

# Design Significance and Characteristic of Incense Culture in Modern Times

\*Chuko, Cheng      \*Li, Ai-rong      \*Peng, Xuan-zi      \*\*Li, Yu-Sheng

\*Department and Graduate School of Industrial Design, Chaoyang University of Technology

\*\*Department of Visual Communication Design, Da-Yeh University

Taichung, Taiwan

**Abstract :** Incense itself is definitely a product with an idea of designs, which contains the properties of smoke, fire, and fragrance and also represents a strong vision of symbol. The most important function of incense is to establish the channel between man and soul and that fulfills all kinds of psychological needs for man. Through the action of lighting the incense, you can feel the visional and sensory stimulation. Thus, nowadays lots of incense products in Taiwan markets are eventually turned into new lifestyle designed products, not just for sacrificial offerings.

In fact, incense commonly exists in Chinese culture life; however, there is not much literature information. Our research is based on history review and the inspection of design, focusing on modern historical development, function, and product style of incense. Analysis is performed on the evolved features of how the incense was used and modified in Chinese society. The following conclusions are summarized.

**Key words:** *History (primary keyword) Culture*

## 1. Introduction

From the perspective of utensils, "incense," an essential tool for ancestor-worship, has always been one of the everyday items in the Chinese way of life, and it is also used for incense-appreciation, home-fragrancing, insect-repelling, and time-keeping. By observing folk art and traditional crafts we can see that incense-making is considered as one of the traditional arts, and indeed so in the times when everything is made by hand. Whether incense-making has become an industry or remains a traditional art is an interesting question since its production is now assisted by machines.

From the angle of design, incense itself is quite sophisticated: it contains the three elements of smoke, fire, and scent, and has strong symbolic meanings. Its primary purpose is to establish a channel of communication between humankind and deities and spirits. The action of lighting it up and the visual and olfactory stimulations that come with it satisfy humankind's different psychological needs. As a result, many incense products today no longer emphasize on ancestor-worship and the tedious procedures of incense-appreciation but a new life-style.

Most incense-makers are pessimistic about the future of this industry and point to "design" when asked how this industry can be upgraded or transformed, believing the design of packaging and product development would instantly improve its sales.

Humankind invents utensils and tools to aid in day-to-day applications. In the process of "using" utensils, humankind is often inspired to improve them, and this is why utensils are constantly being improved in terms of their shape, how they are used, and their implications, and have eventually become what they are today in the Chinese society. As a result, the use of incense in the Chinese society has also been given cultural implications (such as the mysterious power of summoning spirits or a way for spiritual cultivation) that deserve our careful observations. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between the use and design of incense by studying this industry and its design, especially the design of the packaging of modern incense products.

## 2.Changes in the Modern Applications of Incense

"Ever since the May 4th Movement, Chinese intellectuals have believed that a person having received modern education should not, cannot, and does not have religious beliefs"(Li, 2002).

The complicated process of ancestor-worship always makes people wonder "how should we worship the ancestors" and "what should we worship them with." With Western scientific concepts being introduced since the 20th century, many components of the traditional Chinese ancestor-worship ceremonies, including procedures, taboos, and methods have been forgotten despite how public education has been made more available. In fact, at the end of WWII ancestor-worship has been treated by the Taiwanese government as a form of superstition and being uncivilized (ancestor-worship and traditional cultures and religions have been almost entirely wiped out during the Cultural Revolution in mainland China).For the past 6 decades after the war ended, the large number of religious groups established actually further diversified how incense is used in ancestor-worships. With the general public forgetting the details of the use of incense in ancestor-worship, many scholars sigh about how ancestor-worship ceremonies have been mixed up and conducted incorrectly. Most of the books on ancestor-worship state using one stick of incense to worship ghosts, 2 sticks for ancestors, and 3 sticks for deities; however, the actual applications shown on the photo (Fig. 1) indicate that today's worshippers do not really care about the proper procedures and treat traditional religions and ancestor-worship casually since modern education and social values focus more on the Western scientific ways and evidences. However, eventually people want to express their respect to deities and ancestors by using ancestor-worship utensils due to thousands of years of the culture of ancestor-worship.



Fig. 1 Ceremony in Lukang's Tianhou temple, Taiwan (1945)

Data source: Left Sheep of the press, 1994, "Lukang huaigu"

As a result, people start having complexes and confusions regarding the use of incense and sacrificial offering (whether to use them or how much should be used). Economic growth has also indirectly influenced the practice of

ancestor-worship as the use of ancestor-worship utensils such as sacrificial candles and printed money has become "quantified."

Lotteries that became popular in Taiwan after the mid-1980s have further changed the religious attitudes in Taiwan; the motive behind the use of incense for ancestor-worship was distorted, and the incense industry also bloomed as a result. That era was very profitable to incense makers. The size of the order for incense, candles, and printed money was huge, and demands frequently exceeded supplies, thus incense factories were expanded in order to satisfy the market. The use of incense for ancestor-worship became a business trade for immediate benefits -- "the more you offer, the more you shall receive" (whether it is incense or printed money). Although this does not mean it was the sole reason why incense was in demand, it still had a profound impact on the amount of output and sales volume of modern incense makers.

As for the environmental issues of incense, popular temples often use large fans or ventilators to keep the air in the premise well circulated. These temples often also have patrollers who would throw an existing stick of incense into a bucket (1/3 full of water) when a new one has been inserted in the censer in order to maintain the air quality. This also implies that the use of ancestor-worship incense is forced to actively face issues such as changed religious attitudes, environmental and public health issues and make adjustments.

### 3.Changes in the Sales of Incense in Modern Incense Industry

The traditional incense stores in Taiwan can be divided into two categories: specialty stores and grocery stores. Specialty stores are those that sell only the candles and printed money for ancestor-worship, whereas grocery stores sell different types of household items with a few selections of wares for ancestor-worship. Incense stores vary in their scales, and incense is also sold by mobile vendors or household shops. This makes the incense market more complex and thus incense shops can be seen virtually anywhere (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Incense selling in the street

However, since the 1980s, department stores have started trying their legs in the incense market, making this industry more competitive than before. After the 1990s, the sales of incense has gradually been made available in supermarkets (e.g., Wellcome and Taiwan Fresh Supermarket) and mega-stores (e.g., Makro and Carrefour), making the access to incense-related products easier and the market more fiercely competed. After the year 2000, some convenient stores have also attempted to sell basic incense candles and printed money during the Chinese New Year season:

"This year mega-stores are selling wares for ancestor-worship at lower prices, and convenient stores are also selling them as they are more conveniently located. Last year Hilife launched a pre-order for products needed for the Mid-summer Festival, and this year they have products available right on site so consumers do not have to travel all the

way to mega-stores.

Hilife (a 24-hour convenient store) is selling more than 50 most popular products for the Festival. Until Sept. 18th, consumers can pick up whole cases of products they need at around 40%, including a family-sized pack of Wang Wang Rice Crackers for \$50 NT and 2 for \$79 NT, Wei-Wei Instant Noodles 15 packs for \$159 NT, and a box of Ku Tao plum-flavored green tea for \$139 NT. Other products such as the candles, fragrance, and money for ancestor-worship are also sold in the convenient store, which is rarely seen before."(Economic Daily News, 20002/1, page 19).

The reason why traditional incense stores can be seen everywhere is because it is easy to start one. Many business owners believe that this kind of business will always be profitable since incense is "inexpensive" and "essential" in people's lives. Given these two conditions (convenience and demand), it is not difficult to see why such stores are everywhere. People often perceive old incense shops as dusty, cramped, and dark. Today, however,



Fig. 3 Tian-Faug Shei, incense store in the city of Taichung County, Taiwan

incense is gradually being sold in mega-stores due to the competition and new ways of shopping (Fig. 3) so consumers can do all their shopping at one stop. On the other hand, traditional incense stores are also becoming brighter, bigger, and cleaner in order to provide consumers with a more comfortable and convenient shopping environment. However, traditional incense stores are not being fully replaced by supermarkets since the former provide more "added values" such as teaching consumers about religious ceremonies, including the rules and methods of ancestor-worship and functions of worship wares. Another main reason why they are not fully replaced by mega-stores is because they are more professional about the ceremonies of ancestor-worship.

#### 4.Modern Incense Packaging

With the gradual changes in the sales, display, and stores of incense, the packaging has also been changed as plastic has been widely utilized in different industries. According to the "Health Nourishment Thoughts of Gao Lien," incense was also packed in paper bags in the earlier times, and this is probably why it is packed the way it is today. With the changes of the times and the development of chemical technologies, plastic packaging has gradually replaced paper.

There have never been any fixed ways, styles, or designs of the packaging of incense products as they all depend on what individual sellers prefer. However, the sellers also adjust their brands and product images due to their consumers' needs, such as religious factors or local traditions. Although there are no rules on how incense should be packaged, today's incense packaging has nevertheless shown several "public patterns" which related to the consideration for the cost of packaging and printing.

In the printing industry, the differences in the designs are known as the "public pattern" and the "private pattern." "Public patterns" refer to a printing company's available formats (including sizes, layouts, and fixed methods of printing) for a client to choose from. These patterns are fixed, leaving little room to adjust the design. Some printing companies simply let their clients choose from finished packagings (such as jewel boxes or glasswares). Although public patterns do not really demonstrate a product's features or a brand image, it is low in cost as a client only needs to determine whether they want to go ahead with the printing, choose from the existing designs or finished products, and how many boxes should be printed without having to pay for design or typesetting.

Private patterns are greatly different from public ones in terms of the cost for design, typesetting, or molding. The client provides the company with a set of visual design that depicts the former's brand image and product features, and based on which the latter makes changes on the package structure, method of printing, and visual design, thus the cost increases significantly. Even if the packaging is printed with the most basic method, the cost for design and typesetting is still on the client's part. This also explains why most incense sellers go with similar, traditional packaging for incense used for ancestor-worship -- they go with the public patterns due to cost, price, and competitiveness. Even if a seller had designed a unique packaging, it would be continued to be used for years and eventually become the seller's trademark. This does not only help lower cost but also create the seller's own brand image.

There is actually an interesting set of rules among these seemingly similar designs of packaging. As the most common tool for humankind to communicate and worship spirits and ancestors, the demand for and supply of incense are actually quite significant, and this is why the design of incense packaging acts as the mediator between incense products and consumers. The packaging of incense sticks (Fig. 4) has always been a product of design with strong visual elements, and many traditional symbols continue to be adopted by business owners and designers. When

purchasing incense for ancestor-worship, consumers intuitively recognize something as a product for this purchase when seeing the similar style of packaging. They would purchase and use it without carefully examine or choose this kind of products. This kind of design of packaging that has been used for years has not only indirectly further defined the market of



Fig. 4 Bags of incense

incense for traditional ancestor-worship but has even become the distinctive icon of such product.

The "patterns" of the traditional design of incense packaging, regardless being public or private, have a strong sense of consistency. Although the origin of the "prototype" of the design cannot be determined, it is still adopted in most of today's incense packaging. The locations of the symbols placed on the different packages that we have gathered are basically the same, suggesting a traditional design that has been agreed on.

For the purpose of clear demonstration and easy understanding, the structure of the design is analyzed in four categories: color, text, totem, and layout (Fig. 5).

(1) Color: Colors used on incense packages are mostly those symbolize fortune. The traditional Chinese colors of





Fig. 5 Packaging design structure of incense

fortune include red, orange, yellow, purple, and gold, with red being most popular as it also means "being blessed and avoiding misfortune." Gilding is also commonly seen on incense packages for the purpose of giving the product an ornate and elegant look.

- (2) Text: Most of the texts on incense packages are of Chinese calligraphy in fonts such as the regular script, Han Dynasty font, Yan Kai font, or those by calligraphers. Highly-recognizable boldface fonts are also commonly used on product advertising and descriptions. In ancient China, texts were the symbol of knowledge and power. The activity of "incense appreciation" that has been enjoyed by scholars since the Wei and Jin Dynasties was often combined with the culture of incense applications have resulted in calligraphy being joined with incense. In addition, using calligraphy on this oriental product further demonstrates the Chinese culture of incense applications.
- (3) Totem: Pictures commonly seen on incense packages include the utensils and images directly related to ancestor-worship such as censers, deities, beasts, smoke, and clouds. What is typically seen on the package is the censer placed below with its smoke coiling up and turning into clouds that symbolize fortune and on which deities walk. The Chinese dragons, phoenixes, cranes, and unicorns that bring good fortune and majestic, traditional Chinese decorations and diagrams are also commonly adopted. Incense packaging has always relied on direct visual presentations instead of metaphors.
- (4) Lay out: Due to the shape of the product (long and thin), the package of incense sticks is basically limited to the shape as we know. With this limitation, the layout of the design is mostly symmetrical with centered texts and diagrams. This kind of visual presentation is similar to the symmetrical design of Chinese temples, and such layout indeed demonstrates the solemn and serious ceremonies of ancestor-worship.

From the above we know that the visual elements and applications on the packaging are direct or indirect presentations of the traditional, Chinese concepts of fortune (such as the images of deities and beasts of fortune) that create the Chinese sense of life, joy, and fortune. The layout of the design in Fig. 6 is loosely divided into three sections, and the symbols in each section basically follow a certain pattern, making them virtually the "traditional design" of incense packaging. Examples include:

Section 1: Mostly consisted of graphs such as censers or beasts that symbolize earth.

Section 2: Where the name of the incense product and the picture of the coiling smoke are shown, which can be treated as a projection of the product's image to the texts.

Section 3: Objects that are placed high up in the real world (horizontal inscribed boards, palace lanterns, and clouds), suggesting where deities are located.

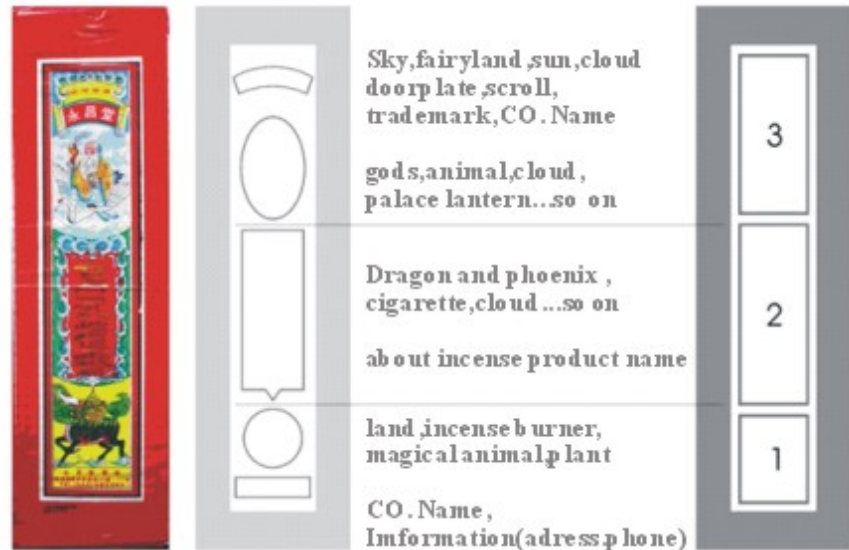


Fig. 6 Package design rules of incense

Analyzed from the design perspective, the visual presentation of incense packaging can be treated as the process of the visualization of the ancestor-worship ceremony or even interpreted as the image of followers inserting incense sticks in the censer in order to express their wishes to the deities above through the smoke that rises to the heavens. The layout of these visual elements also corresponds to the function of incense, "communication between mortals and immortals."

The designers who work on incense packaging stated that clients' needs are still the most important basis for a design, and a further examination of the traditional "pattern" of incense packaging indicates it is the most common design in today's incense products. Therefore, follow-up designers still need to look up these visual images, situations, and layout when dealing with designs and layouts and gather and re-arrange certain elements in order to achieve "innovation" with the restrictions. A few modern incense products have also been utilizing different elements of design. For example, Fig. 7 shows a pattern that is quite different from that of the traditional packaging. This also indicates that with the simplified culture of ancestor-worship and incense applications and modern aroma products, the design of traditional incense packaging is showing changes for the purpose of improving product image and exposure (such as agar wood and sandalwood). However, the design of incense packaging is not only based on a client's needs and existing patterns, but the image of incense (smoke), context (ceremonies of ancestor-worship), and cultural background (Chinese style) are also being considered in the modern design of incense



Fig. 7 Different visual design in the form of traditional incense bags

packaging.

## 5. Conclusion

### (1) Changes in the Modern Industry and Sales of Incense

After the war, the demand for incense in Taiwan increased as folk religions became more popular, and the massive use of incense rather forced the government to promote simplified ceremonies of ancestor-worship. However, the economic boom and lotteries in the 1980s pushed religious activities to a new peak that is also shared by the incense industry. With chemical materials being introduced to incense-making, incense products were more diverse and improved in terms of their visual presentation, scent, and quality, making chemical materials a popular choice among incense makers. However, as consumers demand better quality (such as scent), it is inevitable for manufacturers to introduce aroma oil. Any changes would require consumers to change their habits of using incense such as using less of it.

In addition, the economic and religious developments have resulted in a huge demand for incense products, and Taiwan's incense-making industry introduced more and more machines starting the 1980s in order to increase output. The machineries greatly improved output and efficiency and led to less demand for manual labor, and today's incense-making incorporates an equal proportion of manual and mechanical production. Such transition has also taken the traditional art of incense-making to a blurry boundary between industry and art.

With many industries moving out of Taiwan and cheaper incense being imported into Taiwan, the local incense industry is facing serious competition and pressure. Changes in how people shop have also shaped the fact that products for ancestor-worship started being sold in super stores and mega-stores since the 1990s. The reasons behind the changes are that most consumers have gotten more used to buying cheaper products in convenient stores, super markets, and mega-stores that are also physically better (brighter, more organized, and cleaner), and traditional incense stores are losing the battle as they cannot compete in terms of store hours and prices. Eventually, these stores turn into specialty stores (providing consultations) or try to sell their products inside mega-stores as the reality has left them with few options.

### (2) Changes in the Design of Incense Packaging

The traditional paper-based packaging of incense has been utilized for at least few hundred years and have not been replaced by plastic materials with more direct visual elements until the past two or three decades. Modern incense packaging basically still utilizes traditional designs and has achieved little breakthrough, and this is mostly because incense vendors care very much about their cost and price advantages instead of "innovative design."

Incense has always been a part of the Chinese way of life since ancient times, and people naturally associate this product with and think of it as an icon of the ceremonies of ancestor-worship. The culture of incense-appreciation is treated as an ancient and expensive hobby and somewhat related to the Japanese culture. Most people also believe the modern aroma applications are introduced from foreign cultures. Although incense products are determined by the traditional culture as how they should be used (for ancestor-worship or incense-appreciation), such distinctions are getting blurry due to cultural exchanges and public media.



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