng) and ripe (shou or shu). Raw Pu-er undergoes a natural aging process over time. The aging of raw Pu-er allows for a complex and nuanced flavor profile to develop, with some Pu-er tea improving with age, much like fine wine. Ripe Pu-er undergoes an accelerated fermentation process, which was developed in the 1970s to mimic the aging process of raw Pu-er. Ripe Pu-er has a milder flavor and lacks the astringency associated with raw Pu-er. So, Pu-er tea has a deep, earthy flavor and is often described as having a rich, full-bodied taste. It is believed by some to have various health benefits, including aiding digestion and reducing cholesterol. Additionally, Pu-er tea has also played a significant role in Chinese tea trading history, especially during the ancient tea horse road era, where tea was traded for horses and other goods along the trading routes connecting China, Tibet, and Southeast Asia. Today, Pu-er tea is highly sought after by tea enthusiasts around the world, and its production and consumption continue to be an important aspect of Chinese tea culture (Gong, 2016). Furthermore, according to the book "Journal of Traditional Chinese Medical Sciences", it says "Pu-er tea has been used for thousands of years to treat metabolic diseases. Recognized in Shen Nong's Herbal Classic, a compendium kept by the first traditional Chinese practitioners, it is still highly valued for its hypcholesterolaemia and hypolipidemic effects....we chose to develop a narrative that followed a typical "top-down" research format favored by Chinese. The ingested Pu-er tea is metabolized via the liver gut metabolic axis, inducing metabolic alterations in the host. The compounds derived from Pu-er tea, the bio-transformed Pu-er tea metabolites, and endogenous metabolites together induce decreased inflammation and improvements in glucose and lipid homeostasis" (Wei Jia. et al, 2022). This medical research shows that Pu-er tea works well for healthy diet and supporting lose fats in the body.

Current Status of Chinese Tea Market and the Possibility to Enter Japanese Tea Market

According to data from the China Tea Marketing Association, in 2022, China's total tea output will exceed 300 billion Chinese yuan, maintaining its position as the world's largest tea producer. However, China's tea industry

is facing a situation of “big industry but weak branding”, and the tea business entities are relatively diversified (CTMA, 2022). Therefore, even Yunnan A Chang area has a long history of producing tea leaves, there was no big chance to promote as their own tea brand.

The PR Office of Itoen Corporation, a well-known tea company in Japan, conducted an online survey of 1,000 men and women in their 20s to 60s throughout Japan in 2021 on their attitudes toward health and beverages in the second year of the Corona.” The survey revealed that while a second state of emergency had been declared in some areas, respondents were even more stressed and more health conscious than when the first state of emergency was declared. It also revealed that the health benefits of green tea, Japan’s most popular beverage, are attracting more attention, with as many as 90% of respondents aware of catechins, the main ingredient in green tea.” Furthermore, 25.3% of respondents indicated that their frequency of tea drinking has increased, revealing that one in four people have increased their frequency of tea drinking, with those in their 20s having the highest percentage. The top reason for the increase in frequency of tea drinking was “I think it is good for my health,” at 56.5%, up 10.4% from the May 2020 survey results. It can be seen that the number of respondents expecting health benefits from tea has increased. This result shows that people especially 20s have interests to drink tea for healthy purposes, and so far, they have mainly access to Japanese green tea not Chinese tea in the Japanese market, so there is a chance to introduce Chinese Pu-er tea for those of people who are seeking new healthy tea to try.

Tea is very familiar to the Japanese, and is consumed as a favorite in their daily lives. In recent years, a variety of healthy teas have been marketed to meet the needs of the health-conscious, and there has been a health tea boom in Japan. In 2000, professor Hiroe Okuda of Hiroshima Jogakuin University surveyed 182 female students aged 17–22 about their tea consumption and values about healthy tea. The results showed that “99.5% said they drink tea every day, with 4–7 cups a day being the most common. And the most common reason for drinking tea was during lunch or other meals, and more than 70% of the respondents said the purpose of drinking healthy tea was to lose weight or maintain good health.” Although this survey is old data, when compared to previous Itoen’s 2021 survey, there has been no significant change in young women’s opinions about tea in nearly 20 years, indicating that their interest in healthy tea and their tea-drinking habits have remained unchanged at least for 20 years.

Eco Packaging and Import Food in Japan

The term “ecological package” could potentially refer to a set of practices, policies, or technologies aimed at promoting ecological sustainability and reducing environmental impact. It might encompass a range of measures related to conservation, renewable energy, waste reduction, and other eco-friendly initiatives. Japan is known for its efficient waste management system. There are strict recycling policies, and citizens are encouraged to separate their waste into categories like burnable, non-burnable, and recyclables. Nowadays, many food companies try to use eco-packaging to reduce unnecessary waste from package such as non-labelling beverage plastic bottles, recycle material candy package, or using ink with natural color materials.

According to Oumar Fofana who has done research about packaging around the world, she says Japan has experienced a significant change in packaging trends, driven by a heightened awareness of environmental issues. The primary focus has been on reducing container weight and simplifying packaging materials. This environmentally conscious approach has resulted in the creation of products using recyclable materials. Additionally, there is a noticeable emphasis on developing high-functioning products that prioritize safety and convenience (Fofana, 2023). Also, consumers in Japan are increasingly conscious of the environmental impact of packaging, prompting manufacturers to reconsider their packaging strategies. From bento boxes (lunch box) to cosmetics, companies are rethinking their packaging to be more environmentally friendly. For example, numerous food companies have adopted biodegradable or compostable packaging materials, decreasing their dependence on single-use plastics. In a recent announcement by the Japan Packaging Technology Association, “it has been revealed that the packaging and container shipments in Japan saw a significant increase in 2021. The shipment value reached a staggering 5.6 trillion yen, marking a 2.2% increase compared to the previous year. Moreover, the quantity of shipments also surged to 19.2 million tons, reflecting a substantial 3.8% growth. This remarkable upswing indicates a promising trend in Japan’s packaging industry.” It means Japanese packaging technology gradually started to be famous, and it increases variety of packaging which people have more access to produce. Furthermore, according to the Ministry of Economy in Japan, “Trade, and Industry’s Production Status Survey, the combined production quantity of the four primary packaging materials from January to October 2022 reached 2,593,075 tons. This marked a significant 2.2% increase compared to the same period in the previous year. Notably, plastic containers, driven by advancements in recycling technologies and the promotion of recycled plastics, recorded a 2.9% increase. Packaging paper showed a 3.2% increase, while glass containers exhibited a 2.1% growth, both experiencing a two-year consecutive rise. In contrast, beverage cans experienced a 1.4% decline, marking three years of continuous decrease. This continued growth in packaging materials production signifies a commitment to sustainability and innovation within Japan’s packaging industry. Manufacturers are investing in research and development to create packaging solutions that are not only environmentally friendly but also economically viable.” Therefore, whole industries produce packages indorse or plan environmentally friendly materials to change existing packages. It is necessary to concern eco-package aspect when designing tea package to Japanese audience.

There are many stores selling foreign food and snacks such as MUJI, KALDI, Seijo Ishii supermarket, or Kinokuniya Gourmand Market in Japan. This is because people started to have more interests to try foreign food brands since around 2018, and many influencers introduce them on SNS or YouTube. For example, in Seijo Ishii supermarket which sells original natural food products and foreign import products, there are a lot of Chinese food products such as Taiwan bottled fruit teas, spicy Chinese rice clackers, or Dan-dan noodles, etc. Nowadays, this supermarket has over 200

stores in Tokyo, and every season it releases new products related to foreign cultural food. Also, KALDI used to be a coffee store, but after started selling import food items, KALDI became very popular among young people. In KALDI, customers buy Chinese biang-biang noodle cooking sets, Chinese almond tofu pudding, and traditional local Chinese peanuts candy. KALDI is now selling Korean, Chinese, Filipino, Malaysian, Thai, European, American, Vietnamese food products, and Japanese not only love to eat Japanese dishes but also love to eat other countries ones especially Asian food. Therefore, Pu-er tea has a great chance to enter Japanese market because Pu-er tea is still unknown tea product in Japan.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Pu-er tea stands as a distinguished member of the tea family in China, its uniqueness derived from a post-fermentation process that sets it apart. Its classification into raw and ripe varieties provides a spectrum of flavors catering to diverse preferences. Beyond its taste, Pu-er tea boasts a rich history intertwined with Chinese tea trading and cultural heritage. Moreover, recent medical research underscores its potential health benefits, particularly in metabolic diseases. Despite China's dominance in tea production, challenges persist in branding and market penetration, as highlighted by the situation in the Yunnan A Chang area. However, the evolving landscape of Japanese consumer preferences, marked by a growing interest in health-conscious choices and eco-friendly packaging, presents a promising avenue for Pu-er tea's introduction. Japanese familiarity with tea consumption, coupled with the burgeoning health tea trend and openness to foreign food products, further enhances the potential for Pu-er tea success in the Japanese market. In essence, Pu-er tea's journey from ancient Chinese traditions to modern Japanese consumer preferences signifies not just a product expansion but a bridge connecting cultural legacies and contemporary tastes.

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