



# Media Narratives and the Conceptualization of Tea: A Case Study of Teavana's Oprah Chai Tea

Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen, Giulia Evolvi

University of Colorado, Boulder, USA

Nicolene Durham

National Renewable Energy Laboratory, Golden, Colorado, USA

More than just a drink, tea embodies social, cultural, economic and political meanings through time and across cultures. There is an essential tie between media and this meaning-making process. Media often create and carry the visions of health, nature, tranquility, and prosperity offered by tea. This mediated imaginary seems to persist even in the face of vast human inequalities and suffering and irreversible negative environmental impacts through the current practice of tea production under global conglomerates. Through textual analysis of media narratives of Teavana, a well-known tea brand, this project explores how media's mythic narratives potentially naturalize and celebrate the current production practice and the conspicuous consumption of tea, and silence the human suffering and environmental destruction endured, in order to gratify the very practice and consumption promoted by media.

*Keywords:* Tea, media narratives, Teavana, Oprah, metabolic rift, treadmill of production theory, tea laborers

## Introduction

Next only to water, tea is the world's second most consumed beverage. However, more than just a drink, tea also embodies social, cultural, economic and political meanings through time and across cultures. There is an essential tie between media and this meaning-making process. It is the media that often create and carry the visions of health, nature, tranquility, and prosperity offered by tea; in the media, tea is often considered as a "green", environmental friendly beverage. Through news stories, movies, television shows, blogs, new media, and especially advertising (Ramamurthy, 2012), the media help provide a universal imaginary of tea: a beautified, sanitized and idealized vision of the world attributed to tea. Media's creation and recreation of this imaginary persists even in the face of vast human inequalities and suffering (such as labor and health issues of tea workers) and irreversible negative environmental impacts (such as soil erosion, water contamination, and air pollution) through the current practice of tea production under global conglomerates.

In this research project, we did not intend to argue against the established health benefits, nor to discourage the consumption of tea. Our goal was to analyze the infinite intersections of media and the conceptualization and consumption of tea. We explored how media's mythic narratives potentially naturalize and celebrate the current production practice and the conspicuous consumption of tea and silence the human

---

Shu-Ling Chen Berggreen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, College of Media, Communication and Information, University of Colorado.

Giulia Evolvi, Ph.D. Candidate, College of Media, Communication and Information, University of Colorado.

Nicolene Durham, Project Manager, Communications and Public Affairs, National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

suffering and environmental destruction endured in order to gratify the very practice and consumption promoted by media. In particular, we textual-analyzed one well-known brand name's media narrative, Teavana, and its involvement with the television celebrity Oprah Winfrey. Before discussing this specific case, a brief history of tea in the U.S. will be reviewed first.

## **Tea in the U.S.**

### **The World's Very First Cup**

More than a handful of stories exist in popular discourse about how tea was first discovered. The story of Sheng Nong, a Chinese emperor who was also known as the father of Chinese agriculture, probably is the most often cited among them. Legend has it that in 2737 B.C. a gust of wind blew tea leaves from a nearby wild bush into a pot of water Sheng Nong was boiling. Thus the very first cup of tea in the world was brewed and drunk. While there is no written record of this first cup, tea containers were discovered in tombs dating back as early as circa 200 B.C. in China. The first known reference to tea in Chinese literature appeared in 222 A.D., which recommended tea as a substitute for wine, though it made no reference to Sheng Nong. Regardless of whether the legend of Sheng Nong and the world's first cup of tea is myth or truth, it has been established that the tea we have come to know and consume today likely originated from the tea plant in the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan. In time, much of the rest of the world developed a taste for this beverage (Berggreen, 2014; Richardson & Altman, 2014).

### **Brewing With Voluminous Meanings in the Land of the Free**

In 1610, the Dutch traders were the first Europeans to import tea from China and in 1650, Peter Stuyvesant, a Dutch trader, introduced tea to the settlers in America through the Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam, which was later renamed New York by the British who acquired the region. Subsequently, the British passed on many of its tea drinking customs. By 1720, tea was a generally accepted staple of trade between the colony and England, with Boston, New York, and Philadelphia as the centers of tea trade. Tea was so popular in the colony during that period that for quite some time the city of New York consumed more tea than the entire United Kingdom (Dolin, 2012).

This popularity of tea, however, did not last long. As the United Kingdom began to impose tea taxes for both financial and political reasons, some Americans protested by stopping drinking tea. Tea became a political symbol and the conflicts it represented ultimately led to American Revolution. After the independence, tea gradually returned to dining room and expanded to social scenes. Beginning in the late 1880s, fine hotels started establishing tearooms or tea courts for tea services, a practice originating from Victoria England where ladies gathered for conversations over tea. When pursued in the U.S., it became a sign of elegance in cities like New York and Boston. Tea now became an indicator of social status and cultural taste. These feminine, refined and elite meanings of tea would soon be a crucial force in women's suffrage movement.

Meanwhile, by 1910, hotels around the country began to host "tea dances", social occasions where young women were permitted to participate unaccompanied in activities outside their domestic sphere. These tea dances offered possibilities of meeting suitors. Though still bound in traditional roles, unmarried young women now could actually enjoy themselves in public, a scene mostly reserved for men until this point.

Tea also provided American women another path to liberation in the early 20th century. Tea was credited as a powerful tool that aided the success of the California woman suffrage campaign. Historians describe this

1911 campaign as the turning point for the national women's movement. In order to counter two firmly stereotyped ideas about suffragists, masculine ("no longer like a woman") and improper/aggressive/revolutionary, California suffragists used tea to construct an image of domestic, feminine, refined, and proper for themselves. They harnessed the feminine and elite meanings of tea to their cause. For example, the Oakland Suffrage Amendment League and the Club Women's Suffrage League served "Equality Tea" in their meetings. Other leagues regularly served "pink teas" and invited anti-suffragists for a polite and engaging conversation. Obviously, tea was used here to signify and emphasize the femininity and propriety of suffragists. These suffragists' love and usage of tea was often reported in the news media, further solidify the images they sought to create. With tea thoroughly integrated into their political messages, California suffragists made further and multiple use of it. They applied it in both domestic and commercial settings. They served tea in their parlors in the interest of the cause. They sold tea in tearooms they themselves managed and in department stores and other commercial venues and used the profits for the cause. California suffragists purposely and consciously employed particular meanings of tea at the time—domesticity, femininity, propriety, refinement, whiteness, and perhaps modernity—to obtain power and rights beyond their domestic sphere: women's rights to vote. Once California women won the vote, many other states' suffragists immediately copied the California model. Victories in many states that followed finally led to the passage of federal amendment in 1920 (Sewell, 2008).

The year 1920 also witnessed another turning point in women and tea. The prohibition created a demand for tearooms. Some women with social status and financial means saw this as an opportunity to further their ongoing quest for independence. As a result, many of the tearooms were owned and operated by elite and middle-class women who were previously housebound. Tearoom entrepreneurship not only offered a great opportunity for many women to enter into the business world, but also established women as a new class of consumers. It signified the beginning of a social understanding (and marketing realization) that saw women as important consumers who now had their own money to spend. This realization also indirectly acknowledged the fact that women had a mind of their own and could make their own decisions. Furthermore, perhaps shocking at the time, as consumers, women's preferences were both highly defined and often quite different from men's (Whitaker, 2015). From this perspective, tearoom boom in the U.S. actually helped launch the market segmentation strategies, which are still highly practiced in advertising industry today. Clearly, tea has always had a gender dimension in its historical development. This dimension continues to be prominent even as of today. However, the stories of its role in women's liberation in social and business scenes stand in sharp contrast to the working conditions of female tea pickers, which will be discussed later in the paper.

### **An American Invention and The Reemergence of Tea**

The early 20th century also witnessed the U.S. play an unexpected watershed moment in the developmental history of tea. In fact, it occurred almost as serendipitously as did the world's first cup of tea. Richard Blechynden, a U.S. tea merchant, planned to give away free samples of his tea products in the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, MO. However, a heat wave came upon the mid-West and, understandably, no one wanted to drink the free hot tea Blechynden was offering. Out of frustration and out of his wit (or perhaps at the height of his wit), he decided to dump ice in the tea to tempt consumers to sample his tea, thus born "Iced Tea". This important innovation didn't immediately boost the appeal of tea in the country. It would take more than half a century for tea to become truly popular in the United States. Coffee as a competitor in the beverage

market was an obvious reason, but politics, economy and consumption trends were also important factors.

The popularity of tea in America began to blossom when the United States lifted its trade embargo with China in 1972. Then in 1979, China enacted its Reform & Opening Up policies. As a result, the U.S. became the new and most promising export market of Chinese tea producers. Up until this point, the U.S. tea market was supplied largely by a limited number of Taiwanese tea manufactures. On top of this now abundant availability of tea was the rising health and wellness trend in the U.S. consumer markets in the 1990s. Since tea has always been perceived as part of a healthy lifestyle and more beneficial than coffee, the demand for tea was surging while tea import from China has already begun inundating the American marketplace.

Consequently, the U.S. tea industry exploded from a total wholesale value of \$1.8 billion in 1990 to \$2.5 billion in 2007, \$7.8 billion in 2010, and to \$10.84 billion in 2014. Similarly, the number of specialty tea stores across the U.S. has grown 10 folds (from some 200 to more than 2,000 stores) in the same time period. Data from the Tea Association of the U.S. reveal that in 2014, the U.S. imported 285 million pounds of tea, and consumed 80 billion servings of tea (or more than 3.6 billion gallons). *Datamonitor* reports that, “Tea’s star is rising partly because of coffee fatigue, party because of the rise of ethnic cuisine including Asian-inspired foods, but also because of the impressive array of tea beverages that are available” (The Tea Association of the US; *Datamonitor*, 2014).

It is under this atmosphere of rising popularity of tea that Teavana emerged, flourished and then was acquired by the coffee giant, Starbucks.

### **A Marriage at the Tea Garden: Starbucks, Teavana and Oprah**

Teavana is an American premium tea company that presents itself visibly through colorful stores to mall shoppers all over the country since 1999. Teavana’s goal is to be a “heaven of tea”, where people can consume, buy, and experience tea, as explained in its website ([www.teavana.com](http://www.teavana.com)). Teavana stores are classy and conceived to have people engaging in the experience of tea. For example, loose-leaf tea boxes are made available for customers to smell the fragrance, and tea samples are readily available for anyone who wishes to try them. To enhance the tea experience, shops sell a variety of tea-related tools—such as teapots or mugs—often of Asian design. While Teavana is an American brand, it stresses the Japanese and Chinese origins of its teas and its symbol is a Buddha-like figure in the Lotus pose, with a cup of tea.

Even before Starbucks’ purchase of it in November, 2012, Teavana has been a somewhat well-recognized tea company. Teavana also positions itself as exclusive and different from most well known household tea brands, which are on stock in supermarkets. Until its appearance in Starbucks after the 2012 merger, Teavana tea was only available through its own stores and website. Furthermore, Teavana emphasizes the healthiness of tea and promotes the sense of harmony and balance connected with it. By selling high-quality tea products, Teavana capitalizes on the rising health and wellness trend in consumer markets. Teavana’s tagline is, indeed, “Opening the doors to Health, Wisdom and Happiness”.

This status of uniqueness, health and harmony seemed to be a desirable characteristic when it comes to mergers and acquisitions. Of all the available tea companies Starbucks could easily devour, Teavana was the chosen one. On November 14, 2012, Starbucks announced its US\$620 million acquisition of Teavana. In its press release, Starbucks reiterated its commitment to transform the tea industry while enhancing the customer’s tea experience just like what it did with the coffee industry through its espresso and coffee products.

Being the second most consumed beverage in the world, the tea industry is a US\$90 billion dollar market.

As Starbucks' expansion of domestic coffee shops in the U.S. began to slow down, it was only logical that Starbucks would try to increase its business reach through tea by procuring Teavana; tea consumption in the U.S. is constantly rising, more than the coffee consumption (*Datamonitor*, 2008). Furthermore, Starbucks could appeal to customers concerned with health and wellness, substantially differentiating its offer. Starbucks now could refocus its business strategy on opening teahouses supplied by Teavana. Already established in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, one of the company's new foci is to build teahouses in China in order to establish it as their second largest market outside the US. However, this wasn't Starbucks' first attempt to carve out its niche in the tea market. In 1999, Starbucks obtained Tazo tea for over \$8.1 million. In addition to the obvious monetary difference (US\$8.1 million vs. US\$620 million), there is a great distinction between these two deals: Oprah was not involved in the Tazo production and marketing.

Two years after the Starbucks/Teavana merger in 2012, Oprah Winfrey started collaborating with Teavana to produce her own tea. "Everybody can do perfume, but who can do chai?" she says enthusiastically in the video<sup>1</sup> that announces her creation. Oprah declares that she wanted to create a tea brand because she greatly appreciates Teavana's products. The promotional video of the tea-making process of Oprah's Teavana tea, where Oprah chooses and mixes various ingredients, suggests that the tea is made with fresh fruits and spices with the ultimate rewards: "Oprah Chai Tea" and "Oprah Chai Herbal Blend".

We chose Teavana as a case study for this project because of its high volume of media exposure and the variety of media narratives that, thanks to Oprah, the brand is involved in. The media accounts of Teavana make the brand a great example of how mediated tea narrative can play a central role in creating images that are disconnected and indifferent to the reality of tea production.

### **Steep Your Soul in Oprah Chai**

"Oprah Chai Tea" and "Oprah Chai Herbal Blend" are conceived to be appreciated and enjoyed beyond their tastes. For Oprah, the collaboration with Teavana becomes a way to pursue her work of charity and philanthropy and to connect with the personal lives of the people she interviews. Teavana is the sponsor of Oprah's *Steep Your Soul* series, which are part of the *Super Soul Sunday* program, a 45-minute show, on OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) debuted on October 16, 2011. *Steep Your Soul* was first introduced and integrated into the show in spring 2014. On average, each *Steep Your Soul* video is about 4-minute long. It always follows the same pattern: Oprah sits with a guest, usually in a natural outdoor environment, and interviews him or her for a few minutes. Among the guests, Oprah has invited former president Carter, spiritual leaders and authors such as Sister Joan Chittister, writers such as Elizabeth Gilbert, artists such as Alanis Morissette, innovators such as Arianna Huffington, and columnists such as David Brooks. In some cases, the actual interview is preceded by a brief introduction of the guest. Through her questions, Oprah has her guests talk about what makes them feel good. Each video starts with the standard opening of the image of a teapot and a teacup, and between Oprah and the guest there are always two cups of tea. While sometimes tea is neither mentioned nor drunk, the visual presence of the *Super Soul Sunday* tea mugs makes tea a fundamental element of these inspiring guests' narratives. Oprah uses tea-related metaphors, such as the "steeping of the soul" idea, and emphasizes morning rituals, making the consumption of tea an implicit but important part of the interviews. Since Starbucks owns Teavana, the connection with coffee is explored, as well. However, we would submit that

---

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <https://news.starbucks.com/2014annualmeeting/teavana-oprah-chai-tea-announcement>.

Oprah chose to associate with tea, instead of coffee, within the brand because of the perception of tea as being healthier and closer to relaxation and spirituality. In fact, in an interview with *The Huffington Post*, Oprah discussed her own personal morning tea-brewing ritual, which includes making a cup of Teavana Oprah Chai. She exclaimed that “but it isn’t just about steeping tea. It’s also about “steeping your soul” and taking time to pause and reflect on the day ahead” (“How Oprah Prepares”, 2014). Following this logic, tea is, therefore, more effective in describing the work and life philosophy of Oprah and her guests.

In order to fully understand how Oprah and Teavana use tea symbolically and literally in their media narratives, we textual analyzed all 78 Oprah’s *Steep Your Soul* videos available up to this point, which includes more than one year of collection, from March, 2014 to December, 2015. In addition to airing them every Sunday since 2014, these videos have been visibly displayed and easily accessible from Oprah’s website<sup>2</sup> and through the Teavana website as well. Three prominent themes emerged from our analysis.

### **A Cup-Full of Charity**

First, tea is connected with charity. In the video<sup>3</sup> where she presents her Chai Tea, Oprah explains that it is a “tea infused with the spirit of giving”. Oprah, in the interview with Starbucks’s CEO Howard Schultz, says that she usually does not associate herself with companies. However, she chose to do so with Starbucks because it “is not just a coffee company, it is more than a coffee company, it is about nurturing the human spirit, and that really is what my goal in life has been”. She also stresses the power of education and says, “philanthropy and giving back is a part of my life, education is one of the forces that helped me be who I am in the world, through my life I try to help other organizations who do the same”. The commercial aim of Teavana and Starbucks is removed from the conversation since the company is presented almost as a charity, aimed at improving the world rather than profit. The production of the Teavana Oprah Chai Tea becomes, therefore, a charity work that helps disadvantaged youth through educational projects in the U.S. and in South Africa. The gender dimension is central here: Oprah’s charity focuses on underprivileged young girls and aims at women’s empowerment.

This connection between tea and charity is further reinforced in two ways. On the one hand, Teavana donates a portion of the Oprah Chai Tea’s proceeds to charity. Tea-drinking is, therefore, more than consumption of a beverage. It is an act that can help others. It signifies tea-drinkers as kind and altruistic consumers. On the other hand, the *Steep Your Soul* guests are people that Oprah invites because, in their various fields, they are able to inspire and help others. Connections between tea and these luminaries and achievers connote tea-drinking as an activity for people who are able to improve the world.

### **A Pot-Full of Wholeness**

Second, tea is connected with physical and mental health. Teavana stresses the quality of its products and promotes the health benefits of tea. For example, its website declares that “The delicious tastes and health benefits make tea a wonderful beverage—much better than the unhealthy alternatives”. The link between health and tea is widely explored in the *Steep Your Soul* series, where tea is considered a way to relax and improve one’s inner balance. For example, when Oprah asks “how do you steep your soul?”, a standard question she surveys every single guest, her guests often describe practices of relaxation. The majority of the guests talk about their relationship with nature. For instance, book author Sue Monk Kidd explains her soul steeping

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/app/steep-your-soul.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*.

process by saying, “I can sit for a long time on the beach and just stare at the waves”<sup>4</sup>. In some cases there are explicit references to tea. For instance, Nobel Prize winner Malala Yousafzai says that she steeps her soul by “drinking tea in the morning”<sup>5</sup>.

Even when tea is not mentioned, the presence of tea in the quiet and relaxing environment where Oprah interviews her guests implicitly connects tea with physical and mental health. The visual idea of “steeping” becomes, therefore, a way to improve one’s body and inner life, following the Latin idea of “menssana in corporesano”<sup>6</sup>.

### **A Drink of Rite and Sacrament**

Third, tea is connected with ritual. Teavana sells “Oprah Chai Tea Ritual” kits (US\$89.95) that allow consumers to enjoy their tea as Oprah does. In a video<sup>7</sup>, Oprah explains her morning ritual of preparation of the Chai Tea, stating how she “likes everything about it”. The concept of ritual is described as a moment that makes people start the day more meaningfully and with positive thinking. Oprah starts her *Steep Your Soul* interviews with the question “Do you have a morning ritual?”. Answers often involve spiritual or religious practices. Musician Russels Simmons, for examples, explains that he wakes up, lights a candle and meditates for twenty minutes; then, he spends twenty minutes with his children and brings them to school<sup>8</sup>. Former NBA player Jay Williams says he goes to church and prays for everybody but himself in order to show altruism and care.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, the morning ritual is around the practice of drinking or eating, but it is always connoted as a meaningful activity. For example, screenwriter Tracey Jackson describes her coffee-drinking habit as a “spiritual moment”.<sup>10</sup> Tea is for Oprah part of a ritual that helps people through their everyday routines and connects them to their inner selves and a higher power or, more generically, makes them more spiritual. The ritual function tea traditionally has in Eastern societies is here re-visited and re-appropriated in a Western perspective. Tea-drinking is implicitly compared to Eastern practices, such as yoga or meditation, that are imported in the West with new and different meanings.

Through our observations, it was palpable that the Oprah Chai Tea is more than a drink. It represents the merging of marketing strategies, celebrity culture and charity work; media images are used to create meanings around tea consumption. Oprah Chai Tea is a central element of Oprah’s television show *Steep Your Soul*, where tea is connected to charity, to physical and mental health, and to quasi-religious rituals. However, the results of our textual analysis indicate that one important aspect of tea was never addressed in the Oprah Chai Tea narrative. The process of tea production and its subsequent social and environmental impacts remain largely unexplored. There is, therefore, a contradiction between the emphasis on the virtues of tea and the lack of awareness of the impacts caused by its production.

### **The Process and Impacts of Tea Production**

While there is a plethora of talks about good tea practices and the social and health benefits of tea, *Steep Your Soul* makes no references to the environmental impacts of tea cultivation, pesticide use on the farms, or

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSYD0\\_Er4qY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSYD0_Er4qY).

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.oprah.com/steepyoursoul/Malala-Yousafzais-Greatest-Source-of-Inspiration>.

<sup>6</sup> “healthy mind in a healthy body”.

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AQD0NduvKY>.

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHEq7LMZeBA>.

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8YR7uD-qqA>.

<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvkSArx8KMo>.

problems with inequality and the treatment of female tea pickers.

### **The Environment**

According to a 2002 report, tea farming today places severe impacts on our environment (School of Environment, p. 43). Instead of being situated in its original and natural environment from a few thousand years ago in China, India and later other parts of Asia, tea farms are established across the globe. Therefore, forest cover must be cleared in order to cultivate tea, leading to other environmental impacts, such as soil erosion and aquatic systems contamination. Air pollution from fuel combustion, solid waste generation, and energy consumption are other known negative environmental effects. Most commonly, when monoculture farms are created for tea cultivation, natural predation systems are altered, allowing more insects to flourish. The result of monoculture farms is the high use of pesticides in order to manage insects (Berggreen, 2014). This phenomenon counters the perception of tea promoted in *Steep Your Soul*, a cup full of pure, natural goodness from the mother earth. This positive and beneficial perception encourages further tea consumption, which in turn deepens the rift between consumption and production.

In *Capital*, Marx defines a metabolic rift as “an irreparable rift in the interdependent process of the social metabolism, a metabolism prescribed by the natural laws of life itself” (Foster, 1999, p. 379). Grounded on Karl Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift, Foster (1999) discusses a rift between human consumption and natural laws. The rift represents a gap between consumer goods and soil restoration, comparing the biological, metabolic process to unsustainable capitalism. Although it may have been Marx’s intention to use the image of soil depletion as a metaphor for labor exploitation, Foster argues that his critique of capital agriculture encompasses a more ecological perspective. If the pace of production is out of balance with natural conditions, negative impacts result from systematic feedback, or how the ecosystem as a whole will suffer.

Schnaiberg’s (1980) treadmill of production theory presents another model that helps to further conceptualize production-consumption relations. The model is similar to metabolic rift, but instead paints the image of a continuous cycle triggered by the pendulum of over-production and debt. Schnaiberg and his colleagues argue that “The ‘treadmill’ component recognized that the nature of capital investment led to higher and higher levels of demand for natural resources for a given level of social welfare” (Gould, Pellow, & Schnaiberg, 2004, p. 297). The rise in technologies and capital profit decreased the need for (and costs) of labor, which has pushed laborers into powerless positions, decreasing prices, calling for a higher demand of natural resources, and finally, depleting the environment of a healthy ecosystem. Even in cases where tea farms reject a model of cheap labor for faster output, the more “sustainable” farms must compete with corporate influencers.

Treadmill theory relies on the Marxist perspective that capitalism perpetuates overproduction. As Gould, Pellow, and Schnaiberg (2004) point out, “the majority of what social systems consume must be extracted from nature... and then further processed...” (p. 300). As they focus on the production end of a Marxist critique on capitalism, they state, “it is in the decision to *provide* supply, and the means by which that supply is provided, where social systems and ecosystems first collide” (p. 300). This discussion of the two systems—human and soil—calls attention to the way they interact and are impacted by one another. Humans play the power role in their relationship with nature, given the upper hand to manipulate nature if they so choose. Within the framework of tea, the global demand for tea has created a metabolic rift between soil restoration and soil degradation over the past century, and market externalities including poor labor conditions, carbon emissions



and use of chemical sprays have become inevitable by products of this process.

### **The Laborers**

Tea production not only concerns the exploitation of soil and environment, but also of laborers: tea farm conditions for laborers are generally rated as poor, unsanitary, and unsafe (Berggreen, 2014). A case study found tea workers in Assam, India, endure various diseases and medical challenges such as cold and fever, gastro-enteritis, anemia, dysentery, skin diseases, eye diseases, injury, rheumatism, ulcer and respiratory problems (Kars, 2000).

Additionally, tea farm workers are financially exploited. Workers are expected to pick more than 20 kilograms a day under back-breaking and harsh conditions, making as little as \$1-1.15 a day (Berggreen, 2014). Women make up 75-85 percent of the workforce, and they are given very little privacy. Sexual harassment and violence against women is common (McLennan, 2011). The condition of female tea-pickers is in contradiction with the historical role tea had in the improvement of women's condition in the U.S. Furthermore, Oprah's charity work does not take this problem into account, weakening her claim about the importance of women's empowerment.

### **The Remedy?**

In an effort to alleviate unsustainable practices of tea cultivation, NGOs like Fair Trade Organization and Rainforest Alliance have encouraged responsible trade practices and product labeling, such as "Green" for environmental friendliness and "Fair Trade" for labor fairness. Certainly, such practices are a first step toward better conditions of tea production; however, the degree and extent of the benefits of these practices to the environment and the tea workers are still uncertain. Teavana, as many other companies, is involved in charity to support people from tea producing areas.<sup>11</sup> For example, according to its website, with every purchase of Teavana's tea, "the consumers are donating to Teavana'sEquaTrade@program...". Therefore, as the company declares, "You, Teavana and CARE ... help lift communities out of poverty"<sup>12</sup>. However, this engagement could be seen as problematic for a number of reasons. First, it presents fair trade as a charity action, instead of the normal act of paying the fair wage to workers. Second, it supports a paternalistic rhetoric that sees third-world countries in need of help from more developed ones, negating the historical role of colonialism in certain nations' poverty. Third, it is not clear whether all Teavana's products are fair trade—they do not display fair trade symbols—and whether they respect the soil and environment of the tea plantations.

Obviously, the process of production of tea is not what it used to be. As stated previously, tea's origin dates as far back as 2737 B.C. in China where tea was cultivated in its natural setting without pesticide and environmental damages. Tea was earthy, medicinal and truly in harmony with nature. However, through nearly 5,000 years of human evolution, progress and destructions, the process and production of tea is far from how it used to be centuries ago. Nevertheless, the popular understanding and belief of health, social and environmental benefits of tea, based on those far-away and long-ago historical moments, endures. This incoherency is evident in current media narratives as illustrated in the example of Oprah Chai Tea for Teavana.

## **Discussion**

From Oprah's discourses, tea is the leitmotiv of altruism, health and spirituality. Oprah uses tea as an

<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from <http://care.teavana.com/>.

<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from <http://care.teavana.com>.

important part of the performance of her character, since it is a drink that supports the values and meanings she believes in. Through Oprah, tea becomes a strong media presence that is in the background of interviewees' lives. However, this use of tea is problematic for not addressing the current practices of tea production described above.

In one of the *Steep Your Soul* interviews<sup>13</sup>, food expert Michael Pollan says that, through his books, he wants to make people conscious about where food comes from. The interview contrasts stridently with the lack of acknowledgment of how tea is produced. In Teavana shops and on the website there are explanations on how the various plants are transformed into types of tea; also, Oprah is filmed while making tea mixing ingredients from different plates. However, it is not clear how the ingredients arrived on Oprah's table, and Pollen's reflection on food production does not involve tea. It almost seems that tea is regarded as a "non-food", whose production has no implications for the environment.

Furthermore, Oprah's charity work addresses people in disadvantaged conditions, but not the tea-pickers; she empowers girls from South Africa and the U.S., but not those who work in tea plantations. There is, therefore, another contradiction: It seems that certain people can enjoy the benefits of tea, while some other cannot. In this sense there is a clear hierarchy of people and values. The celebrities and achievers Oprah interviews can use the tea to "steep their souls" and in a quasi-religious fashion, and customers who can afford the US\$89.95 Teavana Oprah Chai Tea Ritual Kit can imitate them. People in disadvantaged situations in the U.S. and South Africa, through Oprah's charity association, indirectly benefit from the generosity of tea-drinkers, but not from drinking tea. Tea pickers, who are the ones making this consumption possible, are never mentioned as direct recipients of benefits.

There is an undercurrent and unspoken class division in this type of media accounts. The affiliation between Teavana and Oprah, through various narratives and her celebrity endorsement, allows tea in general and Teavana tea in specific to become a lifestyle and wellness choice. From this perspective, physical and psychological health and charitable human nature are attached not only to choices of material consumption, but also to those who have the economic power, leisure time and the reflective capital required to engage in such consumption. Good health, morality and, especially, a good soul are on sale to the social and economic class who can afford such a purchase. Regrettably, this class division seems to underscore perhaps the greatest contradiction of all: Oprah promotes equality and empowerment for all, but she sells a lifestyle only some can afford.

Viewing from this "selling" standpoint, *Steep Your Soul* is not much different from any regular television commercials. Despite the very positive and inspirational messages these videos convey, there is an underlying commonality between them and regular advertisements. Essentially and vitally, they are about selling. Just like almost all advertisements, narratives from these videos posit, promote, and normalize certain lifestyles, making buying power a measure of virtue. Notwithstanding these core similarities, these videos are not officially television commercials. They are programs of inspiring stories and poignant messages. This incongruity raises another question. As a promotional tool aiming to sell, a regular tea advertisement would not be expected to be inclusive in its narrative. But as a program aiming to inspire people and benefit our society, *Steep Your Soul* is incomplete. Considering Oprah's influential power, this indeed is a misfortune.

While we applaud Oprah's charity work and her many other important efforts for the benefit of our society,

---

<sup>13</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8BYp8OJfAg>.

the obliviousness (however unintentionally) of the rift between soil and human, between tea drinkers and pickers and between have and have-nots in her tea narratives is unfortunate. Oprah Chai Tea narratives are an example of how media images of tea create strong meanings around tea-drinking, but risks channeling consumers' awareness and sensibility through projects that do not consider works and efforts of the people that made possible the "real" production of Oprah Chai Tea.

Teavana and Oprah's *Steep Your Soul* series was used as a case study here because of the brand's strong media presence and because of Oprah, a highly influential celebrity with a great following, exemplified by her more than 30 million tweeter followers ("Oprah Winfrey", 2015). However, this choice doesn't necessarily imply that Oprah's narratives are particularly imperfect comparing with those of other brands' and products'. In fact, as little as she concerns herself with the laborer and environmental issues surrounding her products, Oprah is probably far more humanitarian, thoughtful and conscientious than most others involved in the selling of their products. Therefore, our media industry's frequent usage of this type of incomplete narratives and the social implications of this common practice are the fundamentals of our reservation. This case study is the first step toward a larger critical discourse analysis project that will include many more tea brands and forms of media narratives in our future studies.

### References

- Berggreen, S. L. (2014). Deep drink: Notes on mediating tea in public imagination. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 4(2), 24-34.
- Datamonitor. (2008). Teavana case study: Capitalizing on the rising demand for tea in the US. Reports.
- Dolin, E. (2012). *When America First Met China: An exotic history of tea, drugs, and money in the age of Sail*. New York: Liveright Publishing.
- Foster, J. (1999). Marx's theory of metabolic rift: Classical foundations for environmental sociology. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 105(2), 366-405.
- Glaucus Research Group. (2013). *Haines Celestial Group, Inc. (Nasdaq: HAIN)*. Retrieved from <https://glaucusresearch.com/consumer-watchdog-reports/>
- Gould, A., Pellow, D., & Schnaiberg, A. (2004). Interrogating the treadmill of production: Everything you wanted to know about the treadmill but were afraid to ask. *Organization & Environment*, 17(3), 296-316.
- How Oprah Prepares The Perfect Cup of Chai at Home Each Morning. (2014). Retrieved from <https://Huffingtonpost.com>
- Kars, R. K. (2000). Ecology of health and health culture: A case study among the tea labourers in Assam, India. *International Journal of Anthropology*, 15(1-2), 171-183.
- McLennan, W. (2011). *Special Report: Environmental damage and human rights abuses blight global tea sector*. Retrieved May 24, 2013, from [http://www.theecologist.org/News/news\\_analysis/847970/environmental\\_damage\\_and\\_human\\_rights\\_abuses\\_blight\\_global\\_tea\\_sector.html](http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/847970/environmental_damage_and_human_rights_abuses_blight_global_tea_sector.html)
- Oprah Winfrey. (2015). *Boulder Daily Camera* (p. 5B).
- Ramamurthy, A. (2012). Absences and silences: The representation of the tea picker in colonial and fair trade advertising. *Visual Culture in Britain*, 13(3), 367-81.
- Richardson, L., & Altman, J. (2014). *Modern tea: A fresh look at an ancient beverage*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books.
- Schnaiberg, A. (1980). *The environment: From surplus to scarcity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- School of Environment, Resources and Development. (2002). Small and medium scale industries in Asia: Energy and environment. Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand.
- Sewell, J. (2008). Tea and Suffrage. *Food, Culture & Society: An international Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 11(4), 487-507.
- Whitaker, J. (2015). *Tea at the Blue Lantern Inn: A social history of the tea room craze in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.