

**CHINESE COSMETIC BRANDS ABROAD:
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
IN THE INTERNATIONAL BEAUTY MARKET**

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Abstract. In the past decade, Chinese cosmetic brands have emerged as significant players in the global beauty industry, a phenomenon commonly referred to as “C-beauty”. *Research value/originality:* this paper investigates the factors driving their overseas promotion, the challenges they face, and the opportunities available in an increasingly competitive market. It addresses a notable gap in both Chinese and foreign academic literature, which has predominantly focused on foreign brands’ adaptation to the Chinese market or domestic “guochao” marketing, leaving C-beauty’s internationalization and overseas performance underexplored. The *purpose* of this study is to explore how Chinese cosmetic brands construct, communicate, and adapt their identities in overseas markets, and how cultural and strategic factors influence their reception in different global regions. This research analyzes Chinese cosmetic brands’ (C-beauty) global expansion through an interdisciplinary prism of the country-of-origin effect and cultural adaptation theory. *Methodology* of the study is based on secondary data analysis and three illustrative cases – Florasis, Perfect Diary, and Herborist – the research uncovers the following major trends: competitive pricing models, storytelling of cultural roots, use of digital channels, and fast product innovation. *Results* suggest that the country-of-origin perception serves as a strategic variable: where markets are culturally receptive, brands strengthen their original roots; where markets prove less receptive, they implement cosmopolitan and culturally neutral communication. Cultural adaptation becomes central for the balance between brand originality and market-related resonance. *Practical implications:* recommendations follow in the report, including the importance of strategic communication in shaping an overseas identity of C-beauty as well as China’s soft power through beauty export.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, the beauty industry has seen an extraordinary transformation in market geography, culture, and competition landscape. Long dominated by a small handful of Western transnational companies, the industry has continued to liberalize and welcome new participants from diverse cultural and economic sectors. Perhaps most noteworthy has been the appearance of Chinese beauty brands on the global radar – an ascendancy generally referred to as C-beauty [Ikrama et al., 2024]. While Korean (K-beauty) and Japanese (J-beauty) counterparts have long enjoyed their established reputations, C-beauty has recently begun to capture rising interest worldwide due to the blend of traditional Chinese cultural beauty perceptions, contemporary product innovations, and promotional campaigns [Nidoli, 2024]. Chinese beauty companies are now breaking into emerging and mature markets across Asia, in European and North American economies [Yang, 2024].

The development of C-beauty has to be obviously viewed against the context of China's changing place in the global economy. In the past two decades, China has changed from being a largely manufacturing-driven economy supplying foreign brands to a consumption-driven economy with the potential to support homegrown enterprises. In the cosmetics industry, the transformation has been characterized by an expansion of consumption domestically and an increased capability to compete globally. In 2023, China exported close to \$7.6 billion of cosmetic products, two times more than a decade ago [Luo, 2024]. In 2025, the cosmetics market of China was set to reach \$10.84 billion, and it was estimated to reach \$17.23 billion in 2030 [Biorius, 2025]. Trade statistics data consistently positions China among the leading cosmetic exporters globally, and the domestic market as among the biggest and fastest-growing cosmetic domestic market worldwide [The Business of Fashion, 2025]. In 2024–2025, China was the leading cosmetic importer (No. 1), importing cosmetics valued at about \$13.02 billion (17.4% of the total import market share). The cosmetic export market of China continued to steadily increase (No. 6), reaching an absolute net of \$4.08 billion in export value and accounting for 5.5% of global cosmetic exports [TradeImeX, 2025]. This dual positioning signifies the transformation of China's involvement – and not only as an exporter but more and more as a consumer and beauty trends influencer.

The export of Chinese cosmetic brands to the rest of the world is a comparatively new phenomenon, gathering steam from about 2018 onward [Wang et al., 2019; Wolfer et al., 2023]. This coincided with some related changes. The first was an improvement in the formulary, packaging, and branding of domestic Chinese brands due to technological changes and increased competition in the domestic market. The second was an expansion of cross-border e-commerce sites like Tmall Global, JD Worldwide, Shopee, Lazada, and Amazon, which reduced barriers substantially and made Chinese products easily accessible to foreign consumers. The third was the expansion of social media – global sites like YouTube and Instagram, and regional sites like Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Douyin – which offered Chinese brands cost-effective means of reaching foreign audiences, avoiding traditional retail intermediaries [Liu, 2020; Li et al., 2021; Wang, 2023].

A distinctive characteristic of C-beauty's foreign expansion is the infusion of cultural elements into branding and marketing. Some brands make overt use of traditional Chinese beauty perceptions, including elements deriving from classical Chinese poetry, folk culture, and ancient crafts in packaging and commercials. This tactic utilizes what scholars refer to as “cultural capital” to make product offerings stand out in an increasingly homogeneous global market [Zhang et al., 2023]. Others are more global, engaging in trend-driven innovation and transnational collaboration to situate themselves within global youth culture, particularly Generation Z [Wu et al., 2024]. This continuum – ranging from overt cultural branding to culturally neutral global positioning – mirrors brands' strategic choices in negotiating the country-of-origin (COO) effect, in which consumer perception of product origin may affect reception of the brand.

Apparently, Chinese entry into the global cosmetics market is further guided by macroeconomic and geopolitical dynamics. On the one hand, Chinese cosmetics are benefiting from developed infrastructures of production and supply chains to enable cost-competitiveness without an erosion of quality. On another hand, the COO label still elicits ambiguous emotions in some markets, especially European and North American ones, where perception may be predominantly guided by a discourse of politics or residual stereotyping. From the question of strategic management of COO identity – either through celebrating it by way of cultural narratives

or suppressing it in favor of a more universal branded image – emerges an acute issue in C-beauty's success globally.

Chinese beauty brands' appeal to overseas customers may further be attributed to universal consumer trends. Consumers increasingly demand beauty products, including fragrances and makeups, offering a blend of efficacy, aesthetic appeal, and an interesting narrative. The “national tide” (guochao) phenomenon, which has reinvigorated Chinese domestic pride in Chinese culture, may similarly appeal to overseas customers if communicated as exoticism or craft authenticity [He et al., 2020; Huang et al., 2022]. Furthermore, the affordability of most Chinese beauty and skincare offers them access to the emerging “masstige” (mass prestige) element of the beauty industry, where customers demand premium attributes with affordable prices [Kapferer et al., 2012; Lu et al., 2015; Ko et al., 2019]. With such positioning, Chinese brands are pitted against mainstream offerings of mature players in the industry.

From a communication and cultural studies standpoint, the success of C-beauty overseas has important implications in a few different dimensions. Firstly, it defies the current hegemony of Western and other Asian beauty cultures and injects new aesthetic codes and product ideologies into the global beauty market. Secondly, it illustrates the globalization of consumer culture, in which ideas, images, and commodities move in various directions, including multiple times and trajectories, instead of the unilinear West-to-East direction. Thirdly, it provides a rich context in which to explore the negotiation, representation, and consumption of cultural identity in a transnational arena. The tension between retaining cultural authenticity and accommodating to domestic market forces broader intercultural communication and the theory of branding debates.

With these dynamics in mind, the main **research aim** is to explore how Chinese beauty brands build, convey, and tailor their identities overseas and to what extent cultural and strategic elements impact their acceptability across various global regions.

Literature Review

For the past twenty years, there have been two main areas of research in the academic study of cosmetics branding and communication: 1) research by Chinese and foreign scholars on how international brands enter the Chinese market and 2) research by Chinese scholars on domestic branding trends,

often in the context of the above-mentioned guochao movement. Although these bodies of literature have produced significant insights into marketing, consumer psychology, and cultural adaptation, they possess a common limitation: an inward focus that largely neglects the internationalization of Chinese cosmetic brands.

The first strand, with easily classifiable literature on the Chinese market, is predominantly filled with localization of Western, Korean, and Japanese beauty brands to Chinese consumer tastes, beliefs, and purchasing behavior. In this category of studies, frameworks drawn from international marketing are prevalent, including localization of brands' strategies, cross-cultural adaptation of commercials, and consumer culture theory [Hinčica et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2025]. For example, studies analyzing European luxury brands' communication strategies in China tend to emphasize localization of brands' narratives to Chinese culture codes, communication and live-streaming through WeChat, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu [Vescovi et al., 2017; Santini, 2023; Tsai et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025]. Correspondingly, studies on K-beauty and J-beauty in China tend to comment on their cultural capital, technological views, and ability to construct lifestyle patterns that might be attractive to urban Chinese as a factor of appeal [Sun, 2024; Zhang, 2024; 2025].

This literature has provided detailed descriptions of how global beauty brands have adapted to China's competitive and culturally diverse market [Paddeu, 2023]. However, by concentrating predominantly on the inbound aspect of branding – foreign brands adapting to China – it provides minimal insight into how Chinese brands themselves operate within foreign cultural contexts. Moreover, numerous communication models formulated in this literature are specifically designed for the distinctive socio-cultural context of China, prompting inquiries regarding their relevance to outbound branding initiatives [Yang et al., 2022; Yao, 2023].

The second overarching thread, domestic branding literature, highlights the rapid development of homegrown brands within China's own consumer culture. In these regards, the term guochao has come into prominent usage, involving a renaissance of interest among young generations born in 2000-s in traditional Chinese beauty, heritage, and storytelling [Huang et al., 2022; Zhai et al., 2022; Tang, 2023]. This literature highlights Chinese beauty brands' interactions with national culture elements in the context of ads

campaigns, product innovations, and storytelling to generate pride and uniqueness in the domestic market [Duan, 2022; Li et al., 2023].

Other related subtopics of Chinese domestic-brand research are innovations in digital marketing, the contributions of key opinion leaders (KOLs) and key opinion consumers (KOCs), strategic applications of livestreaming commerce, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) representation in brand communication [Chen, 2020; Wu, 2022]. A number of studies examine cosmetic industry CSR efforts in the Chinese market and connect them with brand trust and consumer loyalty [Wang, 2024; Wei et al., 2024].

An expanding corpus of research examines the international endeavors of domestic brands within general consumer goods sectors, including electronics, apparel, and e-commerce. These studies frequently address topics such as cross-border logistics, regulatory compliance, and strategies for brand internationalization [Mungari, 2024]. However, there is not much research like this in the cosmetics industry. When it appears, it usually takes the form of industry reports instead of peer-reviewed academic papers. These reports focus on export statistics, new markets, and e-commerce performance metrics without going into depth about the cultural and communicative aspects of brand adaptation.

This imbalance in the literature reveals a clear research gap. While both foreign and Chinese scholars have devoted significant effort to studying how cultural differences influence brand messaging within China, far less attention has been drawn to the reverse: how Chinese brands position themselves on the world stage. Questions about how they reshape their cultural identity for different markets and how they navigate the delicate balance between their COO image and local consumer expectations remain largely unanswered.

The limited studies that address Chinese cosmetics abroad are often anecdotal or focus on basic market descriptions, without a strong theoretical backbone. This gap is important because the obstacles Chinese beauty brands face overseas go beyond logistics and regulations – they are deeply tied to cultural perceptions, media narratives, and symbolic meanings. Without examining these communicative and cultural dimensions, any analysis of their global expansion risks being incomplete and overly weighted toward economic factors.

From a theoretical angle, the lack of research on Chinese brands going global also limits the way we can test and refine existing cross-cultural branding models. The COO effect, for instance, has been widely used to study how labels like “Made in Korea” or “Made in Japan” shape consumer perceptions in global beauty markets – but there is far less empirical work on how “Made in China” operates in the same space [Jin et al., 2024; Pei, 2024]. Likewise, cultural adaptation theory has been deeply explored for multinational corporations entering China, yet it is rarely applied in reverse to examine Chinese companies expanding abroad [Hannanto et al., 2025]. This imbalance makes the cosmetics industry a promising arena for uncovering fresh insights and broadening these theoretical frameworks.

The present study attempts to address this gap by examining the global expansion of Chinese cosmetic brands through the lens of communication and cultural studies. It looks closely at how selected brands craft and convey their identities across different cultural settings, how they choose to adapt or preserve their Chinese identity depending on the market, and how these choices shape the way consumers respond.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical basis of this research comes from two mutually complementary conceptual frameworks, namely the country-of-origin (COO) effect and cultural adaptation theory. Mixed together, they form a consistent lens through which we may try to explore Chinese cosmetic brands building, conveying, and adapting their identities overseas. The COO effect accounts for the way in which product origin impacts consumer perception, and cultural adaptation theory accounts for the way brands calibrate their communication and product strategies to fit locally prevailing cultural patterns and avoid diluting their underlying identity. They may help elucidate both the constraints and opportunities of C-beauty brands operating in a heterogeneous and highly competitive global beauty arena.

Country-of-Origin Effect

The COO effect has been widely discussed in consumer behavior and international marketing literature. It involves the impact that a product’s country of origin has on consumer assessments of the quality, reliability, and desirability of the product. The COO effect may appear positively as well as negatively, depending on the target market, the sector, and the past

associations of the producing country [Heslop et al., 1998; Samiee et al., 2005; Pharr, 2005]. In Chinese cosmetics overseas, the COO effect acts as a strategic variable instead of an immovable determinant. Firms are free to accentuate their origin in order to create distinctiveness through cultural roots, or they may de-emphasize overt national links in order to appeal to consumers who have negative predispositions. Strategic management of COO identity entails an evaluation of national branding potential or risk in each market of interest and a corresponding adjustment of communication [Al-Sulaiti, 2025].

Notably, the COO effect combines with worldwide consumer demand for authenticity, storytelling, and cultural variety. In consumer economies where distinct, culturally deep products are demanded, COO may serve as a brand asset, communicating authenticity and providing symbolical added value in addition to functional product attributes. In less favorable economies, COO may be repositioned by quality assurance narratives, technological levels, or worldwide collaboration, thus buffering unfavorable perceptions without eliminating national identity altogether [Papadopoulos et al., 2003].

Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cultural adaptation theory forms the second pillar of this research's analytical structure. It covers the way individuals and organizations adapt their behavior, communication, and identity when faced with the cultural norms of another environment. In marketing, cultural adaptation means the intentional transformation of brand communication, product offerings, and visual identity to appeal to the values, preferences, and expectations of local customers [van den Bosch, 2014]. Cultural adaptation of cosmetic brands has several dimensions. At the product level, this can mean the adaptation of formulations to local skin types, climates, or regulatory standards. At the communication level, this means adapting advertising images, storytelling, and ambassadors to cultural beauty ideals, lifestyle dreams, and social acceptability. At the symbolic level, this involves caution about the way cultural motifs are received overseas – as exotic, authentic, antiquated, or unknown [Li et al., 2008; Rovai et al., 2020].

It is noteworthy that Chinese beauty brands range along a continuum of adaptation strategies. Some engage in extensive localization, drastically altering their product offerings in each market but upholding brand

principles, while others engage in moderate adaptation, adjusting their product offerings in select aspects but preserving global uniformity in primary identity. Others go further and prefer minimal adaptation, seeking a single global identity extending across markets, which may suit “digital-first” environments but may alienate some consumer segments.

Integrating COO and Cultural Adaptation in Analysis: Applicability to Chinese Cosmetic Brands

The combination of the COO effect and cultural adaptation theory provides special insight into C-beauty’s foreign path because COO defines the initial perceptions with which customers approach their first exposure to a brand, and cultural adaptation defines the way in which perceptions are modified through continued interaction with the product offerings, marketing, and reputation of a brand. The two are mutualistic: unless there is adaptation, COO-derived stereotypes – either favorable or unfavorable – may go unchallenged; unless a knowledge of COO exists, attempts at adaptation may falter in an opportunity to utilize cultural identity to create difference. In practical terms, this integration requires the new market entry of a brand to first determine how exactly the origin is likely to be viewed and then develop adaptation strategies either to capitalize on COO as a unique selling proposition or to mitigate it carefully to prevent resistance. Successful adaptation over time modifies the perception of COO, building up favorable consumer experiences and establishing credibility through brand stories.

The use of these two theoretical frameworks makes perfect sense for the cosmetics industry because beauty products are deeply connected to cultural ideals, aesthetic traditions, and symbolic meaning. Unlike purely practical items, cosmetics are closely linked to personal identity, aspirations, and lifestyle – where cultural significance matters just as much as how well the product works. Cultural adaptation and COO are not abstract concepts but operating realities that must be dealt with in every detail of market entry and development for C-beauty brands. The intertwining of these frameworks enables this research to explore branding’s symbolic and strategic dimensions: the symbolic, as an issue of the representation and meaning of origin and culture; and the strategic, as an issue of brands’ employment of these elements to derive benefit competitively under varying cultural settings.

Trends in the Overseas Popularity of Chinese Cosmetic Brands

Chinese cosmetic companies' foreign success is the product of the confluence of market forces, technological changes, the recasting of culture, and shifting consumer demand. Unlike past global beauty industries, in which Chinese products were largely relegated to the role of “faceless” production on behalf of overseas brands, the modern period witnesses Chinese brands as leading, branded participants in the global beauty discussion. These participants are no longer responding to exogenous market demand but dictating trends, aesthetic perceptions, and consumption narratives. It is reasonable to detail the underlying forces behind Chinese cosmetics' foreign popularity and broader tendencies characterizing their spread. One of the primary reasons Chinese cosmetics are gaining traction overseas is their knack for pairing affordable prices with increasingly high-quality products. Due to large-scale production, streamlined supply chains, and a strong homegrown beauty industry that has been sharpened by domestic competition, Chinese brands have learned to meet – and often surpass – international quality standards. Yet they still manage to keep their prices roughly 20–40% lower than similar global brands. For international shoppers, that sweet spot between price and quality is especially appealing in the “masstige” market – products that feel premium and aspirational but are still within reach [Paul, 2018; Chaurasia et al., 2024; Fatima, 2024]. No less important are the strategic applications of cross-border e-commerce and digital marketing. Online channels, including Tmall Global, JD Worldwide, Shopee, Lazada, and increasingly TikTok Shop, have opened up new market access to Chinese beauty brands without the expensive cost of retail coverage. Branded products through these channels are able to pilot consumer receptions, make adjustments to product offerings in real time, and interact with end-customers via interactive features such as livestream shopping. This model enables brands to avoid traditional bottlenecks of distribution and to function on a “digital-first” approach, remarkably successful in markets where adoption of social commerce is widespread [Comendulli, 2020; Liu, 2021; Lyu et al., 2023]. Another factor behind the overseas popularity surge is the Chinese brands' nimbleness in product innovation and trend reactivity. Unlike many traditional Western beauty firms operating on annual product cycles tied to the apparel industry's traditional seasonality, Chinese brands work on a condensed innovation

cycle of three to six months from idea generation to market launch [Hu, 2020]. This helps them quickly exploit burgeoning beauty trends – be they an isolated style of makeup, an ingredient trending upward, or a format of packaging that is taking off on the internet. Quick integration of consumer input, often taken directly from internet forums, helps create an impression of reactivity and contemporaneity, to which young people respond very positively.

Sequenced market entry is one such trend in which brands take culturally and geographically near-to-home markets before entering more competitive or culturally alien markets. The former are typically taken as the initial stepping-stone into Southeast Asia. Shared culture and understanding of beauty expectations in Asia altogether make such markets easier to transition into. A successful entry into Southeast Asia may then serve as a proof of concept before entering more challenging markets, such as Western Europe and North America. Thus, Japan has become an early target of choice due to the mature beauty culture and openness to new product launches, although competition is quite tough [Lu, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2023].

The second trend is the fusion of cultural distinctiveness and universal appeal. Brands keep a sharp Chinese character and rely on cultural motifs as a basic element, but some of them take on an internationally neutral aesthetic to more insistently push through Western and Korean markets. For culturally adventurous buyers in Asia and the West, such a narrative provides novelty and authenticity, which marks these products apart from the more standardized branding of many multinational brands [Lundqvist et al., 2013; Schroeder et al., 2015; Cheong et al., 2019; Li, 2023].

Third is strategic use of social media ecosystems. Brands not only have a presence on worldwide sites like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube but also develop alliances with influencers in every target market to customize their message accordingly. In some instances, brands even customize the format of the content to suit domestic cultures digitally: short, funny skit style for the TikTok audiences of Southeast Asia and high-end production tutorials for European YouTube viewers. A multiple-platform and multiple-format approach allows wider coverage and customized interactions [Qiu, 2024; Wang, 2024; Concepcion, 2025].

The fourth big trend is the push for international partnerships – whether through mergers, acquisitions, or creative collaborations. Some of the larger

Chinese beauty brands are buying niche overseas beauty and fragrance companies to instantly tap into their distribution networks, local know-hows, and established reputations. Others are teaming up with fashion labels, cultural organizations, or even global NGOs, using these collaborations to boost their credibility on the world stage and connect their brands to wider cultural or ethical stories.

Challenges Facing Chinese Cosmetic Brands in Overseas Markets

The ambivalence surrounding the “Made in China” label is arguably the most enduring barrier for Chinese cosmetic brands in some markets. In markets like Southeast Asia, where acceptance is facilitated by shared heritage, regional cooperation, and similar beauty ideals, the COO effect can be a useful tool. However, COO can arouse consumer skepticism in Western Europe and North America due to ingrained bias. Many Chinese brands have attained manufacturing and quality assurance standards that are on par with or even higher than those of their Western counterparts, so these perceptions are not based on current reality. However, perception lags behind performance, and unfavorable associations can affect consumers’ decisions to buy before they even interact with the product.

Another issue involves extending brand storytelling and aesthetic perceptions across national lines. Elaborate packaging and luxurious storytelling so prevalent in China – and which tend to feature traditional paintings, historic allusions, and rich visual design – may be misinterpreted in markets with minimalist culture traditions. Even product attributes undergo adaptation: for instance, a product suited to humid tropical weather may not fare as well under dry, wintry conditions, and vice versa. Without proper adaptation, even good products are likely to stall due to a mere mismatch with regional use patterns and concepts of beauty.

There are many rules in the global cosmetics industry, and the standards, testing protocols, and labeling requirements vary a lot from one place to another. The European Union’s Cosmetics Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009 sets strict rules for product safety, ingredient disclosure, and proof of claims. These rules often require a lot of paperwork and testing before the product goes on the market [Regulation, 2009; European Commission, 2024]. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in the United States has its own set of rules, with a focus on making sure labels are correct and not making claims that are not backed up by evidence [Food and

Drug Administration, 2022; 2023]. For Chinese brands that want to grow in these areas, following the rules can be time- and money-consuming, especially for small- and medium-sized businesses without their own compliance departments. Some markets also have highly specific rules that may require reformulation. For example, halal certification is required in Muslim-majority countries, and the EU has rules about some preservatives [Bocchini et al., 2021]. Because of the differences in regulatory frameworks, a single product often needs several localized versions, which makes production and inventory management more difficult.

Finding consumer attention in overseas markets is difficult, and cosmetics are no exception, with shelf space – both virtual and physical – being highly contested. Long-standing multinational companies have established strong partnerships with key retailers and possess substantial marketing budgets, which enable them to dominate high-traffic retail spaces. For Chinese cosmetic brands, achieving similar visibility tends to necessitate huge expenditure on promo campaigns, displays at points of sale, and retailer incentives. In the online retail landscape, visibility relies on platform algorithms, paid-for posts, and user engagement metrics. Without continued investment in online ads and endorsement deals with influencers, good product offerings are lost under the competition of better-resourced opponents. This scenario presents a Catch-22: without visibility, sales are constrained; without sales, marketing budgets are limited [Odoom et al., 2017; Baker et al., 2018]. In the digital epoch, reputations are no longer built through company messages alone but by the narratives crafted in conventional channels, social media, and consumer-generated content. For Chinese beauty companies, this is a two-faced proposition. Favorable coverage of Chinese beauty brands in beauty publications, lifestyle blogs, and vlogger presentations can help make them more desirable quickly, but unfavorable coverage – whether about product safety, environmentalism, or geopolitical tensions – can destroy trust quickly. Currently, this “halo” effect may be especially visible in Western economies, where discussions regarding China tend to be based on false prejudice and overpoliticized in the media.

Moreover, C-beauty appears under a beauty universe already shaped by two deep-seated Asian beauty trends, K-beauty and J-beauty. Korean brands have capitalized on innovation cycles, endorsement by celebrities,

and commercial heft of K-pop to be mentioned in the same breath as global skincare trends. Japanese brands have decades-long reputations for minimalist coolness, product longevity, and scientific justification. In this competitive context, Chinese brands have to define a clear and distinctive value proposition. Success will likely depend on identifying unique brand narratives, such as integrating traditional Chinese culture, highlighting technological manufacturing advantages, or leading in sustainability practices.

Opportunities for Chinese Cosmetic Brands in Overseas Markets

In spite of the obstacles, the global beauty industry offers Chinese cosmetic companies a vast set of potential openings. They come not only from favorable market situations and shifting consumer demand but also from the unique advantages with which C-beauty brands have endowed their home market and are now in a position to transfer to overseas settings.

Among the strengths of Chinese cosmetic brands lies access to an extensive and varied cultural heritage, including traditional beauty, historic storytelling, and native plant knowledge. This legacy may be turned into a unique selling proposition and make C-beauty stand distinct from Western beauty ideals and other Asian beauty traditions [Liang et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022]. In consumer segments that favor product attributes of a rich heritage and craft sensibility – like Japan, France, and some of the ASEAN nations – this type of branding can elicit interest and even brand attachment. However, localization needs to be executed carefully so that cultural references are understandable and appealing and not obscure or alienating to overseas customers.

The rapid expansion of cross-border e-commerce is providing Chinese beauty brands with an accessible, cost-efficient route to reach international consumers. Platforms such as Tmall Global, JD Worldwide, Lazada, Shopee, and TikTok Shop enable market entry without the heavy capital demands of building physical retail networks. These digital channels also create opportunities for real-time consumer feedback, A/B testing of marketing content, and agile adjustments to product assortments [Iwasaki, 2023; Chan et al., 2024]. By investing strategically in localized content – including influencer collaborations, step-by-step tutorials, and interactive livestream shopping – Chinese brands can increase visibility while fostering a sense of community among overseas audiences. This approach is especially valuable

for small- and medium-sized brands, which may lack the global advertising budgets of multinational competitors but can achieve high engagement through focused, targeted digital campaigns.

Whereas marketplaces of Western Europe and North America are typically considered the “final destinations”, new marketplaces throughout Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America provide tremendous development potential with lower perception barriers. In these locations, Chinese brands may be perceived more pragmatically, more for their quality and affordability and less subject to traditional brand pyramids of superiority and inferiority. Furthermore, niche segments such as halal-certified beauty products, plant- and animal-cruelty-free cosmetics, or dermatologically specialized skincare are areas in which Chinese brands can leverage their agility in manufacturing to meet the unique demands of customers [Sudibyo et al., 2024].

Additionally, joint branding with already established houses of fashion, cultural centers, or overseas beauty brands may confer greater visibility to a brand while instantly getting access to new consumer bases. Chinese brands may tie up with domestic influencers who serve as cultural intermediaries and convey brand narratives into locally relevant idioms. For larger players, mergers and acquisitions offer a direct route to infrastructure, distribution channels, and brand equity in foreign markets. Such alliances not only expand the product portfolio but also allow for hybrid branding strategies that merge the appeal of both Chinese and foreign identities [Zheng et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2023].

Nowadays, consumers around the world are becoming more conscious of product safety, ethical sourcing, and sustainability [European Commission, 2023]. In some markets, sustainability measures can also act as a reputational buffer against unfavorable COO impressions. Chinese firms constantly shift their image from merely cost-driven producers to leaders in responsible beauty by positioning themselves as innovators who care about the environment [Zhang et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2023; Tulloch et al., 2024].

Lastly, the globalization of Chinese beauty brands can support a larger soft power and cultural diplomacy initiatives. Customers' opinions of China as a producer and cultural entity may change significantly when they come across Chinese cosmetics that blend superior quality with

captivating cultural narratives. In this way, C-beauty brands can act as cultural ambassadors, representing principles of craftsmanship, innovation, and heritage retention. For industry associations, sponsoring these brands overseas is not only a business venture but also an investment in building China's profile in the collective imagination.

Case Study Analysis: Communication Strategies of Selected Chinese Cosmetic Brands Abroad

The globalization of Chinese cosmetic brands must best be comprehended via specific case analyses that demonstrate the working of theoretical frameworks such as the COO effect and cultural adaptation theory in practice. This section deconstructs three leading brands – Florasis, Perfect Diary, and Herborist – which exemplify diverse approaches to branding strategy, cultural positioning, and market adaptation. Analyzing these cases extensively allows us to recognize the way in which brand identity gets negotiated amidst the compulsions of authenticity and the accommodation demands of the local market.

Florasis (花西子) is a Chinese beauty company whose brand identity was established by integrating cultural elements from ancient China with contemporary design for beauty products. Its packaging was borrowed from Miao ethnic embroidery styles, classical Chinese poetry, and works of lacquerware painting. In China, its brand positioning is very compatible with this guochao movement that touches consumers' cultural sentiment and their need for eye-catching product offerings. With regard to the COO effect, Florasis celebrates its Chinese origin as a key component of its brand strategy. In culturally accepting markets like Japan and Southeast Asia, this identity serves as an indication of authenticity and artistic clout. However, in European luxury markets – where minimalist design and understated elegance often dominate – Florasis adopts a more nuanced adaptation strategy. While retaining its ornate packaging, the brand adjusts its advertising tone and visual presentation to emphasize concepts such as exclusivity, craftsmanship, and limited-edition artistry. Campaign visuals in France and Italy feature cleaner photographic compositions, drawing attention to the intricate detail of product designs without overwhelming the viewer with dense cultural symbolism. A strong COO identity and selective cultural alignment have helped Florasis sustain brand authenticity and branch out to different markets. It illustrates how, if

properly managed, COO can be utilized and transformed into a source of potential strength.

Perfect Diary (完美日记) serves as a counterexample, opting for a cosmopolitan, trend-oriented positioning that reduces overt Chinese cultural cues in its overseas branding. Founded in 2017, the brand achieved success in China through rapid digital marketing, sponsorship via influencers, and rapid rotation of product launches. In China, it occasionally utilizes guochao, yet abroad, it emphasizes universality over cultural specificity. From a COO point of view, this strategy is a deliberate choice to counteract the potential biases present in certain Western markets. In North America and Western Europe, Perfect Diary's communications emphasize international pop culture collaborations – like themed product lines with Discovery Channel or National Geographic – and its packaging uses a minimalist, high-end look for product naming. Through this, the company is able to co-position its brand with Western mid-tier peers without causing any unfavorable COO linkages. On the cultural dimension, Perfect Diary is very adaptive. For markets in Southeast Asia, it adjusts foundation tones and blends of skin-care ingredients based on regional climatic environments and skin tones. For North American markets, it employs domestic promoters on TikTok and Instagram to create tutorial content, which is consistent with the consumption behavior of Western beauty consumers. Despite this action reducing the cultural uniqueness of the brand, its accessibility and adaptability to international beauty criteria are enhanced.

Herborist (佰草集) has a hybrid approach, publicly promoting its Chinese identity but framing its brand storytelling to correspond to international beauty and wellness trends. Its identity emanates from traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), with products that feature herbal elements like ginseng, goji berry, and peony. In China, Herborist brands itself as a contemporary keeper of ancient beauty knowledge, combining classical formulation with modern scientific proof. Internationally, the COO effect is addressed via a reinterpretation of TCM tradition as botanic science, an appeal that resonates with the “clean beauty” movement that dominates Europe and North America. Herborist product communications in those markets feature natural, dermatologically tested, and environmental-friendly products. European-market packaging uses soft pastel colors, minimalist typography, and careful botanic drawing, blending authenticity and contemporary style.

Even its distribution strategy reveals Herborist's cultural awareness. In Europe, it collaborates with upscale shopping locations like Sephora France and upscale spa chains in Spain and Italy, positioning itself as an upscale wellness brand. This validates its legitimacy and is consistent with clients who seek holistic, plant-based treatments for their skin.

Table 1

Summary of each brand's positioning

Brand	Core strengths	Main overseas markets	Communication strategies	Reasons for attractiveness
Florasis	Integration of traditional Chinese cultural aesthetics with modern cosmetics; advanced manufacturing technology.	Southeast Asia, Japan, selective distribution in Europe.	Cultural storytelling emphasizing heritage ingredients, ornate packaging; localized social media campaigns on Instagram and TikTok.	Unique cultural identity; artisanal packaging; blend of luxury image and heritage narratives.
Perfect Diary	Affordable yet trendy products; strong digital marketing and KOL network.	Southeast Asia, North America (USA, Canada), trial in Europe.	Influencer collaborations; co-branding with global pop culture entities; cosmopolitan minimalism abroad.	Price-to-quality appeal; rapid trend responsiveness; cross-market brand adaptability.
Herborist	TCM-based skincare combined with modern dermatology; mid- to high-end positioning.	France, Italy, Spain, broader EU market via Sephora and spas.	"Natural wellness" framing; botanical imagery; "clean beauty" positioning aligned with EU consumer preferences.	Alignment with global "clean beauty" trend; heritage in TCM; selective luxury positioning.

A comparative study of Florasis, Perfect Diary, and Herborist finds that none of their approaches follows any universal formula for internationalizing Chinese beauty brands, but all their successes hinge upon fine-tuning COO identity and cultural adaptability according to the unique circumstances of individual target markets. Florasis demonstrates that amplifying COO identity can be effective when cultural heritage is perceived as a source of value and differentiation. Perfect Diary illustrates that neutralizing COO

associations can open doors in markets where biases persist, provided that brand identity remains coherent and competitive. Herborist shows that it is possible to maintain cultural authenticity while reframing heritage narratives in terms that align with dominant local trends.

In each instance, cultural adaptation is no optional add-on but an integral component of the brand's international strategy. Whatever this adaptation manifests in terms of changing product formulation, visual design, or brand storytelling, this dictates exactly how far a brand can convert domestic success into sustainable international growth.

Discussion

Internationalizing Chinese beauty brands entails a complex mix of economic prowess, cultural positioning, and communications strategy. A combination of the COO effect and the cultural adaptation model offers an effective interpretational framework to unravel noticed trends from case studies as well as comprehensive industry trends. For the purposes of this discussion, it summarily bundles the results within four thematic categories: COO identity management, level and span of cultural adaptation, digital platform-caused brand perception, and positioning outcomes of C-beauty in an already oversaturated international beauty marketplace.

Probably, the most obvious conclusion that comes out of analysis is that COO identity is neither an immutable constraint nor a fixed characteristic. Instead, it is an adaptive brand resource that can be positively constructed to either highlight cultural uniqueness or appeal to universal ideals of beauty. The example of Florasis shows that an overt adoption of COO identity – rooted in heritage storytelling – can be a strength in markets where beauty consumers prize authenticity, artisanal tradition, and cultural diversity. On the one hand, Perfect Diary's strategic downplaying of overt Chinese cultural signals across select Western markets shows how COO neutrality can be used to sidestep deep-seated biases and place a brand within prevailing ideals of global style. These alternative approaches all argue in favor of treating COO as a contextually dependent variable: its role depends upon prior associations retained through experience by each consumer market. In those cases where associations are positive or neutral, extension can establish differentiation; in those cases where associations are still negative, strategic reduction can smooth out barriers to entry.

A cultural adaptation theory application to the case studies identifies that adaptation is multi-faceted, extending from surface changes to marketing collateral to deeper changes to product formulation, distribution methods, and brand storytelling. Herborist's repositioning of TCM as European botanical science is an example of deep adaptation, matching a culture-specific origin with international clean and natural beauty trends. Florasis uses a moderate adaptation strategy, keeping symbolic, ornate cultural designs but changing advertising styles to suit national luxury styles. Perfect Diary uses broad adaptation for Western markets, changing product presentation, influencer collaborations, and brand stories to suit cosmopolitan beauty standards. The variation in adaptation depth across cases suggests that there is no universal optimal strategy.

Digital commerce and social media ecosystems have become pivotal enablers of Chinese beauty brands' global expansion. Cross-border e-commerce platforms not only lower the financial barriers to market entry but also provide opportunities for iterative learning through the continuous analysis of consumer data. At the same time, social media operates as both a marketing channel and a cultural adaptation tool, enabling brands to tailor content for local audiences in real time and to track engagement directly. The case studies further show that digital platforms can help counteract COO-related biases. By emphasizing user-generated content, influencer endorsements, and tutorial-driven product demonstrations, brands can shift consumer attention away from origin-based stereotypes and toward the tangible performance, quality, and experience of the products. In this way, digital storytelling acts as a bridge between COO perception and consumer trial, with well-executed campaigns capable of redefining brand identity in a matter of months.

Despite their strategic advantages, Chinese brands still face challenges from established K-beauty and J-beauty brands, which have spent decades building strong international brand positioning. Both have created aesthetic codes that are immediately identifiable and widely accepted. In order for C-beauty to carve out an equivalent position, it should present a unique value proposition that is not easily subsumed within current beauty categories. Three possible positioning pathways emerge from this analysis:

1. Differentiation of cultural heritage – taking advantage of China’s deep storytelling and pictorial traditions to develop a unique and high-end brand identity.

2. Technological leadership – emphasizing manufacturing agility, quick innovation cycles, and state-of-the-art formulation science.

3. Sustainable and ethical leadership – being dedicated to sustainability, clean beauty, and corporate social responsibility as brand pillars.

Each of these approaches will be comparatively successful depending on market conditions, but all require perpetual execution and thoughtful alignment across brand identity, COO communications, and domestic consumer expectations.

Conclusions

These results indicate that COO identity, instead of being an unchangeable driver of brand perception, is a strategic resource that can be amplified or downplayed depending on the cultural climate and consumer mindset in each target market. In receptive regions, celebrating Chinese heritage – through design, storytelling, and traditional ingredients – can create meaningful differentiation and reinforce authenticity. In markets where skepticism exists, softening COO signals allows brands to blend seamlessly into global beauty norms, avoiding potential bias. The choice between these strategies depends on a sharp reading of market perceptions and competitive dynamics. Cultural adaptation is equally vital – and it goes far deeper than changing packaging or ad slogans. It involves rethinking product formulations, brand stories, and distribution strategies. The brands that manage to balance authenticity with local appeal – without losing their identity or clinging rigidly to domestic formulas – are best positioned for lasting international success.

Digital channels now serve as both gateways to new markets and tools for shaping perception. Cross-border e-commerce reduces the cost and risk of expansion, while social media enables brands to tailor content and connect with consumers in real time. Through influencers, user-generated content, and targeted ads, Chinese brands can shift the focus from origin-based stereotypes to product performance, brand values, and customer experience. The ability to quickly adapt a brand narrative is a major advantage in a world where public opinion can change overnight.

From a theoretical perspective, the present research reiterates that COO and cultural adaptation should not be treated as independent constructs but as complementary strategic levers. COO creates the first perceptual lens through which consumers understand a brand, and cultural adaptation adjusts and possibly redefines that lens over time. Their interaction is intermediated via digital channels, which facilitate quick brand awareness and consumer responses.

From a practical point of view, the study emphasizes the value of pre-entry market-specific brand audits, continual adaptation based on data, and intentional expenditure on reputation-forming activities that tie COO identity to domestic consumer values. Brands that conceive COO and adaptation as fluid processes, not fixed judgments at the time of international entry, are better equipped to realize sustainable international growth.

From a cultural and communication perspective, the rise of C-beauty also functions as a form of soft power. By exporting high-quality products enriched with cultural storytelling, Chinese brands can influence global perceptions of China beyond the beauty sector. Strong international branding can break stereotypes, inspire cross-cultural appreciation, and build a more complex and positive image of the country.

Expanding the sample of brands, gathering primary insights from both consumers and managers, and tracking strategies over time will not only refine the theory but also reveal how Chinese – and other emerging market – brands navigate the complexities of global consumer culture.

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