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# Corporate heritage brands, augmented role identity and customer satisfaction

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The study aims to explore customer satisfaction towards the celebrated Tong Ren Tang (TRT) Chinese corporate heritage brand (established in 1669). This paper examines the multiple roles of the corporate brand and, in particular, the enduring imperial identity (role identity) of the corporate brand. The study examines whether the corporate heritage brand's imperial associations are still meaningful.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A indicative, survey-based case study methodology undertaken with Chinese customers informs this research.

**Findings** – TRT's corporate heritage brand identity and, moreover, its imperial role identity were salient in terms of customer satisfaction. TRT's augmented imperial role identity not only was highly salient but also, moreover, meaningfully enhanced the organisation's corporate reputation in terms of customer satisfaction.

**Research limitations/implication** – This study lends further support for the utility of the notion of corporate heritage/corporate heritage brands and in particular the saliency of the theoretical notion of augmented role identity within the corporate heritage marketing field.

**Practical implication** – Corporate heritage brand managers should be appraised of which corporate role identities are meaningful for customers. At a practical level, senior corporate marketing managers of corporate heritage organisations should accorded importance to the additional P of Provenance apropos the corporate marketing mix.

**Social implication** – At a time, when China is reappraising its relationship with its past – including its imperial past (of which much has been destroyed) – this paper's focus on TRT's unsurpassed augmented role identity is pertinent and propitious. Seemingly, this corporate heritage brand's imperial association provides a living and tangible link with China's long and momentous imperial provenance and erstwhile imperial polity. In short, the corporate heritage brand is part of China's patrimony and enjoys a unique place in this regard.

**Originality/value** – This paper is one of the first empirical studies examining a Chinese corporate heritage brand entity. The study marks new ground in examining customer satisfaction from the theoretical perspectives of corporate heritage brand and augmented role identity. It is believed that this is the first study to consider corporate heritage in the pharmaceutical sector and marks new ground in considering the saliency of China's imperial legacy on an extant, highly successful and high profile-Chinese corporate heritage brand.

**Keywords** China, Customer satisfaction, Brand management, Corporate branding, Heritage tourism, Corporate heritage brands

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* This is the evocative title of Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) largest and most celebrated painting. As a work of art, it not only has an iconic but also has a philosophical quality. Both visually and metaphysically, Gauguin's canvas addresses – in visual terms – three profound philosophical questions relating to time. Philosophical issues are not always uppermost in artists' minds, and this is sometimes the case among marketing scholars too. Yet, marketing can be seen as a philosophy and one in which time is accorded prominence and can be of the utmost import. Time has a heightened role in both corporate marketing (Balmer and Greyser, 2006) and corporate heritage marketing contexts (Balmer, 2013), where considerable import is accorded to the past, present and prospective future.

Taking cognisance of the above, in this article, we not only consider the value of time in the context of corporate heritage – and more particularly, corporate heritage brands – but also take account of the corporate marketing philosophical approach. More specifically, this article focuses on China's Tong Ren Tang (TRT). Founded in 1669 and known for the quality of its traditional Chinese medicine products and services, it is unquestionably one of the most illustrious corporate heritage brands within Greater China, as well as enjoying considerable esteem among the Chinese diaspora.

In broad terms, this preliminary study examines the significance and added-value effect of corporate heritage and moreover its augmented role identity/ies in terms of customer satisfaction. In this instance, the research focus is on TRT's augmented *imperial* role identity. Within China, many are cognisant of TRT's enduring links with China's extraordinarily long imperial provenance and polity.

### Omni-temporality: a missing dimension of marketing thought?

Reflecting further on the past, present and future as per Gauguin's aforementioned *magnum opus*, some scholars may deduce that, to date, some marketing scholarship has been narrowly conceived. Thus, the extant marketing canon – for all its considerable strength and utility – sometimes perceives the field through a somewhat narrow lens in terms of:

- a *narrow temporal focus* (focusing on the present and future, particularly in terms of marketing management and sometimes failing to accord significance to issues of omni-temporality *vis-à-vis* the past, present and future);
- a *narrow exchange focus* (focusing on products and services and sometimes failing to see that mutual and profitable exchanges also take place at the corporate/organisational level);
- a *narrow customer focus* (focusing on customers, which are of undoubted critical importance but sometimes failing to adopt a stakeholder perspective); and
- a *narrow economic focus* (focussing on the crucially important economic benefits of marketing but sometimes failing to take account of ethical and CSR imperatives).

The nascent corporate marketing field is distinctive in that it is mindful of the above and adopts a broad palette in terms of marketing thought and philosophy at the organisational level.

#### *Significance of corporate/organisational marketing*

Recently, the growth of interest in the distinct corporate marketing philosophical and theoretical perspective (Balmer, 1998, 2011a; Balmer and Greyser, 2006), by taking

cognisance of the above, can be viewed as advancing marketing thought and, arguably, complements important product-focused and service-focused marketing perspectives.

Of particular pertinence to the above is the formal introduction of the notion of corporate heritage marketing (Balmer, 2013) which arguably represents a logical development of corporate heritage scholarship.

### *Corporate heritage*

One significant development in the corporate marketing domain since 2006 has been the notable increase in marketing interest in a new and highly distinctive category of corporate brand (*corporate heritage brands*) and corporate identity (*corporate heritage identity*), as the literature attests (Balmer *et al.*, 2006; Urde *et al.*, 2007; Balmer, 2011b; Bloombach and Brunninge, 2013, 2016; Bloombach and Scandeliuss, 2013; Hudson and Balmer, 2013; Urde and Greyser, 2014; Burghausen and Balmer, 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Balmer and Burghausen, 2015a, 2015b; Barganda, 2015; Cooper *et al.*, 2015a, 2015b; Rindell *et al.*, 2015; Santos *et al.*, 2016; Balmer, 2017).

Understandably, perhaps, owing to the embryonic nature of the field, a good deal of the formative work has been on concept development, and a pronounced instrumental perspective has often been adopted. However, significant theoretical advances have already taken place in terms of the formal introduction of the corporate heritage brand concept (Balmer *et al.*, 2006; Urde *et al.*, 2007); the corporate heritage identity construct (Balmer, 2011c), corporate heritage marketing and the notion of total corporate heritage communications (Balmer, 2013) and the augmented role identity notion *vis-à-vis* corporate heritage (Balmer, 2013). Taxonomies of past-related areas and constructs (Balmer, 2011c), along with foundational concepts relating to the past, are also noteworthy (Burghausen and Balmer, 2014b).

### **Research objectives and significance**

An under-researched aspect of the corporate heritage/corporate heritage brand field relates to customer attractiveness, and this preliminary study has customers as its focus. To reiterate, this preparatory study explores the importance and impact of TRT's corporate heritage brand and, in addition, its imperial augmented role identity *vis-à-vis* enhancing the company's extant corporate brand reputation in terms of customer satisfaction. In theoretical terms, the research seeks to validate the significance of both corporate heritage and the attendant theoretical notion of augmented role identity. The insights from this small-scale preliminary study should be regarded as provisional, but it is hoped that the findings will shed light on an under-explored field of corporate marketing scholarship, and as such, this study is an appropriate focus for an *EJM* commentary.

The research applies Balmer's (2013) theoretical notion of augmented role identity within a pronounced corporate heritage brand context.

Moreover, this study is the first to focus on China and on one of its oldest and famous corporate heritage brands: the traditional Chinese medicine company TRT (established in 1669). The initial findings from this study have the potential to be of theoretical significance owing to:

- its customer focus (seemingly one of the first customer-focussed empirical studies on corporate heritage brands per se);
- its territorial focus (seemingly the first corporate heritage study undertaken in China);
- its sectorial focus (seemingly the first corporate heritage study undertaken in the pharmaceutical sector);

- its institutional/corporate brand focus (seemingly the first corporate heritage study on TRT, which is arguably China's most famous corporate heritage brand); and
- its imperial focus (seemingly the first corporate heritage study which examines the enduring legacy and effect of imperial identity on an extant and prominent Chinese corporate heritage brand).

### *Societal significance*

In broad terms, in a country (China) that has eviscerated a good deal of its heritage and historical legacy (Balmer and Chen, 2015, 2016), as such, the research focus and initial research insights detailed in this article are potentially of considerable significance in the Chinese context. This is because TRT is arguably a unique survivor among China's erstwhile corporate heritage brands, and it could also be argued that one reason why it has endured the vicissitudes of the Cultural Revolution (*circa* 1966-1976), as well as earlier and more recent travails, is because of the saliency of its inimitable corporate heritage. Moreover, at a time when China is reappraising its relationship with its past – including its imperial past – this article's focus on TRT's unsurpassed augmented role identity is pertinent and propitious. Seemingly, the corporate brand's imperial association provides a living and tangible link with China's long and momentous imperial provenance and erstwhile imperial polity.

### **The Tong Ren Tang traditional Chinese medicine company (founded in 1669)**

Today, TRT is arguably the most world's most celebrated traditional Chinese medicine corporate heritage brand. Moreover, it is arguably China's most celebrated corporate heritage entity, both within China and among the Chinese diaspora. The firm has branches throughout the Middle Kingdom, as well as having a strong global presence. TRT is engaged in the production and retailing of pharmaceutical products. It also provides (private) medical consultations and runs hospitals. In 2005, in a national poll run by Chinese Television, the firm was voted as China's favourite brand.

Established in 1669, the TRT company quickly acquired a reputation for the quality of its medicinal products and treatments. In 1723, it became the official supplier to the Emperor and the imperial court: a position it held until the proclamation of the Republic in 1911. This imperial link was formalised when, in 1723, Emperor Yong Zheng made the following proclamation:

Tong Ren Tang provides all the medicinal materials demanded by the Imperial drug hall and produces various kinds of patent medicines for the Royal Courts.

According to augmented role identity theory (Balmer, 2013), corporate heritage institutions are associated with additional identity modes linked to peoples, cultures, territories, etc. From our analysis of the literature, it is apparent that among the most significant of TRT's augmented role identities are those associated with China (*a territorial identity*), Daoism (*an indigenous Chinese religious philosophy which informs core precepts of traditional Chinese medicinal principles and practices*) and imperial identity (*until comparatively very recently, the Imperial Monarchy, dating back to 221 BC, was one of the most significant and enduring of all Chinese but also of world institutions: it was older than the Catholic church, for instance*).

In this preliminary study, we examine TRT's ancient and imperial augmented identity. To reiterate, China's imperial polity has an extraordinarily long provenance, dating back to 221 BC and ending in 1911. As such, Chinese history – and in certain regards Chinese values, such as the approach *to* authority – is closely linked to the country's imperial legacy. TRT's

imperial credentials, as we have seen, are strong. Furthermore, the firm's logo is one of the oldest of its kind in China and, significantly, not only consists of two imperial dragons (Chinese Emperors are sometimes known as "descendants of the dragon") but also uses the imperial colours of red and gold. The original (flagship) shop – where data were collected – is situated next to Beijing's Imperial Palace. The shop is included in China's list of major cultural institutions and the firm has also been conferred the status of a *Laozihao* by the State (a "time-honoured" Chinese company). Furthermore, the significance of the firm's imperial augmented role identity is reflected in the popular historically rooted television drama series *Da Zhai Men*, which is based on the company's involvement with the Emperor and the so-called Celestial Court.

### Corporate heritage brands and augmented role identity

The foundational work on corporate heritage brands (Balmer *et al.*, 2006; Urde *et al.*, 2007) presaged the formal introduction of the corporate heritage identity notion (Balmer, 2011c). Corporate heritage identities are meaningful not only because they are imbued with perennial corporate identity traits but also because they are invested with "multiple role identities" or "augmented role identities" (Balmer, 2013).

Over time, heritage institutions become associated with people, places and cultures, etc.

Following this logic, corporate heritage institutions are likely to be viewed as heritage depositories of considerable commercial, social, cultural, territorial and, of course, consumer value. Not surprisingly, the "augmented role identities" notion materialised into a foundational precept (one of six criteria) of corporate heritage institutions (Balmer, 2013, pp. 305-315). The six criteria are detailed in Figure 1. We marshal the above in a more explicit corporate heritage brand context.

### Methodology

Because the TRT corporate heritage brand phenomenon has not previously been accessible to scientific investigation, this preliminary study is akin to a critical case study (Yin, 1994). Indicative research – in very general terms – utilises a mixed method approach to data collection, and the utility of this approach has been advanced by a number of authorities (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Lee and Lings, 2008; Bryman, 2008).

Phase 1 of the study encompassed: examining data on TRT in the public domain; undertaking four focus group interviews (subsequently translated into English from



Figure 1.  
Balmer's (2013)  
Corporate heritage  
identity criteria



Mandarin); visiting TRT's London branch, where a visual audit took place; and (in London) interviewing TRT's medical practitioners. In addition, meetings were held with senior managers of the company in Beijing. The insights from the above were used to inform survey questions, the conceptual framework and hypotheses. See the conceptual framework in Figure 2.

Phase 2 comprised a customer survey, which took place in TRT's flagship store. The survey was undertaken in Mandarin: the researchers were assisted in data collection by five postgraduate management students at a Beijing University. Around 600 customers were approached and 115 questionnaires materialised (a response rate of 20 per cent). The research should be regarded as a preliminary and indicative study and as such the findings should be treated as providing the groundwork for further, more expansive empirical research. Moreover, it cannot be claimed that the findings are generalisable in a theoretical sense.

As shown in Figure 2 above, the hypotheses informing this indicative study are as follows:

- H1.* TRT's corporate reputation has an impact on its corporate heritage brand.
- H2.* TRT's corporate reputation has an impact on its augmented imperial heritage.
- H3.* TRT's corporate heritage brand has an impact on customer satisfaction.
- H4.* TRT's augmented imperial heritage has an impact on customer satisfaction.
- H5a.* TRT's corporate heritage brand mediates between its corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.
- H5b.* TRT's augmented imperial heritage mediates between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.

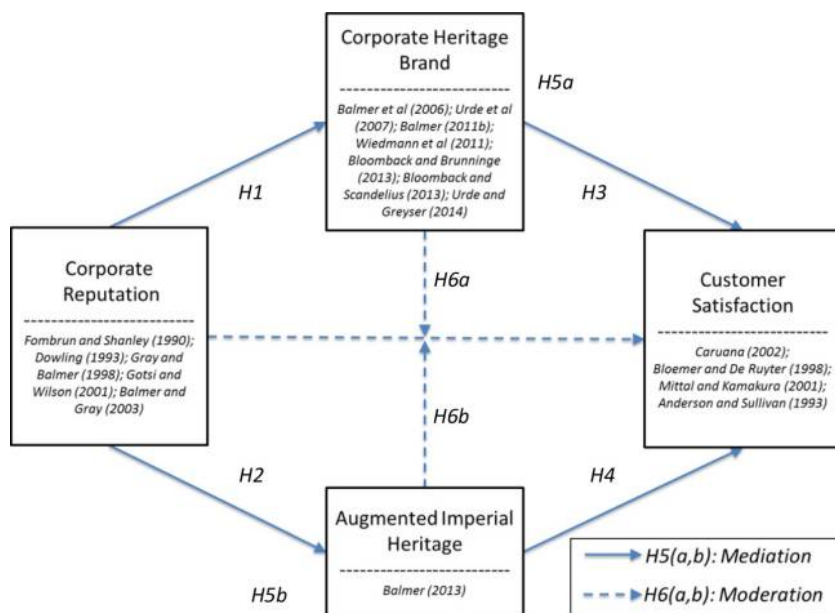


Figure 2. Conceptual framework



- H6a.* TRT's corporate heritage brand moderates its corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.
- H6b.* TRT's augmented imperial heritage moderates its corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.

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**Findings**

Structural equation modelling was used for this pilot study to test the conceptual framework (Table I). The fit indexes ( $\lambda^2(59) = 86.99, p < 0.01, CMIN/DF = 1.474, GFI = 0.904, CFI = 0.919, RMSEA = 0.065$ ) suggested a good fit with the data. The analysis followed the three-step regression procedure proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) and as such examined the mediating role of TRT company heritage and augmented imperial heritage between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction.

*H1, H2, H3* and *H4* are all supported and are shown in Table II. Furthermore, the findings showed that *H5a* is supported in that corporate heritage brand mediates between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction. However, the mediating role of augmented imperial heritage is not significant in this study. The moderating effect of corporate heritage and augmented imperial heritage showed that both strengthen the positive relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction. See Table II for hypotheses test results.

	CR	AVE	Loadings
<i>Corporate reputation (TRT = Tong Ren Tang)</i>	0.839	0.637	
PR1: TRT corporate brand's emphasis on quality is important to me			0.800
PR2: The centuries-old trust and quality of the TRT corporate brand is important to me			0.882
PR3: The centuries-old Chinese respect for the TRT corporate brand is important to me			0.742
<i>Corporate heritage brand</i>	0.93	0.816	
CH1: The TRT corporate brand is relevant to modern times			0.745
CH2: The future existence of the TRT corporate brand is important to me			0.893
CH3: I will be upset if the TRT corporate brand disappears			0.815
<i>Augmented imperial role identity</i>	0.955	0.81	
IH1: I am attracted by TRT's corporate brand's imperial past in providing medicine for successive Chinese Emperors			0.710
IH2: The TRT corporate brand is successful in communicating its imperial heritage (i.e. shop layout, packaging, logo, colour)			0.840
IH3: The TRT corporate brand is successful in communicating its imperial heritage (over 300 years)			0.727
<i>Customer satisfaction</i>	0.859	0.674	
SAT1: Visiting TRT was a good experience for me			0.711
SAT2: Are you pleased that you visited TRT today?			0.748
SAT3: I will come back to visit TRT again			0.782
SAT4: I will tell others about my visit to TRT in positive terms			0.669
<b>Notes:</b> CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted			

**Table I.** Measurement items and validity assessment of the conceptual framework

Table II.  
Hypotheses test  
results

Hypotheses	Standardised path coefficients ( <i>t</i> -value)	Supported
<i>H1</i> : Corporate reputation → corporate heritage brand	0.490 (8.458)*	Yes
<i>H2</i> : Corporate reputation → augmented heritage	0.681 (18.783)**	Yes
<i>H3</i> : Corporate heritage brand → customer satisfaction	0.428 (10.471)**	Yes
<i>H4</i> : Augmented imperial heritage → customer satisfaction	0.210 (8.222)**	Yes
<i>H5a</i> : Corporate heritage brand mediates between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction	Direct effect (0.27**) < indirect effect (0.29**): partial mediation	Yes
<i>H5b</i> : Augmented imperial heritage mediates between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction	Direct effect (0.27**) > indirect effect (0.10**): no mediation	No
<i>H6a</i> : Corporate heritage brand moderates corporate reputation → customer satisfaction	Corporate heritage brand (0.450**), corporate reputation (0.201**), interaction (0.014***): corporate heritage brand strengthens the positive relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction	Yes
<i>H6b</i> : Augmented imperial heritage moderates corporate reputation → customer satisfaction	Augmented imperial heritage (0.258**), corporate reputation (0.019**), interaction (0.023***): augmented heritage strengthens the positive relationship between corporate reputation and customer satisfaction	Yes
<i>Goodness of fit</i> : $\lambda^2(59) = 86.99$ , $p < 0.01$ , $CMIN/DF = 1.474$ , $GFI = 0.904$ , $CFI = 0.919$ , $RMSEA = 0.065$		
<b>Notes:</b> Sample size = 115; * $p < 0.1$ ; ** $p < 0.05$ ; *** $p < 0.01$		

Thus, the results reveal the significance of not only corporate heritage and augmented role identity to customer satisfaction but also, in relation to the latter, the utility of TRT's augmented imperial role identity.

### Management implications

In the opening of this commentary, reference was made to Paul Gauguin's (1848-1903) painting titled: "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" The momentous questions relating to time contained in this title resulted in Gauguin's execution of the subject on a large canvas. Arguably, too, corporate marketing managers should more often than they do consider a larger canvas when addressing issues of temporality in marketing thought. It seems probable that many organisations fail to realise that they are invested with an inimitable and valuable corporate heritage and that they can be strategic assets of considerable importance. Of course, as previously noted, corporate marketing as a philosophy and the nascent corporate heritage domain are informed by an omni-temporal perspective (Balmer and Greyser, 2006; Balmer, 2011c, 2013).

The indicative findings of this preliminary study suggest that TRT, along with other corporate heritage brands/entities, should take account of its corporate heritage and attendant augmented role identity (imperial role identity) in accordance with the precepts of corporate heritage custodianship and stewardship (see the criteria detailed in Figure 1 above). As has been previously noted *vis-à-vis* corporate heritage custodianship:

A corporate heritage institution is the on-going and multi-generational responsibility of everyone within the organisation (Balmer, 2013, p. 318).

In this regard, corporate heritage marketing managers should see themselves as custodians of their companies' corporate brand heritage and also embrace the precepts of total corporate heritage communications in terms of the perennial communications of an organisation's core corporate heritage identity traits (Balmer, 2013, pp. 318-319).

More practically, corporate heritage institutions/corporate heritage brands should include *provenance* (which can equate to heritage) as part of their corporate marketing mixes (and no doubt the traditional product and services marketing mixes).

### Reflection

This indicative study has demonstrated the significance and added-value effect of a corporate heritage brand augmented role identity *vis-à-vis* customer satisfaction. Interestingly, this study found TRT's augmented imperial role identity to be highly significant in terms of customer satisfaction.

In the broader Chinese context, one should not underestimate the significance of corporate heritage institutions such as TRT to China's national identity. This is because so much of China's tangible and recently "extant" heritage has been eviscerated owing to the dictums of former Chinese Governments, and arguably, this cultural heritage deficit/trauma might auger ill for both China and its peoples in cultural and soft-power terms (Nye, 2004). Considering the length of Chinese history, contemporary China sadly appears to have a cultural deficit on many fronts. This explains why the TRT corporate heritage brand enjoys a place of honour within China, owing to its uniqueness and cultural significance. As this study of its augmented imperial role identity has revealed, TRT represents a living, meaningful, tangible and therefore rare link with China's highly meaningful imperial past: an imperial past which in so many discrete ways still informs China's culture and contemporary polity.

Finally, as China reassesses and reengages with its pre-revolutionary past and cultural provenance, it is possible that TRT will grow in importance as a Chinese corporate heritage institution and corporate heritage brand *par excellence*. This is because TRT's corporate heritage brand is not only equated with its centuries-old excellence as a purveyor of traditional Chinese medicine but also allied to China's ancient culture and venerable imperial past, which accounts for its enduring importance to China and, arguably, to the whole of mankind.

As such, we conclude that the corporate heritage field is of considerable importance for corporate marketing scholars in terms of comprehending and managing TRT and other corporate heritage brands. Moreover, the cultural and societal significance of corporate heritage brands – as shown by our indicative study of TRT – should not be underestimated.

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#### About the authors

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