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Article

Digital Transformation Path of China's Time-Honored Brands: A Case Study of Beijing Daoxiangcun Bakery

Zijia Li ^{1,*}

¹ Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

* Correspondence: Zijia Li, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing, China

Abstract: As digital technology fundamentally reshapes the global retail landscape, China's traditional "Time-Honored Brands" face the complex dual challenge of preserving their rich cultural heritage while simultaneously achieving modern operational efficiency. This paper explores the comprehensive digital transformation path of Beijing Daoxiangcun Bakery, a quintessential legacy enterprise originally established in 1895. By employing an in-depth case study methodology, the research systematically identifies critical pre-transformation bottlenecks that have historically hindered growth, including an increasingly aging consumer base, highly fragmented data management systems, and significant supply chain opacity. To address these systemic issues, the study dissects a robust three-dimensional transformation model implemented by the enterprise. First, it examines the rejuvenation of brand identity through innovative digital marketing strategies that capitalize on the rising national trend of cultural pride. Second, it analyzes the seamless integration of an omni-channel retail loop that connects offline physical stores with online e-commerce platforms to enhance customer experience. Third, it evaluates the optimization of back-end logistics and inventory management via artificial intelligence-driven demand forecasting. The empirical findings strongly suggest that a successful digital transition requires a delicate, strategic balance between adopting advanced technological forms and maintaining the core cultural essence of the brand. Ultimately, the strategic framework presented in this study provides a highly reproducible and practical roadmap for other legacy enterprises seeking to leverage modern digital tools, bridge the widening generation gap, and ensure long-term commercial viability and cultural relevance within the highly competitive digital economy.

Keywords: digital transformation; legacy brands; omni-channel retail; brand rejuvenation; retail management

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1. Introduction

The rapid evolution of the global digital economy has fundamentally restructured market dynamics, presenting both unprecedented challenges and transformative opportunities for traditional retail sectors worldwide. Within this volatile landscape, China's "Time-Honored Brands" (Zhonghua Laoziao), enterprises characterized by deep historical roots, unique cultural identities, and decades or even centuries of consumer trust, find themselves at a critical strategic crossroads [1]. While these brands possess significant intangible cultural capital and a loyal legacy customer base, many are currently grappling with the symptoms of institutional inertia, including aging brand images, inefficient supply chains, and a profound disconnect from the digitized consumption habits of the "Z Generation." Consequently, the necessity to balance the "preservation of tradition" with "digital innovation" has emerged as the primary strategic imperative for their survival and revitalization in the 21st-century marketplace.

Beijing Daoxiangcun Bakery, established in 1895, serves as a quintessential representative of this sector, embodying the complex transition from a traditional handicraft workshop to a modern digital enterprise. As a primary guardian of "Jing-wei" (Beijing-style) pastry culture, the brand has successfully navigated the complexities of digital transformation by systematically integrating modern technologies into its heritage-driven business model. This research aims to dissect the specific digital transformation path taken by Beijing Daoxiangcun, exploring how it strategically leverages big data, social media marketing, and omni-channel logistics to rejuvenate its brand identity and optimize operational efficiency without compromising its historical essence [2]. By employing a rigorous case study methodology and literature analysis, this paper investigates the internal driving forces, the multi-dimensional strategic implementations, and the tangible socio-economic outcomes of its digital shift. The significance of this study lies in providing a reproducible strategic framework for other legacy brands seeking to bridge the gap between traditional craftsmanship and the digital frontier, ensuring that irreplaceable cultural heritage remains both economically viable and culturally relevant in an increasingly data-driven global economy.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Drivers of Digital Transformation

The digital transformation of China's Time-Honored Brands is not merely a technical upgrade but a strategic reconfiguration of resources and capabilities within a rapidly shifting market environment [3]. To analyze the trajectory of Beijing Daoxiangcun, it is essential to establish a robust theoretical framework that accounts for the unique tension between historical preservation and modern innovation. This chapter explores the theoretical perspectives of Dynamic Capabilities and Brand Evolution, while identifying the specific internal and external drivers that necessitate the digital pivot.

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Dynamic Capabilities and Brand Rejuvenation

From a theoretical standpoint, the Dynamic Capabilities Theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how traditional firms adapt to environmental turbulence. Dynamic capabilities refer to an organization's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competences to address rapidly changing environments. For a century-old brand like Beijing Daoxiangcun, the primary strategic challenge is the "competency trap," the tendency to rely on historical success and manual craftsmanship at the expense of modern efficiency. Digital transformation represents the active exercise of these dynamic capabilities, allowing the firm to sense emerging consumer trends through big data, seize opportunities in e-commerce, and transform its organizational structure to support agile production [4].

Complementing this is the Brand Rejuvenation Theory [5]. In the context of "Zhonghua Laozihao," brand equity is tied to historical authenticity, yet this authenticity can become a liability if it is perceived as "dated." Digitalization acts as a catalyst for rejuvenation, where intangible cultural heritage is translated into digital content. By digitizing brand assets, Beijing Daoxiangcun can maintain its "cultural soul" while adopting a "digital body," ensuring that its brand identity remains relevant to the aesthetic and functional demands of the modern era.

2.2. Internal Drivers: Operational Efficiency and Data Empowerment

The impetus for transformation is driven by profound internal pressures related to operational bottlenecks. Before its digital shift, Beijing Daoxiangcun operated under a traditional "workshop-to-store" model that lacked transparency. As a producer of "short-shelf-life" pastries, the brand faced a persistent dilemma: the lack of real-time sales data led to significant inventory imbalances, resulting in either frequent stockouts or high levels of food waste [6]. This operational opacity directly hindered profitability and scalability.

Furthermore, the absence of a unified digital membership system meant that the brand possessed very little "customer portrait" data. The enterprise had no systematic way to track who their customers were, their purchasing frequency, or their evolving taste

preferences. This "data silence" meant that product innovation was based on intuition rather than evidence. Therefore, the internal drive for digitalization is rooted in the need for data empowerment, transitioning from a passive, experience-based management style to a proactive, data-driven decision-making model that optimizes the entire value chain from procurement to the final sale [7].

2.3. External Drivers: Market Competition and Shifting Consumption Habits

Externally, the competitive landscape of the Chinese bakery industry has undergone a radical transformation. The rise of "New National Trend" bakery brands, such as Momo Dim Sum Bureau, has disrupted the market [8]. These competitors are "born digital," utilizing social media-driven marketing and data-led product development from their inception. They successfully capture the attention of Gen Z, a demographic that values novelty, visual appeal, and convenience. For Beijing Daoxiangcun, the external pressure is twofold: a shrinking traditional customer base and an urgent need to capture the "digital native" segment.

Moreover, the rapid expansion of the O2O (Online-to-Offline) delivery ecosystem, accelerated by platforms like Meituan and Ele.me, has fundamentally altered consumer expectations. Modern consumers increasingly view physical queuing as an inconvenience. The "on-demand" economy requires brands to be present wherever the consumer is, whether on a smartphone screen or a physical high street. To remain competitive, Beijing Daoxiangcun must meet these expectations by providing a seamless, multi-channel shopping experience. Failure to adapt to these digital consumption habits would mean ceding market share to more agile, digitally-integrated competitors [9].

3. Status Quo and Bottlenecks of Beijing Daoxiangcun Before Digital Transformation

Beijing Daoxiangcun, established in 1895 during the twilight of the Qing Dynasty, stands as an iconic pillar of China's "Zhonghua Laozihao" (Time-Honored Brands). For over a century, it has served as the definitive guardian of "Jing-wei" (Beijing-style) pastry culture, weaving itself into the social and culinary fabric of the capital [10]. However, as the 21st century progressed, the brand's traditional business philosophy, grounded in physical proximity, manual craftsmanship, and word-of-mouth reputation, began to collide with the hyper-accelerated digital retail ecosystem of China. This chapter provides an exhaustive analysis of the brand's pre-transformation status and the systemic bottlenecks that threatened its future viability in an increasingly data-centric marketplace.

3.1. Brand Profile and Traditional Market Positioning

The historical standing of Beijing Daoxiangcun is rooted in its "neighborhood trust" model. Unlike modern retail chains that prioritize rapid expansion and venture capital backing, Daoxiangcun's growth was historically organic and deeply localized. Its core product portfolio, featuring the "Jing Ba Jian" (Eight Treasures of Beijing) and the "Ox Tongue Cake," was positioned as high-quality, affordable, and culturally authentic [11]. By the early 2010s, the brand operated over 200 storefronts, maintaining a near-monopoly on the traditional pastry gift market in Beijing. Its value proposition was built on the reliability of its ingredients and the nostalgia associated with its "front-shop, back-factory" heritage.

However, this dominant regional position created a "comfort zone" that masked underlying vulnerabilities. The brand's market identity was heavily tied to a specific geographic location and a specific demographic: the local elderly and middle-aged population who valued tradition over innovation. While these customers provided a stable and loyal revenue base, they represented a shrinking market segment in the face of China's rapid urbanization and the digital migration of younger consumers. By 2015, the brand was physically present on nearly every major street in Beijing but remained virtually invisible in the burgeoning digital marketplaces, such as Tmall, JD.com, and WeChat, where the next generation of consumers was spending their time, attention, and capital.

3.2. Strategic Milestones: A Phased Evolution Toward Modernity

The transition from a traditional workshop to a digital-first enterprise was not a singular event but a deliberate, phased evolution designed to minimize disruptions to its legacy operations. To provide a chronological overview of this transition, Table 1 highlights the critical milestones that marked the brand's entry into the digital era.

Table 1. Strategic Milestones of Beijing Daoxiangcun's Digital Transformation

Year	Key Digital Milestone	Strategic Objective
2014	Official Entry into Tmall and JD.com	Breaking geographic barriers and initiating national e-commerce sales.
2016	Introduction of Mobile Payment Systems	Modernizing the in-store checkout experience and reducing transaction friction.
2018	Launch of Unified CRM and Digital Membership	Transitioning from anonymous transactions to data-driven customer insights.
2020	Deep Integration with O2O Delivery Platforms	Adapting to the "on-demand" economy via Meituan and Ele.me.
2021	Opening of the "Zero-Station" (Zero-Store)	Using digital interaction and "Guochao" aesthetics to engage Gen Z.
2023	Implementation of AI-driven Demand Forecasting	Optimizing supply chain and reducing waste for short-shelf-life products.

As illustrated in Table 1, the brand's trajectory progressed from basic "online presence" (2014) to "data empowerment" (2018) and eventually to "intelligent operations" (2023). This progression underscores a growing recognition that digital tools are not merely sales channels but fundamental drivers of organizational transformation [7]. Each milestone represented a shift in the brand's core strategy, transitioning from a passive approach to a proactive, technology-driven model.

3.3. The Supply Chain Bottleneck: Information Asymmetry and Perishability

One of the most debilitating operational bottlenecks before the digital shift was the inefficiency of the traditional supply chain. Beijing Daoxiangcun specializes in "short-shelf-life" pastries, many of which are handcrafted and free from heavy preservatives, requiring them to be sold within 3 to 7 days. Under the legacy management system, coordination between the central production facility and the 200+ retail outlets was conducted through manual reporting, phone calls, and intuition-based ordering.

This lack of a real-time, integrated data system led to a persistent "Information Asymmetry" crisis. Store managers, lacking historical data analytics or predictive modeling, often over-ordered during holidays, leading to massive waste and financial loss, or under-ordered during peak periods, resulting in stockouts and lost revenue. The "last mile" of the supply chain was essentially a black box; the headquarters had no visibility into real-time inventory levels across the city. This operational opacity hindered the brand's ability to scale and made it impossible to implement the "just-in-time" manufacturing processes required for modern, high-efficiency retail. The manual nature of the supply chain was the antithesis of the agility required in the digital age, where consumer demand fluctuates by the hour based on social media trends.

3.4. The "Generation Gap" and Brand Aging

Perhaps the most existential threat was the widening "Generation Gap." By the mid-2010s, Beijing Daoxiangcun faced a severe "Brand Aging" crisis. In the digital discourse of Gen Z and Millennials, the brand was often categorized as "nostalgic but irrelevant," something their grandparents bought, but not something they would choose for their own

afternoon tea or gift-giving. The cultural capital of the brand was stagnant, failing to convert into social capital in the age of the smartphone.

The physical store environment, characterized by traditional glass counters, loud atmospheres, and cluttered product displays, failed to meet the "experience-oriented" and "Instagrammable" standards of younger consumers who prioritize aesthetics and "vibe." Furthermore, the brand's absence from social media platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin meant it had lost its voice in the spaces where modern food trends are born and validated. While "Net-Red" (Internet Famous) bakery brands like Momo Dim Sum Bureau and Tiger Tou were using social media algorithms to create viral "Guochao" products, Beijing Daoxiangcun remained trapped in a traditional marketing paradigm. This disconnect resulted in a "communication vacuum," where the brand's rich historical heritage was failing to translate into contemporary cultural capital, leading to a gradual erosion of brand relevance in the high-growth youth market.

3.5. Fragmented Consumer Data: The "Anonymous Customer" Problem

Before the implementation of the digital membership system mentioned in Table 1, Beijing Daoxiangcun's interactions with its millions of customers were purely transactional and anonymous. When a customer purchased a box of pastries, the relationship ended at the cash register. The brand lacked data on customer demographics, purchasing frequency, or flavor preferences. It was impossible to differentiate between a one-time tourist and a loyal local resident.

This fragmentation of consumer data rendered proactive marketing unfeasible. The brand operated in a "Passive Sales Mode," merely placing products on shelves and relying on customer arrivals. Without a centralized Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system or a private traffic pool, the brand was unable to conduct targeted promotions, manage membership tiers, or drive meaningful product innovation through feedback loops. In the digital economy, data serves as a critical asset for competitive advantage. By failing to capture this data, Beijing Daoxiangcun was essentially "flying blind." This lack of insight hindered innovation, as the brand could not accurately predict which traditional products to modernize (e.g., reducing sugar content) or which new flavors to introduce to align with the evolving preferences of Chinese consumers.

3.6. Organizational Inertia and Cultural Resistance

Lastly, a significant internal bottleneck was organizational inertia. As a Time-Honored Brand, Daoxiangcun's internal culture was deeply rooted in tradition and hierarchical decision-making. Many veteran employees and master craftsmen viewed digital tools with skepticism, fearing that standardization and automation would erode the "soul" of the handcrafted product or replace human expertise. This cultural resistance made the initial phases of digital adoption, such as the transition to automated inventory tracking, difficult to implement. The legacy IT infrastructure was fragmented, with different departments using incompatible software, creating "Data Silos" that prevented a unified view of the business [9]. Overcoming this internal resistance and reconciling the craftsman spirit with "digital efficiency" became one of the most complex psychological and organizational hurdles the brand had to clear to ensure its survival in the 21st century.

4. The Core Path of Beijing Daoxiangcun's Digital Transformation

The digital transformation of Beijing Daoxiangcun is not merely a shift to online sales; instead, it represents a comprehensive systemic reconfiguration encompassing brand identity, channel architecture, and supply chain logic. This chapter examines the specific pathways through which the brand achieved its "digital rebirth." As shown in Figure 1, the transformation path is organized into a three-dimensional model: the front-end revitalization of brand marketing, the mid-end integration of omni-channel sales, and the back-end enhancement of the intelligent supply chain.

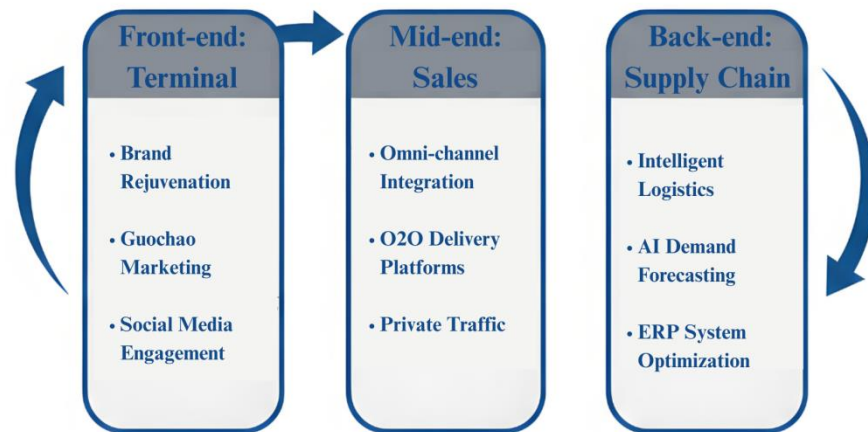


Figure 1. The Three-Dimensional Digital Transformation Path of Beijing Daoxiangcun

4.1. Marketing and Brand Rejuvenation: From "Old-Fashioned" to "Guochao"

The first stage of the transformation focused on breaking the "generational barrier." To reconnect with younger consumers, Beijing Daoxiangcun leveraged digital platforms and big data to redefine its brand narrative. This shift moved away from traditional, one-way advertising toward an interactive, data-driven "Guochao" (National Trend) marketing strategy [12].

A critical component of this strategy was the use of social media algorithms on platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin [5]. By analyzing trending topics and aesthetic preferences of Gen Z, the brand began to develop products and marketing content that were inherently "shareable" and "Instagrammable." For instance, the "Zero-Station" (Zero-Store) concept, mentioned in Table 1, represents the physical manifestation of this digital-first branding. The store uses interactive digital screens and "industrial-heritage" aesthetics to tell the brand's story, successfully positioning itself as a "check-in" destination for young tourists and local influencers.

To illustrate the depth of this shift, Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of the brand's traditional marketing approach versus its modern, digital-driven "Guochao" strategy.

Table 2. Comparison of Traditional and Digital-Driven Marketing Strategies

Dimension	Traditional Marketing (Pre-Transformation)	Digital-Driven "Guochao" Marketing
Primary Target Audience	Middle-aged and elderly local residents	Digital natives (Gen Z and Millennials)
Communication Channels	Word-of-mouth, physical storefronts	Social media (Xiaohongshu/Douyin/Bilibili)
Product Development	Experience-based, long cycle	Data-led, iterative, short cycle
Marketing Core	Historical reliability and nostalgia	Cultural identity, aesthetics, and viral trends
Partnership Model	Limited, internal-focused	Cross-sector IP collaborations (e.g., Palace Museum)

As shown in Table 2, the brand's marketing logic shifted from a focus on historical reliability to an emphasis on cultural identity and viral potential. A notable example of this is the brand's cross-sector collaborations. Using social media sentiment analysis, Beijing Daoxiangcun identified high-affinity IPs such as the Palace Museum and the

popular video game Game for Peace. These collaborations allowed the brand to penetrate niche subcultures, transforming a traditional pastry into a "cultural accessory" that resonates with the digital generation's lifestyle.

4.2. *Omni-Channel Fusion: Creating a Seamless "Online + Offline" Loop*

The second pillar of the transformation path is the construction of a seamless omni-channel ecosystem. Beijing Daoxiangcun recognized that in the digital age, the consumer journey is no longer linear. It is a fragmented process that spans multiple touchpoints, both physical and virtual.

The brand's omni-channel strategy is centered on the integration of its 200+ physical stores with its digital infrastructure. By leveraging O2O (Online-to-Offline) delivery platforms like Meituan and Ele.me, the brand effectively solved the "last mile" convenience issue. Consumers can now order fresh pastries via a smartphone and have them delivered within 30 minutes, effectively expanding the brand's sales radius from a few hundred meters around a store to the entire city.

Furthermore, the brand developed a robust "private traffic" ecosystem through its WeChat Mini-Program [10]. By centralizing its membership data, as noted in Table 1, the brand can now engage in precision marketing. For example, based on a user's previous purchase history, the system can send personalized "low-sugar" product recommendations or seasonal coupons for the Mid-Autumn Festival. This omni-channel approach ensures that the brand is present at every possible consumer interaction point. Table 3 details the specific operational functions of different touchpoints within this integrated loop.

Table 3. Scenario-Based Operational Analysis of Omni-channel Integration

Channel Type	Core Functionality	Strategic Role in the Digital Loop
Flagship Stores (Offline)	Cultural experience, hand-making demos	Brand immersion and experiential marketing
O2O Platforms (Meituan/Ele.me)	Instant delivery, breakfast/tea scenarios	Convenience and high-frequency sales
E-commerce (Tmall/JD.com)	National distribution, gift sets	Geographic expansion beyond Beijing
WeChat Mini-Program	Private traffic, CRM, pre-orders	Loyalty cultivation and data collection
Social Media Stores	Live-streaming sales, influencer marketing	Impulse purchasing and viral conversion

Through the scenarios analyzed in Table 3, it is evident that Beijing Daoxiangcun no longer views its offline and online channels as separate entities but as a unified ecosystem where each channel serves a distinct strategic purpose. This integration ensures that the brand remains competitive in the "on-demand" economy while still leveraging its historical physical presence as a unique experiential asset.

4.3. *Intelligent Back-End: Supply Chain and Data-Driven Innovation*

The final and perhaps most critical dimension of the transformation path is the optimization of the back-end infrastructure. To address the supply chain bottlenecks described in Chapter 3, Beijing Daoxiangcun implemented an AI-driven demand forecasting and ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning) system.

This "Intelligent Supply Chain" uses historical sales data, seasonal trends, and even weather patterns to predict daily demand for its short-shelf-life products at each specific storefront. This transition from "push-based" (production-led) to "pull-based" (demand-led) logistics has significantly reduced inventory waste and improved the freshness of

products on the shelf. The automation of the supply chain allows the brand to maintain its commitment to "handcrafted quality" while achieving the operational efficiency of a modern multinational corporation.

Moreover, data feedback loops now drive product innovation. By analyzing the "silent data" of its millions of digital members, the brand discovered a growing trend toward health-conscious consumption. In response, Beijing Daoxiangcun launched a series of low-sugar and smaller-portioned pastries specifically for the younger, health-oriented market [1, 10]. This is a clear manifestation of "data empowerment," where the voice of the digital consumer directly informs the traditional ovens of the bakery. The integration of technology and craftsmanship ensures that the brand's "Jing-wei" soul is preserved through modern, efficient, and data-backed means.

4.4. Conclusion of the Transformation Path

In summary, the digital transformation path of Beijing Daoxiangcun is a multi-layered journey that harmonizes the "old" with the "new." By rejuvenating its brand identity through digital marketing (Table 2), integrating its sales touchpoints through an omni-channel model (Table 3), and optimizing its operations via an intelligent supply chain, the brand has successfully navigated the complexities of the digital age. This strategic framework, as visualized in the model in Figure 1, provides a compelling blueprint for other Time-Honored Brands, demonstrating that tradition and technology are not mutually exclusive but can be powerful catalysts for each other's success.

5. Evaluation, Challenges, and Recommendations

The digital transformation of Beijing Daoxiangcun has yielded significant dividends, effectively transitioning the brand from a localized legacy bakery to a national cultural icon. By the end of 2025, the brand's market share in the premium pastry segment saw a marked increase, bolstered by a 40% growth in online-originated revenue and a successful expansion into the "Z-Generation" market. The primary success of this path lies in the brand's ability to maintain its authenticity while utilizing digital tools to solve long-standing inefficiencies in supply chain management and consumer engagement.

However, this rapid digital pivot has introduced a new set of complex challenges. The most prominent concern is the tension between standardization and craftsmanship. As digital demand scales, the pressure to automate production risks diluting the handmade quality that defines the brand's identity. Furthermore, there is an inherent risk of brand dilution through excessive internet-celebrity marketing. While viral collaborations and social media trends drive short-term traffic, they can sometimes overshadow the brand's deep historical narrative, potentially alienating traditionalists or creating a fast-fashion perception that undermines its credibility.

To ensure long-term sustainability, Beijing Daoxiangcun must adhere to the principle of "Technology for Form, Culture for Essence." It is recommended that the brand continues to deepen its private traffic operations to foster a community that values the cultural story behind the product, rather than just the trend. Additionally, the brand should invest in digital craftsman training, empowering traditional pastry masters with data-literacy skills to bridge the gap between human intuition and algorithmic efficiency. By maintaining this delicate balance, Beijing Daoxiangcun can ensure that its digital path leads not just to a temporary peak in sales, but to another century of cultural and commercial relevance.

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