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Analysis of wedding appeals on cigarette packs in China

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► Additional material is published online only. To view, please visit the journal online (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-056189>).

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Received 25 August 2020
Revised 10 February 2021
Accepted 1 March 2021
Published Online First
9 April 2021

ABSTRACT

Introduction Exchanging or gifting cigarettes is a common practice in Chinese culture, often occurring during weddings to connote celebrations and happiness. We examined Chinese cigarette packs for wedding terminology and imagery to assess the extent to which packs are marketed for such occasions.

Methods Cigarette packs were collected from Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Kunming and Chengdu in February 2017 using a systematic protocol designed to capture unique packs. Packs were coded by two independent coders for text and imagery of traditional Chinese wedding symbols, such as double happiness, dragon and phoenix, and other culturally specific phrases and images associated with weddings in China.

Results From the sample of 738 unique cigarette packs, 68 (9.2%) contained either lexical and/or imagery appeals for wedding gifting. Of these 68 packs, 65 contained both lexical and imagery appeals, 1 pack had only a lexical appeal and 2 packs only included an imagery appeal. The most common appeal was 'double happiness' found on 56 packs (82.4%) for both lexical and imagery, followed by 'dragon and phoenix' found lexically on 12 packs (17.6%), and through imagery on 15 packs (22.1%).

Conclusions Chinese tobacco manufacturers take full advantage of the cigarette gifting and sharing culture demonstrated by packs with imagery and terminology specific to weddings. With only a 35% text health warning label, manufacturers have much real estate to make packs attractive for gifting on such occasions. Implementing plain packaging policies may be effective in decreasing gifting attractiveness for cigarette packs.

INTRODUCTION

China remains the world's largest manufacturer and consumer of tobacco, responsible for producing 40% of the world's cigarettes and home to nearly one-third of the global population of smokers, most of which are men.^{1,2} One of the contributors to China's high tobacco usage is the strong tradition of gifting and sharing cigarettes.^{3,4} During annual holidays or special occasions, entire packages or even cartons of cigarettes are commonly given as gifts in China.⁵⁻⁷ This practice creates a system in China in which cigarettes serve as social currency, in that they are used to build and maintain interpersonal relationships with friends and acquaintances.⁴ Around 50% of individuals in China have given or received cigarettes as gifts.⁸⁻¹⁰ Gifting and sharing of cigarettes has been a standing tradition in China for some time, but there has yet to be a regulatory effort to date to reduce this practice and its impact on smoking.

One of the common occasions for cigarettes to be exchanged as gifts in China is at wedding ceremonies.¹¹ In China, part of the important propriety and proper etiquette (礼; li) of the wedding ceremony is for guests to give money and presents for luck to the new couple and, in return, they will receive wedding favours to take home that often include alcohol and cigarettes.¹¹⁻¹³ Within Chinese culture, there are certain symbols and idioms that connote marriage. 'Double happiness' (红双喜; hongshuangxi) is predominantly used in wedding ceremonies as a symbol of marriage, which means 'two good things are approaching'.^{14,15} Another popular symbol for marriage is a dragon and phoenix together (龙凤呈祥; longfengchengxiang): as the dragon represents the male and the phoenix represents the female—which together represent a harmonious and balanced relationship.¹⁶ Mandarin ducks are also commonly used in weddings to represent their loyalty to love.¹⁷ A pair of magpies symbolise 'double happiness' referring to a happy marriage.¹⁸ The colour red is also widely used in weddings, tied to the symbolism of joy and luck.¹⁹

Currently, there is a gap in the existing literature on the cigarette gifting culture specific to Chinese wedding ceremonies, and on existing Chinese tobacco products branded specifically for weddings. Many previous studies have shown that the cigarette package can be a powerful marketing tool to communicate the brand's image or appeal to specific audiences through content and colour,²⁰⁻²⁴ suggesting that packs branded with wedding appeals are also an important tool for promoting cigarette use in China. This study aims to fill the gap by analysing how cigarette packs that are on sale in urban China are branded specifically for wedding ceremonies. These data can enhance our understanding of how cultural norms in China normalise tobacco use and can inform strategies to de-link tobacco products from a key life event that symbolises longevity and happiness.

METHODS

Sampling method

In February 2017, cigarette packs were systematically collected from 5 of the top 10 most populated cities in China (Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Kunming and Chengdu) using a data collection protocol as part of the Tobacco Pack Surveillance System (TPackSS) study.²⁵ The five populous cities were chosen to reflect cultural, geographic, religious and linguistic diversity across China. Within each city, data collectors followed a walking protocol to collect unique cigarette packs from a sample of vendors in high-income, middle-income and low-income neighbourhoods. Vendor types included convenience stores, supermarkets, tobacco



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To cite: Trimble DG, Yu L, Welding K, et al. *Tob Control* 2022;**31**:770-772.

and alcohol specialty shops, and ‘mom papa shops’ (small-scale retail business owned and run by individual person/family). Unique cigarette packs were defined as any pack with at least one difference in an exterior feature of the pack including stick count, size, brand name, colours, cellophane and inclusion of a promotional item.

Coding process

The packs were assessed using a codebook designed to capture the appeals on each unique cigarette package (see online supplemental appendix). Each pack was coded by two independent coders for text and imagery related to conventional Chinese wedding symbols. The coded terms included ‘double happiness’, ‘dragon and phoenix’, ‘wedding’, ‘marriage’ and other traditional Chinese wishes for a happy marriage. Imagery of the double happiness symbol, the dragon and phoenix, and other cultural and traditional images including Mandarin ducks and brides and grooms were also coded as wedding appeals. Additionally, the two primary colours of the cigarette pack were coded, allowing an assessment of the presence of red on the pack. Any disagreement by the two independent coders was resolved by a third coder that acted as a reviewer.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted in Stata to measure the frequencies of identified variables from the coding process. The prevalence of packs containing the different wedding descriptors and images and the use of red colour was determined.

RESULTS

In total, 738 unique cigarette packs were purchased in China following the data collection protocol. From our sample, 68 (9.2%) contained either lexical (text) and/or imagery appeals for wedding gifting. Of these 68 with either, 65 packs had both, 1 pack had only a lexical appeal and 2 packs included only an imagery appeal (figure 1).

Out of the 68 packs that used either a lexical or imagery wedding appeal, the most prominent term was ‘double happiness’, found on 56 packs (82.4%). The second most prominent was the phrase ‘dragon and phoenix’ seen on 12 packs (17.6%). Twelve (17.6%) packs fell into an ‘other’ category, including the phrases ‘on your wedding night’, ‘fine and happy fate’, ‘flowers bloom for prosperity’,

‘happy hundred years’, ‘harmonious joy’, ‘wealth and honour come with blooming flowers’, ‘happy fate’, ‘long and happy marriage’ and ‘wedding ceremony’. Fourteen packs (20.6%) contained multiple lexical wedding appeals.

We also found imagery references to wedding gifting in the sample. From the 68 packs with wedding appeals, the most common was the double happiness symbol ($n=56$, 82.4%). The next most common image was of the dragon and phoenix ($n=15$, 22.1%). Six (8.8%) packs had other imagery: four contained images of a bride and groom together, one had an image of two Mandarin ducks and one had an image of a pair of magpies. Ten packs (14.7%) contained multiple imagery wedding appeals.

Additionally, of the 56 packs containing appeals for double happiness, 12 (21.4%) contained any additional lexical or imagery appeal for weddings.

Of the 68 packs containing wedding appeals, 68% ($n=46$) featured red as one of the two primary pack colours. Compared with the 670 packs that did not contain any other wedding appeal, only 33% ($n=223$) featured red as one of the two primary pack colours.

DISCUSSION

This study fills the gap in literature by describing the extent to which cigarette packs are branded for wedding ceremonies in China. We found overall 68 packs (9.2%) in our sample displayed either imagery or text wedding-related appeals. In addition to wedding appeals, we also found packs that could suggest gifting for other purposes, such as holidays and gifts to show respect and appreciation, although those packs are not included in this analysis.

This study has some potential limitations. First, despite extensive background research and including coders who grew up in China, there may be appeals connoting wedding ceremonies that were not captured in the coding. Second, some terms and imagery may have more than one meaning. For example, the double happiness symbol is commonly used at wedding ceremonies, but is not exclusive to weddings, as it can also be used to depict love during other annual events in China such as the celebration of a newborn’s first moon and the celebration of an elder’s birthday.²⁶

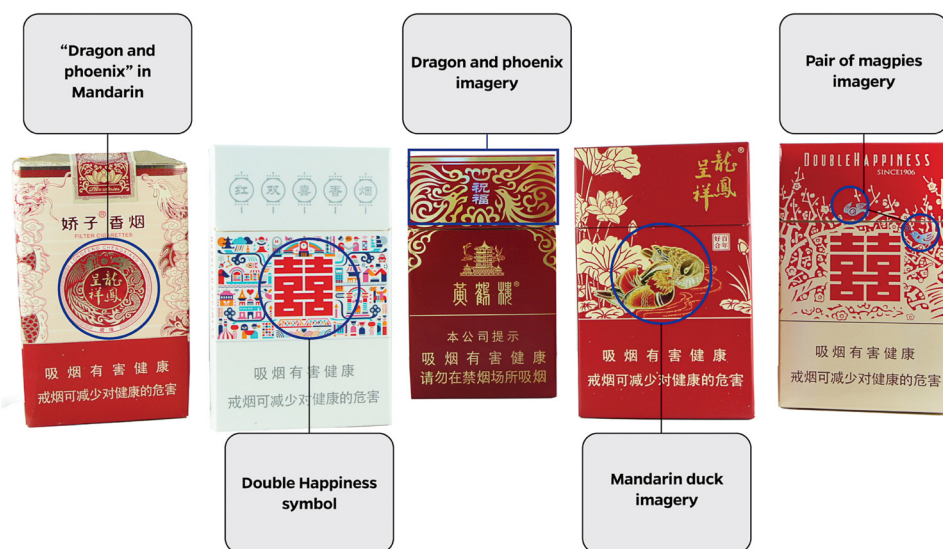


Figure 1 Examples of wedding appeals on Chinese cigarette packs. From left to right: ‘dragon and phoenix’ in Mandarin on Pride brand cigarette pack; double happiness symbol on Double Happiness brand cigarette pack; dragon and phoenix imagery on Huanghelou brand cigarette pack; Mandarin duck imagery on Longfeng Chengxiang brand cigarette pack; and a pair of magpies imagery on Double Happiness brand cigarette pack. Photo(s) © Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 2020.

We pose that the integration of gifting culture into cigarette marketing on the packs is harmful. Gifting culture encourages non-smokers to purchase a product they do not use and contribute revenue to the powerful industry that sells this deadly product. Additionally, the practice of gifting cigarettes may encourage women to purchase cigarettes when they otherwise would not, or present smoking as a socially acceptable activity.²⁷

Previous campaigns to inform the dangers of gifting cigarettes such as the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention's 'Giving Cigarettes is Giving Harm' have been effective in increasing knowledge of smoking harms.²⁸ Despite these campaigns, little has been done to impact the way these cigarette packages are designed for the gifting market. Chinese cigarette packs are only required to have a 35% text health warning label and there are no laws against cultural marketing on packs.²⁹ Manufacturers have considerable room on the pack to make them attractive for gifting and serving to potentially distract from the warning label. If China were to implement stricter packaging requirements, such as graphic warning labels, plain packaging (removing all branding elements) and standardised packaging (standard shape, size and other physical design elements), then cigarette packs might be less desirable for gifting, which is relevant for China as a party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

What this paper adds

- ⇒ To the authors' best knowledge, this is the first paper to examine presence of wedding appeals on cigarette packs in China.
- ⇒ This study aims to fill the gap in literature analysing wedding appeals on Chinese cigarette packages.
- ⇒ This paper describes the techniques used and extent to which packs are designed for gifting at wedding ceremonies in China.
- ⇒ The results of this study strengthen the support to inform interventions to protect the public from harmful and deceptive messaging on cigarette packs such as the introduction of plain packaging in China.

Acknowledgements The authors would like to thank Yunwen Xu for providing insight on the cultural symbols associated with weddings in China.

Contributors DGT contributed to conceptualisation, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, visualisation, composed the original draft, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. LY contributed to the investigation, contributed to original draft, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. KW contributed to data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. KCS contributed to investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, and reviewed and edited the manuscript. JEC contributed to funding acquisition, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, and reviewed and edited the manuscript.

Funding This work was supported with funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies' Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use (www.bloomberg.org).

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Not required.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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