

# Corporate Heritage Brands in China: Consumer engagement with China's most celebrated corporate heritage brand-Tong Ren Tang: 同仁堂 .

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**Abstract:**

This study breaks new ground becomes it (i): considers a non-western (a Chinese) corporate heritage brand and (ii): for the first time within the corporate heritage brand/corporate heritage canon, adopts an explicit consumer perspective. . Significantly–taking an overt corporate heritage/corporate heritage brand stance–this empirical study reveals why a corporate heritage brand such as Tong Ren Tang (TRT) – founded in 1669–is highly meaningful to consumers from one generation to another. The researchers marshal the first four of Balmer’s (2013) criteria of corporate heritage entities in order to verify its corporate heritage credentials and explain its attractiveness to customers. As such, it was found that TRT is meaningfully linked to the past, present and prospective future (*Balmer’s criterion of omni temporality*); has durable and constant organisational traits (*Balmer’s criterion of institutional trait consistency*); has customer and stakeholder faithfulness for a minimum of three generations (*Balmer’s criterion of tri-generational loyalty*); and has acquired meaningful non corporate role identities *vis-à-vis* Chinese national identity and China’s imperial identity (*Balmer’s criterion of augmented role identities*). TRT was found to be attractive to consumers owing to its core and augmented role identities following Balmer’s (2013) augmented role identity theoretical perspective. These findings explain why Tong Ren Tang has endured and flourished from one generation to another and accounts for its celebrated status within China and the wider Chinese diaspora.

**Keywords:** corporate heritage, corporate heritage brands, China, imperial China, traditional Chinese medicine.

## INTRODUCTION

*“Tong Ren Tang is a very famous Chinese heritage brand  
providing high quality Chinese medicine.  
It is still relevant to us today.  
It makes me feel proud to be Chinese.”  
(Tong Ren Tang Customer)*

This study on the Tong Ren Tang (同仁堂) traditional Chinese medicine corporate brand marks new ground. This is because, for the first time in the corporate heritage/corporate heritage brand canon, the focus is on a *Chinese* corporate heritage institution.

Furthermore, this study breaks new ground within the nascent corporate heritage/corporate heritage brand canon in having an explicit focus on *consumers*. To date, customers have not featured in extant studies of corporate heritage institutions and corporate brands.

As noted by Otnes and Maclaren (2007) the intersections between heritage and consumption have largely been ignored by marketing scholars and this is specifically the case in the context of corporate heritage institutions /corporate heritage brands. Significantly, therefore, this study aims to make a meaningful contribution to the interaction between corporate heritage and consumption.

Tong Ren Tang (TRT) is a Chinese corporate heritage brand *par excellence* and is without obvious parallel. Founded in 1669, for the most part TRT is unknown outside China (apart that is from the significant Chinese diaspora). As the initial findings of this study reveal (drawing on the descriptive statistical insights) consumers, whilst valuing the product and service quality of TRT also valued the shop’s corporate heritage traits of *omni-temporality institutional trait consistency, tri-generational hereditary and augmented role identities* (following Balmer’s 2013 corporate heritage criteria).

Today, as in centuries past, Tong Ren Tang is not only celebrated in Beijing, and throughout the Middle Kingdom (中国), as a totem of China’s cultural, national and religious identity but also, significantly, enjoys considerable renown among Chinese *émigrés*.

What should not be overlooked is the corporate heritage brand’s long-standing and high profile links with successive Emperors and the Imperial Court.

For instance, Tong Ren Tan’s centuries-old marque is infused with striking imperial iconography consistency of two golden imperial dragons. The fact this imperial emblem/logo has endured-even during the height of the Cultural Revolution-is not only astonishing but also is testimony of the strong attachment China and its political leaders (both old and new) attach to the corporate brand. The

marque is, therefore, a highly visible, powerful and perpetual corporate link with China's imperial past but is, seemingly, unique within China. No other institution has had continuous use of such imperial iconography and no other Chinese institution uses it so prominently

Established in Beijing in 1669 as a family business, the "mother" shop was, significantly, in close geographical proximity to the Forbidden City (紫禁城). However, this propinquity to the Imperial Court had other, more significant, imperial dimensions. For instance, the shop soon acquired the status as the sole purveyor of medicines to the Emperor and to the Imperial Household. Not surprisingly perhaps, TRT quickly became renowned for the quality of its products and diagnostic services among Peking's residents and, in time, throughout China.

The link with the Imperial Court stood the test of time and only ceased with the proclamation of a Republic in 1911. As with British Royal Warrant holders today, TRT's products were deemed to be of high quality and were seen to be, "*Fit for a King*" or in a Sino context "*Fit for an Emperor*". As the shop's founder noted:

*"Despite the complexity of preparing herbal medicines, there is no compromise on costs or labour, even though the raw ingredients are costly."*

(Source: [http://www.tongrentang.com.au/About\\_us.asp?currently\\_place=About\\_us&page\\_class=4](http://www.tongrentang.com.au/About_us.asp?currently_place=About_us&page_class=4))

The product quality of TRT, seemingly, still endures. As with many successful corporate heritage entities the organisation has moved forward with the past. As TRT's culture manager told us:

*"(Tong Ren Tang) Served the Royal Court yesterday and benefits ordinary people today."*

One dimension of our study involves ascertaining the significance of this corporate heritage brand's national (Chinese) and Regal (Imperial) associations among Chinese consumers, following on from the work of Balmer (2013) *vis-à-vis* the augmented role identities of corporate heritage institutions/corporate heritage brands.

## **RATIONAL and RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Having TRT's customers as its foci this article reports the initial insights (drawn from descriptive statistics) from an in-depth mixed method study of the TRT corporate heritage brand. Drawing on Balmer's (2013) corporate heritage criteria, the preliminary findings of our study reported here, attribute the corporate brand's survival and success owing to -using the *first four* of Balmer's criteria-(See Exhibit One). As such, these initial findings corroborate the first four of Balmer's (2013) fourfold criteria and, therefore, represent an advance in terms of corporate heritage brand attractiveness from a consumer perspective.

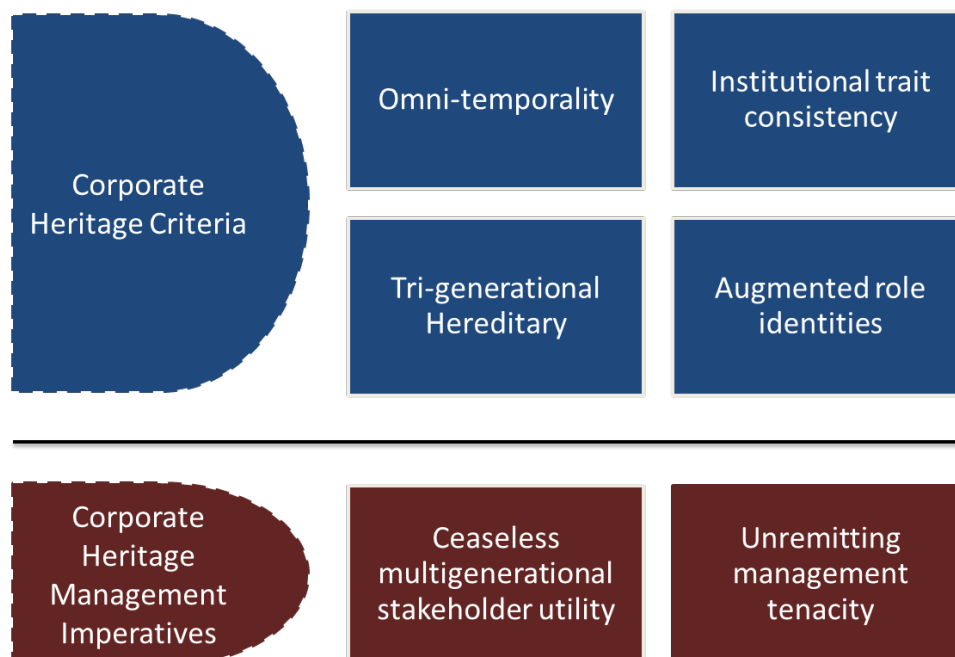
Balmer's corporate heritage criteria are as follows:

- 1 **Omni-temporality** (*subsisting in temporal strata-of the past, present and perspective future*)
- 2 **Institutional trait consistency** (*the continuity of meaningful organisational traits*)
- 3 **Tri-generational hereditary** (*the organisation has to have been in existence, and meaningful, for a minimum of three generations*);
- 4 **Augmented role identities** (*corporate heritage institutions are infused with multiple role identities including territorial, cultural, social and ancestral identity*)
- 5 **Ceaseless multigenerational stakeholder utility** (*demonstrably salient for consecutive generations of stakeholders*) not examined/confirmed;
- 6 **Unremitting management tenacity** (*assiduous management of corporate heritage institutions*) not examined/confirmed.

(It should be noted that criteria 1-5 takes an explicit customer, stakeholder and organisational foci whilst criteria 5-6 is more instrumental: focussing on corporate heritage management imperatives. Criterion 5 bridges both, of course).

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**EXHIBIT ONE: Balmer's (2011) Corporate Heritage Criteria (HALF A PAGE FOR THIS MODEL)**



**CONTEXT: CHINA'S EQUIVOCAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ITS PAST**

In order to understand the significance of Tong Ren Tang as one of the few extant and high profile and foremost -corporate heritage brands within mainland China it is important to appreciate both something of China's ancient as well as its more recent history.

Dating back to over 2,000 B.C., China is a country (and arguably a civilisation) with an unparalleled provenance and richness. As the celebrated Cambridge University Don, *Joseph Needham CH* (李约瑟) showed, China from the earliest times made many highly significant, and enduring discoveries. It was a highly developed and sophisticated polity and Civilisation which, for many millennia lacked any obvious parallels among other cultures.

It is curious, then, why China, over recent successive centuries, became a backwater in terms of innovation and became eclipsed by advances in Europe and then North America. This is a point greatly celebrated *via "Needham's Grand Question/The Needham Question."*

Adopting a branding/brand management perspectives, it is, *prima facie*, mystifying why such an ancient civilisation has a paucity of corporate heritage brands. This is especially the case when a comparison is made with other, much smaller, polities such as France, Great Britain, Italy and Japan.

Perhaps, in part, this is a consequence of its history which militated against the establishment of major companies and, more significantly and more recently, is the result of the policies pursued by Chairman Mao – post 1949 - which resulted in the winding-up of many corporate heritage entities and corporate brands.

Thus, and to repeat an earlier point, in order to understand the significance of Tong Ren Tang as (arguably) China's foremost corporate heritage brand it is important to understand China's recent history.

Elaborating the above, and by means of historical context, it was the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 which led to promulgation and proliferation of new cultural and corporate forms and norms. Under the leadership of Chairman Mao, the Chinese state repudiated many facets of China's extraordinarily rich civilisation and this included corporate heritage entities.

In accord with Mao Zedong's famous/infamous dictum the PRC rid itself of the four 'olds': *old customs, old culture, old beliefs and old ideas*. In short, key pillars of China's civilisation were to not only to be *repudiated* but also, preferably following Mao's dictates, *eviscerated*. This included the country's distinctive religious inheritance - Confucianism and Daoism- which, even though, they had exemplified Chinese Civilisation for over two millennia were deemed outdated, irrelevant and even dangerous.

Unsurprisingly, these changes were highly transformative for China's people, and culture. Many institutions were changed and countless more were decimated. The

aim, apparently, was to forge an inimitable utopia but, for some, this represented a ruinous dystopia.

For a more considered assessment of China's recent history see Editorial Box 1. This provides an overview of China's incongruous, problematical, disproportionate and mercurial relationship with its past.

### **CONTEXT: CHINA'S AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP WITH ITS IMPERIAL PROVENANCE**

Tong Ren Tang's singularity in corporate heritage terms owes much to its Imperial associations. As such, an understanding of Tong Ren Tang's equivocal links with China's imperial past needs to be discerned. The intensity and force of this association was manifest not only in the corporate brand's documents but also emerges from our interviews with senior managers. As the shop's general manager related:

*"We are proud of our imperial past. It is reflected in our high quality of products and service and our good reputation."*

*"We often make reference to our imperial past in our advertising, communications, lectures, films and books."*

*"(The imperial link) "helps Tong Ren Tan's brand and image".*

*"We are proud of our imperial past. It is reflected in our high quality of products and service and our good reputation."*

The above being noted, for much of the last century, the Chinese State relationship with the country's imperial past was at best mercurial, and at worst adversarial. Today, there has been a *volte-face* with a good deal of China's regal past being celebrated and this is of no little significance for Tong Ren Tang. Today, the state is far from abashed about its royal inheritance legacy and, seemingly, has come with a realisation by the state that such a provenance accords the country distinctiveness and, drawing on the work of Nye (2004) can be appropriated as part of its *"soft power"*. (Joseph Nye identified three forms of soft power: culture, political values and policies and the Middle Kingdom's Imperial legacy is very much part of China's cultural power). Further reflections on the above may be found in Editorial Box 2 which details China's changeable trysts with its Imperial past.

**TAKE IN EDITORIAL BOXES 1 and 2 HERE**

**CORPORATE HERITAGE AND BROADER THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES,**

The corporate heritage domain has only recently come to prominence within the corporate marketing literature and in order to place corporate heritage in its milieu Editorial Box 3 provides an overview of developments in as well as key insights relating to heritage, corporate heritage, corporate heritage brands and corporate heritage identities.

***Relative Invariance and Classical Corporate/Organisational Identity Theories***

For corporate heritage organisations/corporate heritage brands the theoretical notion of relative *invariance* (Balmer 2011) explains that corporate heritage institutions/corporate heritage brands are characterised both by stability/enduringness and, also, significantly, by variability too. This study also aims to confirm/shed light on the above. It also examines the degree to which the theoretical perspectives of Larcon and Reitter (1979) and Albert and Whetten (1985) *vis-à-vis* core identity criterion are pertinent to corporate heritage entities and brands (some scholars aver that their criteria are not apposite for corporate identities *per se*).

By means of context, classical identity theories as espoused in Europe by the French Scholars Larcon and Reitter (1979) and the English scholar Balmer (2001) and in the US, by Albert and Whetten (1985) and by US/Danish scholars Gioa *et al* (2000) are noteworthy. Larcon and Reitter (1979) identified three interrelated corporate identity determinates accorded an organisation namely *specificity, stability and coherence*. Albert and Whetten (1985) argued that an institution's perceived key identity traits referred to those dimensions which are *central, distinctive and enduring* about their work organisation. Balmer (2001) demurred from the above and questioned the Larcon and Reitter's (1979) second criterion of stability and Albert and Whetten's third criterion of enduring. He argued-following on from Albert and Whetten that an organisation's identity is characterised by a tripartite criteria of being *central, distinctive and evolving*. Gioa *et al* (2000) also challenged Albert and Whetten's (1985) notion of enduringness and introduced the notion of *adaptive instability*.

**TAKE IN EDITORIAL BOX 3 ABOUT HERE****TONG REN TANG**

This research focusses on the traditional Chinese medicine shop Tong Ren Tang which, arguably, is China's most famous and one of its oldest corporate heritage brands.



Importantly, China's Ministry of Culture has identified Beijing's Tong Ren Tang traditional Chinese medicine shop to be of major significance in heritage terms and is included in *"The Esteemed List of the First Selection of Cultural Heritage."* It also one of China's *Laozihaos* – a time-honoured Chinese brand (中华老字号) as designated by the Chinese Government.

Tong Ren Tang (TRT) is Chinese history incarnate in that it is a unique and highly visible link with China's Imperial past. It is also an embodiment of Chinese culture in another way via its very close associations with traditional Chinese medicine. This is a highly significant and meaningful trait of Chinese culture and is informed and imbued by the precepts of China's two indigenous religions and philosophies: *Confucianism and Daoism*. This is because the precepts of traditional Chinese medicine is to be found in Daoism whilst issues of benevolence to others (in the administration of medicine for instance) informs Confucianism.

Established in 1669 by Yue Xianyang (a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner) in the reign of Emperor Kangxi, the Tong Ren Tang traditional Chinese medicine shop enjoys a prominent position in the Da Shi Lan (大栅栏) district and is close to the Forbidden City. Unquestionably, it is not merely one of the oldest shops in China but incontestably China's most illustrious pharmacy. Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century was a traditional family-run Chinese business.

For 188 years Tong Ren Tang, was the sole purveyor of Chinese Medicine to successive Chinese Emperors. The fact that it has survived numerous travails visited on China over the last 300 is a testament of its importance to China and the affection in which it is held by the Chinese. Notably, some of the shop's traditional Chinese medicinal formulas are of some antiquity. The shop-both today and yesterday-is celebrated for the quality of its products and services (customers can, for instance, consult practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine). For many centuries, savvy customers appreciated that TRT's medicinal formulas were those used by the Emperor, his extended family, his numerous concubine and children and the imperial court generally. As TRT's culture manager told us:

*"The imperial family used Tong Ren Tang's medicinal products. Everyone knows that. If the medicines were not up to standard the pharmacists could be killed."*

The shop has a clear place China's national consciousness is reflected in the television drama series entitled *Da Zhai Men* (大宅门) based on Tong Ren Tang's imperial past.

The bases of traditional Chinese medicine are to be found in Daoist precepts (Daoism being an indigenous Chinese religion Daoism is informed by the notion of *qi* –the vital living force-which is dependent on individuals achieving corporeal equilibrium between *yin* and *yang* elements and this finds expression in traditional Chinese medicine.

## THE STUDY

Following Yin (1994), in broad terms, our study of Tong Ren Tang can be classified as a critical single case study and marshals a mixed method approach to data collection (Bryman 2008). Critical case studies characterise research that is revelatory in nature in that the focus of research was previously inaccessible to scientific investigation.

The utility of mixed method research has been advanced by a number of scholars (Bryman 2010; Hammersley 1996; Morgan 1998; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). A mixed method approach can result in data that is mutually illuminating (Bryman 2008 p.23, 603); enables the dovetailing of data (Hammond 2005 p. 240) and has benefits in terms of triangulation (Bryman 2008 p.612).

Our mixed methods approach marshals qualitative along with quantitative and secondary data (See Table-1). More specifically, this research is informed by data derived from observation, a survey questionnaire with customers, in-depth interviews with managers, focus groups with Chinese nationals, a visual audit of the TRT shop and offices. Recourse was also made to secondary data and the company's documentary data.

The findings from Phase 1 informed the design of interview protocols and questionnaire that we collected in Beijing in Phase 2 and Phase 3 of this study. The initial insights from the descriptive statistics from Phase 3 of this study inform the preliminary findings detailed in this article. The questionnaire tested the first four of Balmer's (2013) criteria *vis-à-vis* his theory of corporate heritage institutions viz:

- a. The importance of Tong Ren Tang's omni – temporality to Tong Ren Tang's customers
- b. The importance of Tong Ren Tang's institutional trait constancy to Tong Ren Tang's customers
- c. The importance of Tong Ren Tang's tri-generational loyalty to customers

- d. The importance of Tong Ren Tang's augmented role identities (*Chinese imperial identity and Chinese national identity*) to Tong Ren Tang's customers

Six hundred customers were approached and this resulted in 115 useable questionnaires.

Table 1 outlines the three stages of our research.

**Table 1: Stages of TRT Study**

Stages of TRT Study	Research Activities
<b>Phase 1</b>	
<b>Location: London (UK)</b>	Collecting and reviewing secondary data on TRT in order to understand its provenance and its status as a tourist attraction. Secondary data sources included: company-specific documents such as annual reports, newsletters, strategic reports, press articles and a recent review of the company history; Guide books, information on guide tours were examined as well as the web and printed media and television coverage/programmes.
	Four focus groups undertaken with Chinese postgraduate students studying in London focussed on their knowledge of the institution and the degree of importance they attach to TRT as a national and cultural institution
	Observation, visual audit and interviews with managers and Doctors in the TRT shop in London's China Town.
<b>Phase 2</b>	
<b>Location: Beijing, China</b>	Successive visits to the TRT Flagship Shop in Da Shi Lan (大栅栏) Beijing. Visits were also made to the TRT shop Qian Men and to the TRT Museum.
	Observation and visual audit undertaken outside and inside the TRT flap ship shop.
	In-depth interviews with senior managers of TRT including a group discussion with senior members of the management team
<b>Phase 3</b>	
<b>Location: Beijing, China</b>	Questionnaires collected from customers within the TRT flagship shop over a three-day period. Data was collected by one of the Mandarin-speaking researchers and was assisted by six Chinese postgraduate students studying in Beijing. The students were carefully supervised by the researchers in order to ensure the data was dependable.

## FINDINGS

The descriptive statistics confirmed the four research questions relating to Tong Ren Tang's corporate heritage brand (*a: the importance of Tong Ren Tang's omni – temporality to Tong Ren Tang's customers; b: the importance of Tong Ren Tang's institutional trait constancy to Tong Ren Tang's customers; c: the importance of Tong Ren Tang's tri-generational loyalty to customers; d: the importance of Tong Ren Tang's augmented role identities (Chinese imperial identity and Chinese national identity) to Tong Ren Tang's customers*). The findings are shown in diagrammatic form in figure 3.

The following sections detail the descriptive statistics from the survey and provide a brief explanation of their significance.

*a: The importance of Tong Ren Tang's Omni – temporality to Tong Ren Tang's customers: This was confirmed by the descriptive statistics*

The multi-temporality criterion-the key notion that a key requisite of corporate heritage brands/institutions need to subsist in temporal strata of the past present and prospective future Balmer (2013 pp.305-315) - was confirmed by the descriptive statistics. See Table 2 below.

Table – 2

Questions asked of customers	Percentage (%)				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The centuries old respect for TRT is important to you	40.0	46.1	10.4	3.5	-
Today TRT is relevant to you	28.7	49.6	14.8	6.1	.9
The future existence of TRT is important to you	59.1	30.4	7.8	2.6	-

*b: The importance of institutional trait constancy to Tong Reng Tang's customers: This was confirmed by the descriptive statistics*

The institutional trait constancy criterion-the key notion that corporate heritage institutions/brands are invested with traits that are constant over time is a core dimension of the field (Balmer 2013 pp.305-315) was confirmed by the descriptive statistics. See Table 3 below:

Table 3

Questions	Percentage (%)				
	Strongly Agree:	Agree:	Neutral:	Disagree:	Strongly Disagree:
TRT brand with its emphasis on quality is important to you	46.1	39.1	11.3	3.5	-
The centuries old trust and quality of TRT is important to you	50.4	40.0	7.8	1.7	-

*c: The importance of Tong Ren Tang's tri-generational loyalty to Tong Ren Tang's customers: This was confirmed by the descriptive statistics*

The tri-generational loyalty criterion-the key notion that faithfulness to a corporate heritage institutions/brands have a tri-generational fidelity - and been bequeathed for a minimum of three generations - (Balmer 2013 pp.305-315) was confirmed by the descriptive statistics. See Table 4 below:

Table –4

Questions	Percentage (%)	
	Yes	No
Do you use TRT products?	65.2	34.8
Did your grandparents use TRT products?	51.3	48.7
Did your parents use TRT products?	56.5	43.5
Do your children use TRT products?	30.4	69.6

*d: The importance of Tong Ren Tang's augmented role identities (national role and imperial role identities) to Tong Ren Tang's customers: This was confirmed by the descriptive statistics*

The augmented role identity criterion-the key notion that corporate heritage institutions/corporate brands acquire extra-organisational identities as noted by Balmer (2013 pp.305-315) - was confirmed by the descriptive statistics. The two augmented role identities which TRT's customers were asked for their feedback was *National Identity* (the significance of TRT as a national symbol) and *Imperial Identity* (the significance of TRT as a totem of Imperial China). As such, TRT can be regarded as a fulcrum of Chinese and Imperial Chinese identity in that it both has and imparts identity by virtue of its augmented role identities following on from Balmer (2013). See Table 5 below.

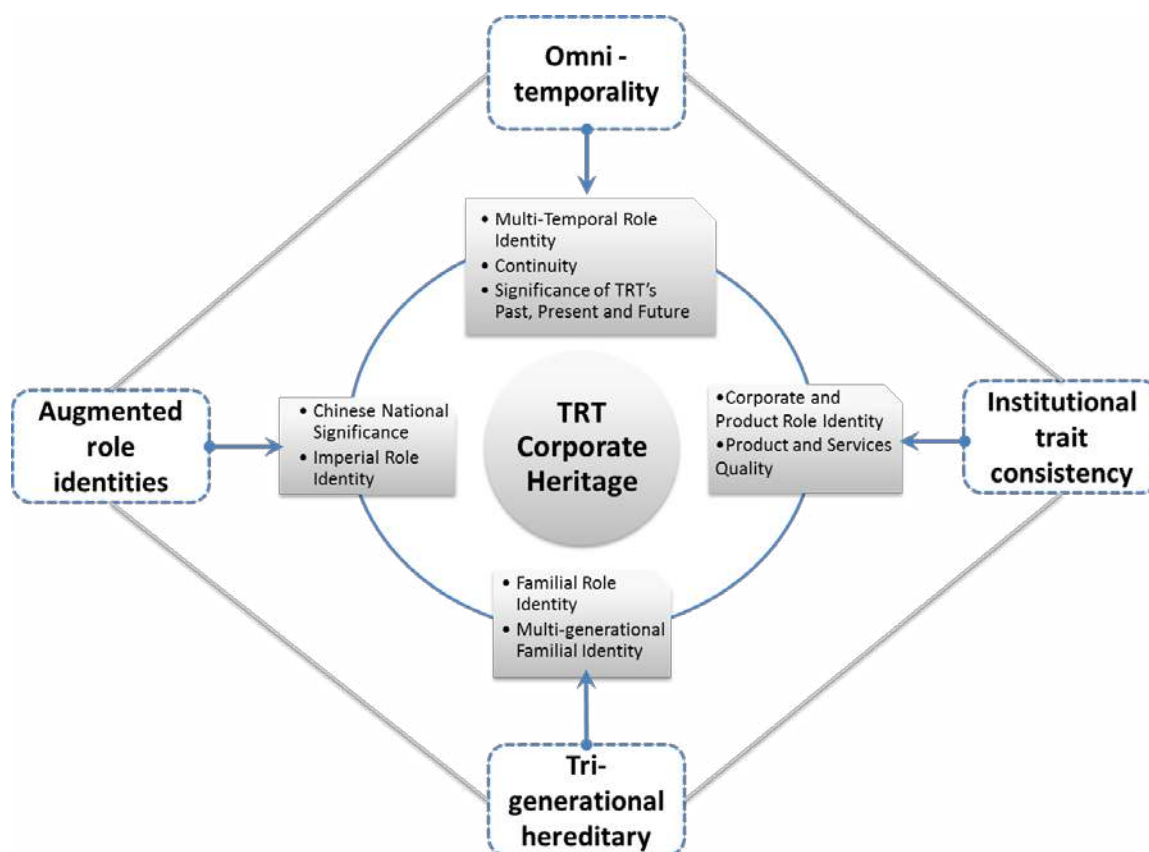
Table – 5

Question	Percentage (%)				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The TRT brand is a Chinese National Treasure.	49.6	40.0	8.7	1.7	-
The TRT brand is important to my sense of Chinese identity	49.6	37.4	12.2	0.9	-

Question	Percentage (%)				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Chinese medicine is important to my sense of Chinese identity	75.7	20.9	3.5	-	-

Questions	Percentage (%)				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I am attracted by the TRT's imperial past in providing medicine for successive Chinese Emperors	27.0	31.3	31.3	8.7	1.7
TRT is successful in communicating its imperial heritage	19.1	25.2	29.6	25.2	0.9

Figure 3 Attractiveness of Tong Ran Tan as a corporate heritage vis-à-vis its multiple role identities (HALF A PAGE FOR THIS MODEL)



## DISCUSSION

The descriptive findings revealed the strategic significance of corporate heritage to the customers and managers of the Tong Ren Tang corporate heritage shop. The aforementioned is attributable to the following five corporate role identities (corporate, temporal, familial, national, cultural and imperial) and supports the notion of multiple corporate heritage roles identities (Balmer 2013).

These multiple role identities imbue the shop with multiple meanings and heritage attractions. Tong Ren Tang is repository of Chinese cultural values which define the Chinese as a people. Tong Ren Tang is a an entity imbued with a living aggregate heritage as such, the shop is as living and tangible manifestations of China's, distinctive, enduring and primordial identity; is a prominent national symbol, too, of China. Today, Tong Ren Tang's constancy in terms of core identity traits vis-à-vis product quality, imperial and national association's couples with the brand's products and service quality explains why a visit to the shop is a meaningful for customers. Its products, too, which enjoyed Imperial patronage until 1911: products and services that were, and remain, "*Fit for a King (Emperor)*." Many of the shop's medicinal formulas-used by successive Emperors-are still prepared by Tong Ren Tang's pharmacists.

There is another, significant, dimension of the attractiveness of the shop's collective heritage identities in that it provides a powerful link with – until comparatively recently-a proscribed imperial past. Moreover, one value of heritage, as stipulated by Rapport's (2002) is that it can make up for the deficit, loss or trauma caused by the past and this, arguably, pertains to China's recent history.

As a corporate heritage entity, the shop is without compare since there are comparatively few retail outlets that have Tong Ren Tang 's centuries-old provenance, impeccable imperial credentials, and an institutional imbued with an iconic national and profile. Taking a primordial perspective of the Chinese, Tong Ren Tang's enjoys an especial status owing to its emblematic status as a manufacture, retailer and proponent of traditional Chinese medicine. China-unlike many other nations-was seriously devoid of corporate heritage brands: brands which can be viewed as part of China's national and cultural repertoire.

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

From a management perspective, Tong Ren Tang's managers should appreciate that customer attractiveness to their corporate brand rests not only on what it sells (formal organisation) but also in what it symbolises in national and cultural terms (social organisation). Thus, managers need to be aware of the corporate brand's key augmented role identities.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

Avenues for future research might include undertaking research in different countries and among different cultural groups *vis-à-vis* the roles of corporate entities and corporate heritage identities in particular in expressing national identities. An example could be the ways in those having Chinese ethnicity but who are nationals of other states with large Chinese communities such as in Canada, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand relate to Tong Ren Tang as an expression of Chinese cultural identity. Research that focusses on the roles of corporate heritage museums-the BBC, BMW, Coca Cola etc.-in evoking and communication and in experiencing national and cultural identity.

From a theoretical perspective, there is scope to advance the insights from this study by drawing on the corporate identity literature (in explaining an institution's corporate heritage identity anchors in heritage tourism contexts) and social identity theory *vis-à-vis* corporate brands and identity (the ways in which individuals define themselves in terms of an organisations having an corporate heritage and heritage tourism identities). The significance of an entities religious/philosophical base-Daoism in the case of Tong Ren Tang-would suggest that the religious dimension might provide another fruitful line of research.

## CONCLUSION

This study explains why the celebrated Chinese corporate heritage brand-the traditional Chinese medicine shop Tong Ren Tang-has survived and remains significant for today's consumers as it has for previous generations. To a large measure this can be explained by the notions of relative invariance - corporate heritage brands need to embrace both constancy and change- and by the notion of augmented role identities -corporate heritage brands invariably have attractive identities linking them to peoples, and places- (Balmer 2011, 2013). Seemingly, consumers found these attributes to be attractive and meaningful.

In a country which, until comparatively recently, has eschewed and has sometimes trounced its links with its past. Tong Ren Tang shop is a rare and widely



celebrated survivor within the People's Republic of China. This corporate heritage brand has impeccable national credentials - as a paragon of traditional Chinese medicine; strong Imperial links and as a living expression of Confucianism and Daoism precepts-the shop Temporal, National and Familial interaction (engagement with multiple temporal dimensions, with feelings of belongingness to a state and country and a focus for familial continuity), Tong Ren Tang in essence is a fulcrum of Chinese culture, spirituality, ancestry and memory and its heritage status, arguably, has been heightened as China reappraises and revisits its pre-revolutionary history and its narratives of the past.

The tangible manifestations of heritage (in terms of the purchase of products and services) represent an important heritage manifestation in that the consumption of heritage products and services links the individual to not only the past but also to the prospective future.

Whilst China's past-as with any national heritage-is subject to change and reappraisal –the degree to which post 1949 China has eviscerated a good deal of material and cognitive memories of the past in recent times certain aspects of China's Imperial past has been acceptable and as such can be celebrated by Tong Ren Tang's customers. It is undeniably axiomatic that Tong Ren Tang is an emblem of Chinese nation and culture. Moreover TRT is a symbol of a disappearing culture and a disappearing past. This might explain why this corporate heritage entity is meaningful to customers. As a corporate heritage brand, Tong Ren Tang is of singular significance within China owing to its temporal, territorial and special significance and because it is invested with cultural, national and familial capital.

In short Tong Ren Tang (TRT) represents a powerful, tangible and incomparable link, with China's past and as such by visiting the shop, TRT's customers embody, reflect and affirm their sense of belongingness to China's traditional culture and civilisation and to China's erstwhile imperial identity. The above explains why TRT has endured and why it remains salient for customers. As one customer told us:

*“Tong Ren Tang is a very famous Chinese heritage brand  
providing high quality Chinese medicine.  
It is still relevant to us today.  
It makes me feel proud to be Chinese.”*

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**EDITORIAL BOX 1: China: an incongruous, problematical, disproportionate and mercurial relationship with its past.**

Since 1949, much of China's engagement with its past has been, and to some degree remains, incongruous, problematical, disproportionate and mercurial. Each of the aforementioned dimensions can be explained as follows:

- *Incongruous*

The above can be seen in terms of the inattention – sometimes verging on national amnesia – *vis-à-vis* China's history and achievements over several millennia (Colin 1981): For instance, it was the magisterial study of a foreigner – the celebrated English sinologist, Joseph Needham CH (Li Yuese CH 李约瑟), that unearthed the numerous ground-breaking inventions of the Chinese (Needham (1954-2004).

*Problematical*

This can be witnessed in terms of China's spiritual inheritance in that the China's state's pursuance of State Atheism has meant that traditional Chinese creeds and spiritual forms (such as Confucianism and Daoism), until comparatively recently, have been eschewed and denigrated. For instance, during the Cultural Revolution most temples were destroyed and those which remained no longer had a religious identity and served, for instance, as military barracks or warehouses (Adler 2002 p.111).

*Disproportionate*

Within China there has been indifference *vis-à-vis* the ancient and historic and state exuberance for all that is contemporary and innovative: the built environment of Shanghai, Suzhou and Beijing are testimony of this.. Consider, for instance, the wholesale demolition of Beijing's centuries-old Hutongs (courtyard houses) and associated communal forms of living which, today, are increasingly rare even though they have emerged as one of Beijing's most popular heritage tourism attractions (Gu and Ryan, 2008).

*Mercurial*

Curiously, whilst official policy of the Chinese state variously accords importance to the requisites of rapid economic development and unremitting modernisation, recently the Chinese Government has emphasised the importance of China's culture, history and heritage. Thus there is an uneasy alliance between the pursuance of western-inspired modernism, and the exceptionalism of China's traditional culture and civilisation.

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## EDITORIAL BOX 2: CHINA'S TRYSTS WITH ITS IMPERIAL PAST

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Tong Ren Tang's distinctiveness as a corporate heritage brand is in large part due to its close associations with successive Emperors. As such, an understanding of the equivocal links with China's imperial past needs to be discerned.

One significant dimension of China's mercurial relationship with the past is its growing fascination with its imperial past. This was not always the case. For much of the last sixty years China largely distanced itself from its Imperial roots. The situation today is profoundly different. As such, all things imperial and activities imbued with an imperial aura very much reflects the current *Zeitgeist* with China. Today, it would appear that many Chinese wish to reconnect at seemingly any price with their imperial pasts and this is especially true within China's burgeoning middle and upper classes. The renaissance of interest in the Middle Kingdom's royal inheritance is highly significant for TRT owing to its close imperial associations.

Evidence of the above can be seen in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games Ceremony in Beijing (Story 2010 p.195) which had discernible imperial overtones; in the inexorable rise in interest in Chinese antiques having a discernible imperial provenance (Melikan 2012).

Consider, too, the Chinese State's pursuance of "*soft power*." As part of a move by the Chinese State to convey Chinese exceptionalism, recently, major exhibitions focus on and celebrate China's imperial past. This includes an exhibition on Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City (London's Victoria and Albert Museum 2011) and an exhibition having the title "The Emperor's Private Paradise"; (New York's Metropolitan Museum ).

Contemporary Chinese culture also meaningfully engages with China's imperial past. Consider, for instance, the "Fifth Generation" group of directors which celebrated the Middle Kingdom's Imperial history and legacy (Spence 2008. p.224).

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## EDITORIAL BOX 3: Heritage, Corporate Heritage, Corporate Heritage Brands and Corporate Heritage Identities: Insights and Developments

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Arguably, the heritage notion comes from the French word for 'inherit'. However the term has different meanings. For instance, its meaning among Anglophone and Francophone nations, differs (Balmer 2013, Heathcote 2011). More recently and significantly, the heritage concept has acquired a somewhat different-albeit broader-meaning in organisational contexts (Balmer 2011; 2013) especially in relation to what Balmer calls its omni-temporality.

In France and in Francophone nations heritage (what the French often call *patrimoine*) typically relates to peoples and societies whereas, in the Anglophone world, it habitually focuses on legacy landscapes and buildings (Balmer 2013, Cohen 2002). Of course, a broader categorisation of heritage may entail conjoining both of the above perspectives.

Developing this notion (and scrutinising the heritage via an organisational and corporate branding lenses), heritage can be seen as a continuum in terms of perennial acts of bequeathing and receiving across the generations that are perennial in nature (Balmer 2011). As such, a heritage is never truly owned but is, in effect, loaned: consumers of heritage are also, importantly, custodians of heritage (Balmer 2013).

One missing facet of the heritage canon has been its failure to recognise and explicate the heritage notion as it pertains to organisations and, specifically, to corporate identities and corporate brands. This missing dimension of heritage, logically, has given rise to the broad corporate heritage notion.

### **Corporate heritage: The formal introduction of the corporate heritage notion (Balmer, Greyser and Urde 2006)**

Formally introduced by a triumvirate of scholars from England (*Professor John M.T. Balmer*), the US (*Professor Stephen A Greyser*) and Sweden (*Dr Mats Urde*), the first definition of the corporate heritage and corporate heritage brand construct can be found in a seminal study of Monarchies as corporate brands published in *The Journal of Brand Management* (Balmer, Greyser and Urde 2006).

It was in the final section (*Reflections*) of this article where these scholars detailed a number of core precepts which have subsequently informed corporate heritage/corporate heritage brand scholarship.

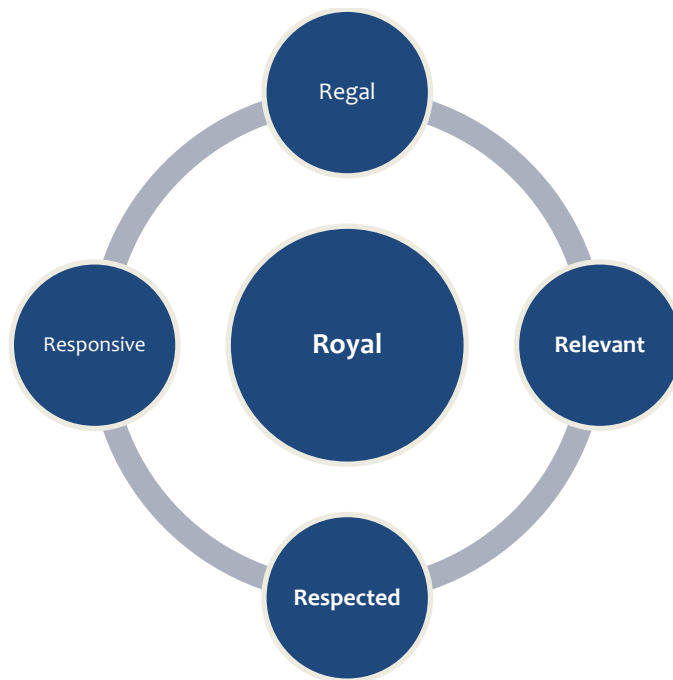


This foundational article on corporate heritage (Balmer et al 2006) advanced a number of perspectives *vis-a-vis* corporate heritage brands:

- Noted the existence of corporate heritage institutions and corporate heritage brands and observed they represented distinct categories;
- Noted that corporate heritage institutions subsisted in multiple temporal strata and were, therefore, of the *past, present and prospective future*
- Noted that corporate heritage institutions were *valuable* since they are *stable points in a changing world*
- Noted that corporate heritage institutions should be *explicitly managed* taking account of the past present and future. In addition, care should be taken not to wear out corporate brand symbols; ensuring corporate heritage brands remain relevant for contemporary customers and other stakeholders and senior managers should be mindful of the fact that corporate heritage institutions-while mindful of continuity-should also sensitively embrace change.

In this article a framework – originally developed by Balmer (2004)- for managing the monarchy as a corporate brand/corporate heritage brand was introduced. This model may have a more general applicability to other corporate heritage brands. Balmer's (2004) monarchical mix framework/the Royal 5Rs model (reproduced in Balmer et al 2006) emphasised the need to focus of five facets. In monarchical terms this was defined as Relevant, Respected, Responsive, Royal, and Regal. In non-monarchical terms this can be defined as Identity, Symbolism Behaviour, Relevant, Respected and Responsive. (Regal equates with symbolism, rituals, regalia and brand behaviour etc).

These five facets can have an instrumental value in focussing the minds of corporate heritage brand managers on some of the key dimensions which characterise corporate heritage brands and the dimensions to be actively managed. The Exhibit below shows the framework in a new diagrammatic form.



Balmer's (2004) Monarchical Mix Framework (The Royal 5 Rs Framework) HALF A PAGE FOR THIS FRAMEWORK

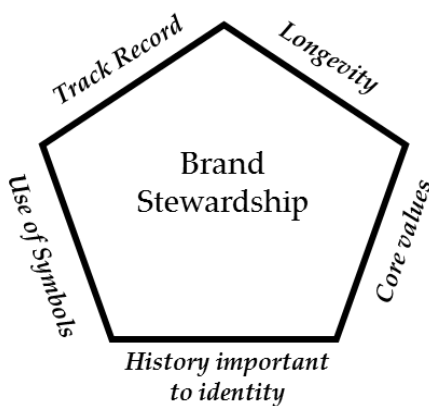
**A further, detailed, explication of the corporate heritage brand notion (Urde, Greyser and Balmer 2007)**

The formal introduction of the corporate brand construct detailed above, kindled further scholarly work on the territory by the same triumvirate and resulted in a more expansive consideration of the corporate heritage notion as it explicitly pertains to corporate heritage brands brand notion (Urde et al 2007). This also appeared in the *Journal of Brand Management (JBM)* article. This *JBM* article is especially noteworthy since Urde et al (2007) advanced scholarship in the territory through:

- Making the distinction between a *corporate heritage brand* and a *corporate brand with a heritage*. The former (corporate brand heritage) relates to institutions that *emphasise their heritage as part of its corporate brand identity* whereas the latter characterises institutions which *do not explicitly manage or draw on their corporate heritage*
- Noting the potential strategic value of corporate heritage brands *vis-à-vis* an organisation's corporate marketing purposes. The point being made that corporate heritage brand *per se* are not necessarily valuable but may be able to accord value

- The introduction of the so-called “heritage quotient”: a five-part framework detailing the dimensions of a corporate heritage brand in terms of track record, longevity, core values, use of symbols and an institutions’ belief that its’ history is important. In part, the framework builds off the authors’ earlier insights detailed in their earlier *JBM* article (Balmer, Greyser and Urde 2006):
  - i. *Track record*: defined as delivering value to customers and non-customer stakeholders over (a long) time.
  - ii. *Longevity*: a key component of corporate heritage although on its own it does not necessarily result in a heritage brand it is one component, among others, that is important
  - iii. *Core values*: these are meaningful and should be held for a period of time and which have guided corporate policies, behaviours and actions and its choices regarding policy and actions.
  - iv. *Use of symbols*: important since these reflect a corporate brand’s past via communications.
  - v. *History important to its identity*: significant since the past helps define the present

See the heritage quotient framework below:



**Urde, Greyser and Balmer (2007)**

### **Exponential growth of the corporate heritage canon**

The above two *JBM* articles have resulted in an exponential growth of interest in corporate heritage among corporate marketing and management scholars including Balmer 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2013; Burghausen and Balmer 2014a; 2014b; 2015; Blombäck and Brunninge, 2009, 2013; Foster et al 2011; Hakala et al 2011; Hudson 2011; Hudson and Balmer 2013; Wiedmann et al , 2011a, 2011b); As a distinct branch of marketing, the nascent corporate heritage domain represents a distinct, albeit nascent, line of corporate marketing scholarship (focussing on

institutions and stakeholders rather than on products/services and customers) within the heritage canon.

As noted by Balmer (2011), corporate heritage has as its focus extant (“living”) heritage organisations and brands. This is a somewhat different interpretation of heritage where heritage equates to spent institutions. Building on earlier reflections on corporate heritage institutions Balmer (2011, 2013) notes that such organisations are special in that they are invested with traits which subsist in temporal strata (what he calls multiple time stratum): traits which are not only in meaningful ways invariant (unchanging) but, importantly, have remained relevant too.

### **Corporate heritage and social identity theory: organisational heritage/organisational heritage identities/organisational heritage identification**

A corporate heritage organisation/corporate heritage brand has or are associated with rare and meaningful identity traits. Such traits imbue heritage organisations with a distinctiveness and attractiveness which are, in individual and collective identity terms, significant and can be marshalled by and have value for customers as well as by organisational members. Such a perspective can be linked to social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1985) and the work (in relation to this theory) of marketing scholars Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) who noted that customers define themselves via their associations with an organisation. From a sociological perspective Macdonald (2006), for instance, observed that heritage is important since it underpins the continuity, persistence and substantiality of collective identities. Such a perspective clearly chimes with the notion that heritage, in corporate marketing contexts, can be meaningful to customer and other stakeholder groups which are linked to or associated with a corporate heritage entity.

The significance of heritage to organisational members of the broad corporate heritage notion opens extant corporate marketing scholarship on the territory to scholars within the organisational behaviour field. As such, the extant concepts of organisational identity, organisational identification can be adapted within a corporate heritage context viz: *organisational heritage/organisational heritage identities and organisational heritage identification*.

### **Corporate heritage and institutional role identity**

It has been argued (Balmer 2013 p.307) that corporate heritage institutions have multiple role identities – what he called institutional role identities (adapting individual role identity theory). As such, corporate heritage traits are manifest in

terms of corporate purposes, activities, competencies, cultures, philosophies, strategies.

At the micro level, the corporate heritage footprint can be found in:

- *design-heritage,*
- *advertising-heritage and communication-heritage,*
- *sensory-heritage,*
- *architectural-heritage and so on*

To reiterate, corporate heritage entities are a tangible manifestation of a 'living' heritage: institutions which are infused with timelessness which, in temporal terms, means that corporate heritage entities are not only manifestly allied to the past and present but the prospective future too (Balmer 2011).

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**EDITORIAL BOX FOUR. BROADER THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS: the saliency of 1 relative invariance; 2 the stability criterion of Larcon and Reitter (1979) and the enduring criterion of Albert and Whetten (1985); 3 augmented role identities 4. augmented role identities and the utility of Albert and Whetten's (1985) notion of hybrid identities and the theory of formal and social organisations and 5 the significance of social identity theory multiple corporate/organisational identifications.**

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*1 The theory of relative invariance.*

This study confirms the theoretical notion of relative invariance (Balmer 2011) which contends that corporate heritage institutions/corporate heritage brands in key regards remain constant and yet change. Thus whilst TRT has changed via growth and has lost a key organisational customer (the Imperial Court) key corporate traits (product and service quality and formulas), its imperial and notional associations remain.

*2 Confirms the stability criterion of Larcon and Reitter (1979) and the enduring criterion of Albert and Whetten (1985)*

By means of context, within the canon, the notion that an institution's actual identity traits (from a corporate identity perspective) or perceived identity traits (from an organisational identity) identity traits are *stable* (Larcon and Reitter 1979) or, as scholars in the USA noted-albeit in an analogous fashion- *enduring* (Albert and Whetten 1985). This study confirms the stability and enduringness of corporate heritage institutions/corporate heritage brands and suggests that whilst the theoretical perspectives of the aforementioned can be challenged in relation to corporate identities they are significantly-but not wholly-germane in the context of corporate heritage institutions/corporate heritage brands (in the context of the relative invariance notion which argues that change and constancy are both necessary).

### 3 *The theory of augmented role identities*

The study showed that TRT not only had a meaningful corporate heritage identity but also two other-highly significant augmented role identities (*Chinese national identity and a Chinese Imperial identity*).

#### 4. *Augmented role identities and Albert and Whetten's (1985) notion of hybrid identities and the theory of formal and social organisations*

Balmer's (2013) theoretical notion of augmented role identities appears to be highly salient *vis-à-vis* Tong Ren Tang (the notion that corporate heritage entities often have powerful and highly meaningful non corporate identities). The theoretical notion of augmented role identities also expands the general understanding of hybrid identity and the theory of formal and social organisations.

Albert and Whetten (1985) famously noted that certain institutions (their chapter focussed on Universities) had Hybrid Identities in terms of having explicit *normative* (economic) and *utilitarian* (social) identities. This study expands this notion by noting that corporate heritage institutions may have *many* meaningful identities (*for instance, economic, utilitarian and national*).

Of course, as *JBM* may recall, within business studies a distinction is sometimes made between the *Formal Organisation* and the *Social Organisation*: the notion of augmented role identities and the research insights also have a bearing on the above.. The former relates to the notion that institutions are created to fulfil a specific business or economic purpose (*in terms of TRT the selling of Chinese medicine*), whereas

the latter accommodates the notion that certain organisations serve as a conduit through which groups can engage in social relations and share commonly-held values (*in terms of Tong Ren Tang this can be seen in terms of its National and Imperial identities*). Notably, therefore TRT has a dual identity as a formal and social identity. As such, in terms of augmented identity theory, TRT has multifarious formal and social organisation purposes.

### 5 Social identity theory and multiple corporate/organisational identification

This study expands social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Ashforth and Mael 1989, and Bhattacharya and Sen 2003 ) as it current applies to consumers and organisational members by showing (from a consumer perspective) that an key institutional stakeholder group (customers) can have multiple identifications with and through an organisation (corporate, national and imperial identifications) **About the Authors:**

**John M.T. Balmer** is commonly regarded as the “Father” of the Corporate Brand construct; the corporate brand orientation concept the Corporate Marketing notion; the Corporate Heritage Identity/Corporate Heritage Marketing and Monarchical Marketing concepts . He co-developed the Corporate Heritage field. Took his PhD at Strathclyde University, Scotland in 1996, and within 3 years was elected Professor of Corporate Identity at Bradford University School of Management. He subsequently was conferred the title of Professor of Corporate Brand/Identity Management in the same University in recognition of his seminal scholarship on both territories. In a similar vein, in 2007, he was appointed Professor of Corporate Marketing at Brunel University, London where he is Director of the Centre for Research in Marketing. All three Professorial positions are understood to be the first appointments of their kind. Since the early 1990s, he has been a leading proponent of the strategic importance of corporate identity, corporate brands, corporate marketing and corporate heritage. He is known for his seminal articles in these areas which have been published in leading journals such as *California Management Review*, *British Journal of Management*, *Journal of Business Research*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Long Range Planning*, *Journal of Marketing Management*, *Journal of General Management*, and *International Studies of Management and Organization*. . Since the early 1990s, he has served as a guest editor/joint guest editor of around 20 special editions of academic journals. He is the founder, chairman, and conference organiser of both the International Corporate Identity Group –ICIG- which was established in 1994 and the International Symposium on Corporate Heritage, History and Nostalgia (established in 2001). ). He is the Chairman of Board of Senior Consultant Editors of the *Journal of Brand Management*.

**Weifeng Chen** is a lecturer at Brunel University Business School London where he specialises in international business/marketing and is a leading member of the school’s Centre for Research in Marketing. He has a particular research interest in China and the management of Chinese brands. Dr Chen is a member of the China-Britain Business Council (CBBC). More broadly, his research focusses on marketing strategies in developing markets. His work has been published in the *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *Regional Studies*, *International Journal of Production Economics*, *Journal of Information System Management*, *Advances in Information Systems Management*, *International Journal of Knowledge Management Studies etc*

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