

Deep Drink: Notes on Mediating Tea in Public Imagination

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Abstract

Tea has been part of human diet for at least five thousand years. As mass media emerged to become a vital part of human history, they also took part in charting the past and future trajectories of tea production and consumption. A seemingly inconspicuous cup of beverage, tea actually can be a deep drink, i.e. its conceptualization, production and consumption have great social ramifications. This paper emerged from a longitudinal project that explores various aspects of those ramifications. While there are multiple parallel but simultaneously intertwined enquiries within this large project, this article focuses on the meaning of tea in our everyday life and the role media play in this meaning-making process.

Keywords: Tea, advertising, news, newspaper, mediated meaning-making, Barthes, Lippmann, myth, ethnography.

1. Introduction

Next only to water, tea is the world's second most consumed beverage (Fisher, 2010; Surak, 2013). However, tea's popularity can be seen beyond the status of a drink. Tea embodies social, cultural, and political meanings through time and across cultures. From ancient Chinese literature and paintings, Jane Austin's novels, Arundhati Roy's work to songs of U.K.'s One Direction (currently the world's most popular music group), tea has been a constant and conspicuous reference. On a more solemn note, tea also has triggered wars (such as the American Revolution of 1776 and the Sino-British Opium War of 1839) and incited large-scale organized crimes, such as tea cartels in the U.K. in the late 1800's when tea tax was 119% (Dolin, 2012; United Kingdom Tea Council).

In more than one way, tea evokes and provokes significant meanings in social, cultural, economic and political realms. In addition to many complex contributing factors, there is a definite and essential tie between media and this meaning-making process throughout the developmental history of tea. It was (and still is) the media that helped the global dissemination of tea. It is the media that often create and carry the visions of health, nature (earthy), tranquility, prosperity, and green (environmentally friendly) offered by tea. Through news stories, movies, television shows, blogs, Facebook, Twitters, and especially advertising, the media help provide a universal imaginary of tea -- a beautified, sanitized and idealized 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 paper, my attempt is neither to argue against the established health benefits nor to discourage the consumption of tea. My goal is to analyze the infinite intersections of media and the conceptualization and consumption of tea and the implications of such interconnectedness.

Although the article will start with the history of tea and the analysis of media texts, the study actually began with in-depth interviews as its first step. As emphasized in the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), it is important that the researcher should be guided by the participant's perceptions rather than by the research agenda. Only after the in-depth interviews were concluded, I went back to re-research the history of tea with the media's role in mind and analyzed how tea is mediated in advertising as well as news articles. However, because of the necessity of providing historical background of the topic, I will begin with the history of tea, the first cup of tea.

2. The First Cup of Tea

Legend has it that Sheng Nong, a Chinese emperor, drank the world's first cup of tea in 2737 B.C. Tea containers were discovered in tombs dating back to the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) (United Kingdom Tea Council). Meanwhile, a court official in the Han Dynasty perfected papermaking in 105 A.D., making it easier to circulate written texts (Needham, 1962). The documentation of tea history through Chinese writings soon followed. Tea was first mentioned in Chinese writing in 222 A.D. as a substitute for wine (Wilson, 2012). Mass media, in their earliest form, began to play a role in the history of tea. In 350 A.D., updating an old Chinese dictionary, *Kuo Po* included the description of tea as a beverage made from boiled leaves (Ten Ren Tea). From 350 to 600 A.D., the demand for tea dramatically increased domestically. Tea was also exported through the Silk Road and across the sea during this period. Buddhist monks, who found tea helped them stay awake during a long meditation period, facilitated the further dissemination of tea throughout East Asia around 600 A.D. Finally, tea was epitomized as part of the Chinese culture by *Cha Ching (Tea Classics)*, a three-volume comprehensive book about tea written by Lu Yu in 780 A.D. (Ten Ren Tea; Wilson, 2012).

Within a century of that publication, a Chinese woodblock printing press was invented in 868 A.D. Then in less than a century, a more progressive ceramic moveable type printing press was in full operation (Needham, 1962). These new media made it possible for massive printing and distribution of books. As for tea, the wide circulation of *Cha Ching* accelerated the further diffusion of tea in China, though mainly within the affluent class. However, by the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368 A.D.), tea had become a national drink, consumed by rich and poor. As China's contact with the West became more frequent and regular in the 17th century, Chinese tea also traveled to the West, first through the missionaries then through the merchants. In 1610, the Dutch traders were the first Europeans to import tea from China. By then Gutenberg had long invented Europe's first moveable type printing press (Kapr, 1996). As a result, mass media (namely the printing press at that time) played a role in spreading the taste for tea in continental Europe and subsequently in the United Kingdom.

Though Marco Polo made references to tea in his travel journal in the 13th century, the three volumes of *Some Voyages and Travels* (published in 1550, 1557 and 1559) by Italian geographer Giovanni Battista Ramusio seem to be more widely known as the first Western writings about tea (Ten Ren Tea; Europe Discovers Tea). The popularity of this set of books among European elites and literates inspired a stream of media references about tea. Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Father Jasper de Cruz also published writings about tea in 1560. Even in the countries where wine and beer were the preferred beverages, articles in German and poems in French about tea were prevalent and fashionable. One can still see French paintings about Chinese tea from that era in exhibit in the Louver today (Europe Discovers Tea).

An English translation of the Dutch explorer Linschoten's *Voyages and Travel of Jan Huyghen van Linschoten* was published in Great Britain in 1598, which stirred great curiosity and desire for tea in Britain. The marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, a Portuguese princess devotee of tea, in 1661, secured tea's status as the most fashionable drink at the royal court. However, to the commoners, the initial first-hand, not translated, reference to tea in Britain was an advertisement in *Mercurius Politicus*, a London newspaper, dated September, 1658 (Europe Discovers Tea; United Kingdom Tea Council). The advertisement was sponsored by coffee houses, such as Thomas Garway Coffee House, and promoted tea as the cure to a long list of ailments. By 1717, Thomas Twining saw the profitability of an establishment devoted strictly to tea and opened the first British teahouse (United Kingdom Tea Council). The founding of teahouses also set off another trend. Tea advertising was no longer a part of coffee house advertisement. The beginning of the 18th century witnessed the launch of strictly teahouse/tea company/tea brand advertising, a common practice we still observe today.

3. Media, a Tea Sweetener: Expanding the Image of Tea

For about two millenniums Chinese mass media (in this case, the printing press) played a central role in documenting tea's developmental history and in disseminating tea. When tea became a globally commercialized commodity, however, media took on a different role. Media, specifically advertising in the West, became a tea sweetener. Adding sugar, spice and everything in between, tea advertising utilized diverse strategies to design and promote a particular aura and image of tea in order to entice consumption. The *Mercurius Politicus* advertising in 1658, which cataloged an idealized list of tea's healing power, was just the beginning. By 1890s, Lipton's advertising campaign epitomized this process of mediated imaginary of tea.

Lipton's beginnings date back to 1871 when Thomas Lipton opened a shop in Glasgow, Scotland. Within a decade, he had created a grocery empire across the United Kingdom. In search of items that would complement his inventory, Lipton decided to sell tea. However, not wanting to be a third party supplier, Lipton developed his own plantations in India in 1890, which launched the Lipton brand into the global tea market (Funding Universe).

In marketing its tea, Lipton's 1896 advertising campaign of "direct from tea garden to teapot," adopted the image of smiling and happy female workers from South East Asia in their working environment -- Lipton's tea garden, a lushly green plantation in complete harmony with nature. The appearance of broadly smiling and decorously contented female tea workers touches upon the aesthetic dimension of our senses and elicits affective responses from consumers. The "tea garden," an idealized space, evokes feelings of order, comfort and tranquility. Together, "the image appeals to an aesthetic sensibility, which enables us to view Lipton's as part of a natural order." (Ramamurthy 2012, 369). This iconic image and many other similar ones deserve further discussions in future research on issues such as colonial othering, naturalizing racial hierarchy and gender subjectivity. Lipton stopped using these images in the 1920s, when attitudes toward colonization began to change in many societies. Nevertheless, these images of the demure and contented Asian female tea picker in a tranquil setting in harmony with her work and with nature continue to endure in public imagination. Although it is not the focus of the current article, the longevity of this image warrants thorough and further investigation of why and how the tea industry, the media institution and the consumers still embrace the legacy of colonial advertising and its underlying messages.

Today, as part of the Unilever global conglomerate, the Lipton brand is recognized everywhere. This status has led to a new and fresh advertising strategy. Lipton's colors are yellow and red, signifying warmth, happiness and energy. The motto "drink positively" encourages consumers to associate Lipton with sunshine, lemons and pep. Since the expansion of Lipton's traditional Ceylon black tea, there are dozens of flavor infusions and herbal alternatives to choose from – like Black Vanilla Caramel, or Orange Blossom Hibiscus. In addition to hot tea varieties, Lipton's bottled iced green tea flavors convey a message that there is something for everyone, which is very noticeable when analyzing Lipton's social media posts from Summer 2012-Fall 2013. These messages – diversified consumer identity, drinking positive and sunlight imagery are all part of Lipton's consumer brand, which says that Lipton is for the young, old and positive American. Even though it deviates from its 1896 image, the message of tea-induced feeling of "happy, positive, and Lipton as part of a natural order" persists.

4. Media, the Incomplete Informer

In my interviews with tea drinkers, newspapers were mentioned often as their source of information about tea. Therefore, a preliminary study of six U.S. newspapers was conducted in order to understand the representation of tea in American news.

4.1 The West Side Story: The Tea Consumption Market

The New York Times, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Seattle Times* were chosen for this analysis because of their highly regarded reputation and steady and large circulation both nationally and locally. They were also conveniently searchable in Factiva database. Using key words 'tea,' 'cha' or 'chai,' Factiva generated 4,900 tea relevant articles published by those six newspapers in 2011 and 2012. 'Tea party' was excluded from the key word list because of its association to a political party. Interval sampling was used. With a random starting point, every other news article from this population of 4,900 was content analyzed.

Based on this analysis, five broad themes of news representations of tea emerged. The first theme is about the frequent yet casual and passing references of tea, such as act of drinking tea, conversation/interview over tea or in tea shops and tea rooms. This affirms the seamless integration of tea in our everyday culture. The second theme highlights the culinary aspect of tea, such as green tea ice creams, salty butter tea and fashion tea. The third theme reports the healing/curing nature of tea, such as weight loss miracle drug, hemp tea as medicine and the health benefits of flavonols in green tea. The fourth theme considers the economics of tea, such as industry outlook and marketing approaches. Finally, the political aspect of tea was touched upon, such as the role of tea in political conversations in foreign crises, and 'tea leaves' as idiomatic reference for future of 2012 U.S. presidential candidates. While not necessarily inaccurate, these representations of tea are incomplete and somewhat unmindful. If we look to the Far East and beyond, we may get a different story.

4.2 The East Side Story: The Tea Production Industry

Most tea is grown and cultivated in India and China, while Sri Lanka and Kenya export the most tea as a global commodity. Other tropical regions, like South America, Vietnam, Japan, and Indonesia also contribute to the worldwide tea market. Tea is now cultivated in more than 50 countries around the world. According to a 2002 report on environmental impacts of the tea industry, “Tea industries worldwide are more or less located in hillside areas where there is above average rainfall, low ambient temperature, and substantial vapor saturation taking place.” (School of Environment, 43). Forest cover must be cleared in order to cultivate tea, and other environmental factors include soil erosion and aquatic systems contamination, air pollution from fuel combustion, solid waste generation, and energy consumption. 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, or making one farm dedicated to a single crop, is the high use of pesticides in order to manage insects. (McLennan, 2011; School of Environment, 2002).

Further, the monoculture farm methods also contribute to habitat loss, threatening the survival of many species. For example, as one study shows, “In North East India, areas which used to be a combination of forest and grassland and were home to tigers and rhinos, have been converted to tea plantations” (McLennan, 2011).

Yet, because tea is a driving industry in many developing nations, the economic benefits are more important than the environmental harm. Furthermore, tea farm conditions for laborers are generally rated as poor, unsanitary, and unsafe. A case study among the tea workers in Assam, India, where the British established its very first tea plantation in 1836, found various medical challenges that Assam workers endure, including diseases such as cold and fever, gastro-enteritis, anemia, dysentery, skin diseases, eye diseases, injury, rheumatism, ulcer and respiratory problems (Kar, 2000).

Additionally, tea farm workers are 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. 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). It was reported in 2006 that more than 40,000 children were working on tea farms in Uganda; however, some of the parents might actually require their children to also work in order to contribute to living expenses.

Unless the management improves the working environment and condition, these workers have no hope to recuperate, especially when they do not have resources to seek medical help. However, the reality is that to satisfy global demand of tea while keeping cost down, the conditions for poorly paid laborers are managed in such a way so that overhead cost of tea production remains relatively low.

In addition to environment and labor issues, economic landscape is also at stake. Tracing back to the colonial era, tea farms outside China were created as an imperial effort to capitalize the market. British, Dutch and Portuguese colonizers recruited workers from various Southeast Asian regions. The impact of this practice is still vividly visible. For example, the development of tea estates in Sri Lanka from the colonial era has forever altered the labor market, making it difficult for young people to find work after college even now. The long history of marginalized workers perpetuated consistent migrating of the Tamil (or “of the hills”) people, in which “neither India nor Sri Lanka claimed them as citizens” (Kingslover, 2010, 4). Because of the tea industry’s ties to colonization, nationalization, and reprivitization, the estates are tightly managed by local or global conglomerates -- with mostly profit, instead of workers and community benefit, in view. Generations later, the regional work force still experiences these problems. In a way, these tea farms, their workers and surrounding communities have been passed along from one colonizer to another. Just as many other social issues, the impacts of colonial tea farms linger even when the initial colonizers have long gone.

4.3 Normalization of the Production and Consumption Contrast

As demonstrated above, these harsh conditions, be it social, physical, cultural, economic, or environmental, were not explored much in the U.S. news coverage about tea. Further, the other end of the tea production cycle – the tea consumer market – gives entirely different meanings to the industry behind tea. For example, when considering how tea is often mediated as healing, healthy and hip, the realities expressed from tea are in stark contrast when comparing its production to its consumption.

The way that tea is represented by imagery often contradicts the source of its production process. For example, Lipton especially portrays their green tea with pristine images of nature, like green mountains and suggestions of health. The actual image of the nature where tea farm was developed would have been an ecosystem stripped of all other types of vegetation, where insects and pesticides abound. Many other tea brands' advertisements portray tea farms as pristine imagery, contributing to a normalized perception of the industry impacts. Is this normalization part of our day-to-day conceptualization of tea?

5. Tea in Public Imaginary

As a part of a large stream of enquiry, through in-depth interviews I explored the question of the role media play in meaning-making and conceptualization of tea.

5.1. Preparing for the Field

Being an occasional tea drinker (before the project) and a media scholar, I did have a somewhat preconceived notion that media intersect with tea culture. However, I didn't know how, at what level and with what implications. Because I wanted to enter the field with an open mind, I deliberately chose not to examine relevant media texts before entering the field, so I can be guided by my informants. However open-minded I could be I should not enter the field with an empty head, so I educated myself on tea history through the chronology of 5,000 years of Chinese history, dynasty by dynasty, without any emphasis on media's role. I also learned about different kinds of tea, such as Oolong, green, white, black and etc., and about popular global, national and regional tea brands. I also familiarized myself with various scientific reports about tea production and its negative impacts, but again I didn't delve into popular media yet. I joined tea clubs, thus became a regular tea consumer in order to get to know culture of tea drinkers. After more than two years of research, I am now a full-fledged regular tea drinker and still a member of various clubs. In that respect, I have gone native, though I do believe I am able to continue to keep the necessary critical distance between an actual and regular tea drinker and a media researcher who studies tea.

5.2 Entering the Field

In order to answer this and other questions, I conducted an ethnography-influenced study of 36 tea drinkers in three U.S. cities in 2012 and 2013. I spent 2012 scouting research sites, recruiting potential informants and building rapport with them in preparation for official data gathering in 2013. Basic criteria for research sites are diverse populations with abundant access to tea.

Three sites were selected eventually. This multi-site approach is guided by multilocal ethnography, espousing researchers to follow a particular practice wherever it leads and not be restricted to a specific place (Denzin, & Lincoln, 2008). While tea is consumed everywhere, time and resources allowed me to focus on only a few sites. In the present study, a major metropolitan city on the East Coast, a smaller, less urban harbor town also on the East Coast and a Mountain West city were selected. The latter two sites were included also to provide geographical and cultural/social variation. However, one of my first findings in reference to tea was the homogeneity of these geographically separate communities. Therefore, despite being in distinct physical locations and social settings, as Bourdieu (1977) would have it, these tea drinkers occupy one 'field' with similar (if not the same) set of capital, disposition and cultural tastes concerning tea.

As I explored each potential research site, I visited many tea shops (wholesalers and retailers), tea cafes (often a combination of tea room, café and tea retail), and restaurants where tea was a staple. I made multiple visits to those locations within each site and conversed with owners, employees, tea masters, and regular tea patrons. I discussed with them my research interests in very general terms. I left them my email and phone number should they choose to maintain contact. Subsequently, I received email updates and phone messages from several people periodically about "tea happenings," such as the arrival of new tea, tea festivals the tea house hosted, and tea exhibitions tea patrons attended. These contacts formed my key informant group. Using the snowball sampling with key informants as a base, I was able to recruit more participants. For these new recruits, I would meet with them multiple times (for tea) prior to the actual interviews. I also attended tea festivals and tea workshops and conducted interviews with attendees whom I spent long hours over several days together.

Even though I make no claim about my fieldwork being an ethnography, the one-year acclimation period, the multiple visits and days of intensive interaction before any interviews were implemented with the hope that data gathered here carry more depth and richness than a mere one-shot interview.

Further, ethnographic work has informed my choices during work in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008) and has inspired the way practices have been described in the present article. For example, in the analysis, the participants are seen as agents through their acting in and constructing of reality. I gathered naturally occurring data. While I initiated the visits with participants, they guided all the conversational interviews in the physical and social settings of their daily routine. Finally, only after and based on interviews with them, I began to research on media's role in the developmental history of tea and analyze the news and advertising media texts to which they referred.

Even though all participants agreed, audio recording sometimes was not plausible since the interviews took place in such natural settings as a walk in the park, a stroll through a street market, or bookstore browsing after a cup of tea. In such cases, paraphrases are used. Overall, the data include field diaries and transcripts wherever recording was available. Informed consent was also obtained from all participants.

Interviewees' age range from 18 to 70s, with ethnic heritages (in their own words) of Chinese, Irish, German, Mexican, English, Scandinavian, African, European, and American. Except for two college students (age 18 and 22), two retirees, two homemakers and one in job transition, they currently work in the sectors of education, finance, IT, office management, art, mental health, bio-medicine and nutrition. Of the 36 interviewees, nine were male and 27 females. If used at all, names and location details have been changed to preserve anonymity.

My conversational in-depth interviews with them generally began with a question such as "What words/images come to your mind when people mention tea?" While I have a set of questions in mind, participants' answers informed my follow-up questions. The semi-structured, no time-limit conversations proved particularly fruitful as many respondents used memorable life experiences to talk about their conceptualization of tea. Depending on the participant's schedule, each interview generally lasted from 2 to 4 hours, or a bit longer in a few cases. The interviews were conducted in the setting of respondents' choice, mostly their homes, sometimes their work place, such as their own stores. We also talked in cafes, parks, markets, bookstores and other settings.

5.3 Visualizing Tea

Obviously, it is impossible to relay more than 100 hours of conversation in full in this article. Key points relevant to the focus of this article will be summarized with some excerpts to help contextualize the information.

When asked what words or images come to mind when thinking about tea, a few themes emerge solidly, regardless of participants' age, gender, tea preference and experience, profession, ethnic origins, place of upbringing and locations of current residency. Health-related, nature-oriented, culinary-connected and emotion-linked themes unite these diverse participants. Words frequently used in association with tea are: healthy, good, beneficial, healthful, nourishing, wholesome, natural, organic, earthy, green, planet earth, smell of nature, happy, peaceful, relaxed, calm, serenity, content, thirsty, salty (Chinese food), hydrated, aromatic, spring, summer and winter.

When I studied media texts after the interview I was able to locate all the words (and their variations) used by participants here in either tea advertising, tea packaging or newspaper articles. This is not to say that media provide these wordings or images to participants here. However, there is a clear association between the pictures in our head and the pictures in the media.

As for images regularly mentioned by the participants, they were family moments (such as childhood and friends and family gatherings), green pasture, green field with tea trees, tea mountains, beautiful, exotic Asia, American South and tea pickers. These images resurfaced when they talked about their tea moments, tea stories, first taste of tea and the importance of tea in their lives.

For examples, a psychiatrist in her early 30s mentioned, "Oh, I immediately think of South, American South, where I grew up. We drank a lot of sweet iced tea down in the South. When I think of tea, I see my childhood and I immediately feel I am transported back to the South already."

A tea aficionado in his 60s said "beautiful spring, of course, because spring is the best season to harvest tea. Spring tea is the best tea."

A bank executive in her 40s said, "I see a fun summer day in a backyard, kids playing, adults chatting and laughing. Then on the table there is a tray of iced tea in tall glasses. Oh, a slice of lemon on top of the glass, of course."

An 18-year-old sophisticated store manager said he would see “a mug with hot steam floating above the mug, just like all those pictures you always see in tea advertising.”

A 52-year-old former publishing executive assistant closed her eyes and declared “happy moments. All those happy times like having a cup of tea with friends, having a delicious meal, served with tea, with my family. I see food, laughter, family and friendship. I see happiness.”

A retired female ESL teacher mentioned “Tea time means eating time and I love to eat, which makes me happy. So, tea is a symbol of happiness for me.”

5.4 The Pictures in our Heads

Clearly, tea has prodigious ability to evoke powerful images of mesmerizing and nostalgic moments. As I analyzed some tea advertising after I finished all the interviews, I noticed repeated selling strategies that tap into our emotional dimension and to those happy moments. Advertisers, obviously, are sophisticated and are very successful in capitalizing those inner feelings. Further, advertising and other media contents sometimes can be a contributor to those mesmerizing, nostalgic and many other images we picture in our heads. During the interviews, quite a few respondents commented that the images they shared with me are not from their own experience. On close inspection, some of them could come from media. The two pictures interact with each other. On the one hand, media at times mirror certain precious moments in our life (in this case to sell us tea). On the other hand, we can also take some media images, though they have no bearing to reality, and gradually integrate them into our own tea imaginaries, which become our own reality. This dynamic was most eloquently discussed in Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*(1922). In the opening chapter, entitled “The World Outside and The Pictures in our Heads,” Lippmann states “They trusted the picture in their heads... but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself...the world as they needed to know it, and the world as they did know it, were often two quite contradictory things” (p. 4). Though media technologies have evolved significantly since Lippmann’s time, his sentiment continues. The theory of media and the construction of social reality (Bryant and Oliver, 2009) applies seamlessly in tea imaginary.

For example, for those people who referred to the images of tea mountains, tea pickers, tea trees, Asia and etc., I followed up and asked if they had first-hand experience being there or encountering those scenes. The answers were a definite “no,” but they reiterated that the images must be real and from somewhere because that is how they have always seen/known them. In some incidences, when later they showed me (or talked to me) about their tea collection, I saw the tea packages full of those images they just described to me, especially scenes of pristine green fields/mountains and various tranquil, peaceful sites/sights of nature. Furthermore, as mentioned in an earlier section, a participant’s description of smiling tea workers led me to search and discover the prototype of that image first promoted by Lipton in 1896. Here is the excerpt from that conversation:

Andrea (62, F, accountant): I see Chinese, Indian, maybe Thai, you know those Asian ladies with those triangular straw hats, picking tea leaves... in the sun at a tea plantation in Asia, of course.

S-L: Have you had a chance to visit Asia or a tea plantation in Asia or in elsewhere?

A: No, but I just somehow know and can see Asian ladies picking tea.

S-L: You can see those ladies. How do they look?

A: They look very happy. They are all smiling. They are singing while picking tea leaves. They sound very happy.

S-L: Do you see them sweating?

A: Come to think of it, I guess they should since I see them pick tea in the sun. But in the image I see, I don’t see them sweating. They are smiling. They are happy and I don’t see sweat, to be honest.

S-L: What else do you see? (Pause) Like, are they well paid?

A: Probably not as well paid as I am, but I think they must be well paid for their kind of work. I see a big, happy family working in the field and singing together. What more can one ask for? To be in the field with the nature, have fun working and getting paid. Beats us sitting in the office all day long.

S-L: What else do you see, like are they healthy?

A: Probably like all of us. Some are healthy and some can be sick, though they all seem young, so they must be healthy. (pause). You know, come to think of it, when they work they get their daily exercise. Fresh mountain air! Outdoors! Oh, the wonder of the nature! And we have to go to a gym, which I often skip. I know I shouldn’t. So, they probably are healthier than I am.

S-L: As you talk I feel I can almost see them, touch them. They are so real to me the way you talk about them. It gives me the feeling that you seem to almost know them in person. I know you don't because you told me you have never been to any tea plantations. But you describe them in such intimate and clear details ...

A: Interesting isn't it? I never thought about it that way. But after drinking tea for all these years, yes, I probably know them in my own kind of way.

S-L: If you could do something for them, say through the type of tea you buy or the way tea is produced, packaged or sold, would you do it?

A: What do you mean?

S-L: Well, I am still thinking about a clear way to ask this question. Well, any little things you can do, may be pay a bit more for a box of tea, write a blog post. Something like that. Would you do it?

A: But I actually don't know them, so I don't, I can't do anything for them.

Because I mentioned the cost and the labor wage, we went on to discuss Fair Trade tea, another important topic but beyond the scope of this article.

To Mandy, the bank executive, who described the image of having tea on a fun summer day in the backyard, I asked if that is how her summer days are like.

M: No, of course not. Who has time for that?

S-L: Then, whose summer days are those?

M: You see it on TV advertising all the time. Isn't that how a fun family life should be?

S-L: I guess, but that 's TV.

M: But that's what we all think how our good life should be or could have been.

S-L: Is tea an ingredient for that good life?

M: Non-tea drinkers don't need tea to have a good life, I suppose. Or maybe only we tea drinkers can have a good life (giggled). But that good life picture I just described to you would have been incomplete without those tall glasses of iced tea.

When I asked the tea aficionado who talked about spring tea and harvest time to elaborate more, he said as an avid reader he learned a lot from newspapers and knew all about harvest and best season for tea. I asked him to share with me that production process. He said, "Well, they pick tea and we drink tea. They sell it; we buy it. There is nothing to it." I probed further and asked about plantation conditions based on what he said he had read and compare that with ours, the tea drinkers. He said, "Well, they work hard and we work hard. They work in the field and we work in the store. They make money and we make money. They work, drink tea, live and die. We work, drink tea, live and die."

These statements are correct and inaccurate at the same time. The production and consumption cycles seem so balanced yet unequal simultaneously. Needless to say, their work and our work and their field and our stores are so incomparable. It is true that we all live and die, but tea plantation workers never taste the tea they harvest. They cannot afford what they harvest. Perhaps the incompleteness of these statements, just like the incompleteness of the news coverage analyzed previously, makes these seemingly harmonious pictures so twisted and incomprehensible.

5.5 Mothers and Newspapers Know Best

When discussing their information source for tea, advertising, news (mostly newspaper) and family members, especially mother, and on-line sources, such as blogs were cited repeatedly. A few mentioned books and a documentary about tea. Most use advertising to find good bargains, discover new products but rely on newspaper to supply cognitive information such as benefits of tea. As far as mother goes, one participant said, "Just ask my mother, she knows everything." I wondered where her mother gets the information. She replied, "Probably newspapers; and advertising for coupons and deals and things like that. Well, she probably just knows. She is a mother. As you know, mother knows everything."

So does a grandmother. A 27-year-old aspiring videographer, who actually is more a coffee drinker, takes tea only in family gatherings to please his grandmother. He went on to discuss the family teatime ritual, complete with very particular tea ware and specific savoring procedures. He talked about his grandmother's knowledge of tea. He also chatted in length about tea and colonial history and the opium war and many tea stories related to colonial British soldiers in India.

Though an almost non-tea drinker, he is by far the most knowledgeable interviewee about tea history, especially the imperial era. He said he reads a lot and doesn't have a particular information source to which he routinely goes.

He concluded, "Since I am not a tea devotee, I don't pay attention about whatever is out there about tea. But let me tell you, you can pretty much use tea to trace the whole history of everything, of anything."

The former publishing executive assistant told me that being a tea enthusiast, she obviously paid great attention to anything tea-related, so I asked her to give me a lesson about various kinds of tea. She went on for a long while about the benefits of green tea. I asked where she learned all these. "Newspapers," she answered without hesitation. Interestingly, the ESL teacher also chatted in great length about the miraculous wonders of green tea. Again, newspaper and sometimes blogs were her information source.

Several drinkers switched to organic tea because of numerous news reports about the benefits of such tea.

Interestingly, tea masters initiated this topic when I interviewed them. I had a chance to talk with three tea masters, separately, at length and another three individually in shorter conversations. They all mentioned how media over-report the benefits of green tea and organic tea. Independently and unanimously they deliberated methodically why and how green tea, among all teas, has the highest profit margin. While green tea does have many health benefits, they believe it is the tea industry's marketing strategy that makes green tea the miracle tea. They all remarked that media should have done a better job informing consumers.

With the same unison, they mentioned the lack of standardization in the labeling system and that organic tea doesn't necessarily mean pesticide-free tea as most people are led to believe. As the female tea master in her forties explained, "organic in one country means the exclusion of pesticides A, B and C, while it would be pesticides D, E, F in another country. So in order to import it to the U.S. as organic, the farm knows not to use pesticides X, Y, and Z. But in reality, we could be drinking a cup of organic tea full of pesticides A, B, C." Three of them also enlightened me about heavy pesticide use in monoculture tea farms. Finally, they also lamented that often small family farms with high quality and pesticide-free tea would not have the financial resources to apply for organic certification, let alone advertise it. Therefore, as one master in his late 70s commented, "advertising, marketing and all your reporting ... Sorry I don't mean you, but you know what I mean. All these really mess up our tea. What are you teaching your students these days anyway?"

As for advertising, almost all interviewees mentioned they either don't pay attention to or can't recall seeing any tea advertising. Yet, as the conversation continued, some described to me in detail the new tea advertising campaign featuring HughJackman. Some recalled others. For example, the 18-year-old sophomore who is also a part-time store manager recited Snapples' slogan "Made from the best stuff on earth!" But he warned me that the tea is made with "fake sugar, so advertising can be deceptive."

Almost everyone mentioned Lipton in various contexts. They called it "the American tea." Some compared it with McDonald's in that "it is not the best, but you know what you are getting, if you suddenly need a burger, a cup of tea. It is handy. You know what you are getting." In the context of advertising, the 18-year-old manager called it "the go-to brand," and "the all American tea, so they don't really need to advertise. It has brand loyalty." Interestingly, strictly speaking, Lipton is not American and it spent millions advertising each year.

The bottom line is tea drinkers here think some tea advertising is not necessary, though they all seem to be using the advertising for various purposes of their own and all of them are exposed to tea advertising whether they are aware of it or not.

Finally, about the heavy leaning toward newspaper as information source, based on my observations of their daily routine, I think tea is also a contributor to that media choice. It is much easier to read with a cup of tea, than to surf the net. I noticed they would forget to drink the tea when surfing and have to remake another cup and decide to sit down to read as they drink the new cup. Besides, traditionally, it seems to be the right medium to accompany tea. One can see many advertising about newspapers showing a cup of tea next to the newspaper.

5.6. "Mommy, do you need a cup of Tea?"

As to what tea means to them, "old friends," "a must," "my crutches" are the typical answer from the participants. For example, one lamented "like an old friend. I wouldn't know what to do without it." Still more said, "my days would be incomplete without it," or "I would be totally lost without it."

The therapist's account sums it up. She talked about tea as a ritual and routine and a key to her equilibrium. She mentioned even her three-year-old son can sense her tealess-induced-stress (even though she didn't know it is that noticeable) and would say, "Mommy, do you need a cup of tea?" If they are in a car, the son would say, "Daddy, stop the car. Mommy needs a cup of tea."

5.7. We, the Tea People

Before I leave this section, I would like to share one observation that tea drinkers, based on my experience with them, are the most generous, sincere, open and kind-hearted people. Tea is a great entrance to any conversation. Tea also serves as a visceral stimulant that reminds people of many memorable moments in life, which some call "my tea moments." Participants here so graciously let me journey with them to many of those moments and beyond.

While it may or may not have whatever medical ingredients needed, tea gives strength to many to get through some very difficult moments. The serenity and tranquility tea conjures up probably is an important contributing factor. Those harmonious pictures in our heads are one of the keys that make a cup of tea so special. Yet the world outside (the tea farm) contradicts the pictures in our heads. In that sense, tea also reveals the paradox of life. The tea moments Andrea (62, F, accountant) shared with me were so heart-warming and thoughtful that I almost wept. (Those moments were not included here because of the scope and space limitation). Yet, the pictures in her head of the smiling tea pickers in harmony with the wonders of nature made me want to weep, too, but for the tea workers in back-breaking, unsafe and unsanitary conditions. That is what makes a cup of tea such a deep drink, like the deep play of Balinese cock-fight in Geertz's work (1973), with so many implications at stake. The ultimate incongruity is that contemplating deep thoughts with a cup of tea in hand, tea drinkers are capable of thinking that cup of tea shallowly.

6. Conclusion

Tea has been mediated throughout the globe as a desired commodity for centuries. From its very origin, especially with seminal key texts such as, *Cha Ching* (780 A.D.) and Giovanni Battista Ramusio's *Some Voyages and Travels* (1550-1559 A.D.), tea has been recognized for its cultural significance in terms of ritualistic practices, health benefits, and a symbol of natural resources that are abundant on the Eastern part of the globe. What might date back to as early as 2737 B.C., the first cup of tea has expanded its course into the globalized market, consumer identity and billions of individuals' tea cups every single day. What used to be limited to Asian landscapes across lush rolling hills and consumed in public spaces to converse or meditate, tea today must be cultivated at a rate which meets its demand. For this reason, tea practices and traditions have changed. Tea farms today are located all over the world, often against nature. What sets tea apart from rival beverages, like coffee or alcohol, is the fact that tea offers a number of health benefits and a sense of nature-induced serenity and well-being, whether mediated or not. Further, the perception of tea as a natural product from mother earth's untamed environment of the East is immortalized even when it is far from the reality. That sense of wonder, comfort and health and the perception of goodness of mother nature seeps into every culture. But there is a paradox that accompanies this perception of tea. Because of the way tea plays such a massive role in the global market, tea as a symbol of health and well-being makes it difficult to understand the implications of its production. The production of tea is often overlooked in pursuit of consumption, of that sense of well-being for both mankind and nature.

Except for tea masters, even the most devoted tea drinkers and heavy media users/readers revealed only partial understanding of tea production and issues associated with that cycle, let alone contemplating the production implications before sipping. At the same time that the media provide limited information for any essential understanding of tea production, they continue to perpetuate the happy, natural and earthy aura around tea. This is not to say that media have direct effect on people. On the contrary, tea drinkers, just like any other media consumers, have strong agency and are actively engaging in their own meaning-making process. However, media contribute to the cultural climate within which meaning-negotiation takes place. Media's mythic narratives naturalize and celebrate the current production practice and the conspicuous consumption of tea while they silence the pain and suffering endured in order to gratify the very practice and consumption promoted by media. Roland Barthes (1957) observes that what goes unsaid by myths is as important as what gets said. The modern tea myths through media certainly leave much unsaid.

Nevertheless, I do not claim generalization of my findings here to all media or all tea drinkers. Each drinker is unique and each story is different. However, the theme emerging from the present study does offer a glimpse of how media can play a role in our imaginary of tea. If we continue to hold fast to that idealization of tea, the imbalance between the production and consumption cycles can be one day soon beyond the reach of amendment.

Yet the tea industry and media industry cannot be viewed simply for the dissonance that exists between production and consumption. Cultural power, historical context, impacts of globalization, and market trends are all factors which have contributed to environmental degradation and poor labor conditions that have become a result of the industry.

Tea is a cup of deep drink; it is more than a cup of boiled water with leaves.

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