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Making Vitasoy “Local” in Post-World War II Hong Kong: Traditionalizing Modernity, Engineering Progress, Nurturing Aspirations

Now considered a quintessential Hong Kong household food product, Vitasoy won the approval of local consumers only in the post-World War II period as its producer capitalized on the discourse of modern nutritional science, leveraged technological breakthroughs, and positioned the soy beverage to respond to a growing clientele experiencing economic growth and lifestyle transformation. In the emerging market and socio-cultural conditions of postwar Hong Kong, Vitasoy’s producer created a local beverage that articulated for the city a modernity that originated in a Chinese national discourse but then blossomed into a celebration of the lifestyle that economic progress enabled.

Keywords: Hong Kong, “local” food, modernity, consumerism, emerging market, technological transfer

“Homegrown Hong Kong,” a local English-language newspaper said of Vitasoy in an article telling the “wholesome story” of the soy beverage.¹ Vitasoy has come to be identified with Hong Kong’s period of economic growth, so much so that nostalgia for the product sells. In 2017, a Vitasoy Memories Contest on Facebook received numerous wistful entries describing childhood consumption of the bottled drink. One entry featuring Vitasoy bottles bathing in a metallic vat

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¹ Christopher DeWolf, “Homegrown Hong Kong: The Wholesome Story of Vitasoy,” *South China Morning Post*, 5 Apr. 2017.

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read, “I always look[ed] forward to getting a hot vitasoy from the store outside my school after school [was] out. The bottles were kept warm in these containers filled with warm/hot water. That’s one of my favorite childhood memor[ies].”²

Despite Hongkongers’ identification with the popular soy beverage today, Vitasoy had to earn acceptance among Chinese consumers when it was introduced in postwar Hong Kong. Marketed as an alternative to a Western product, the beverage attributed its primary nutritional content to an ingredient purportedly of Chinese origin. Yet, while Hong Kong had long traded in soybeans, soymilk was not popular in this city at the southern tip of China compared with the beverage’s prevalence in the north. To win the hearts of local consumers, Vitasoy had to overcome the deep-seated cultural predispositions of Hongkongers, many of whom viewed soymilk as “cooling” and enervating.

Gareth Austin, Carlos Dávila, and Geoffrey Jones have called for an exploration of corporate strategies and structures in emerging markets as distinct from those found in developed economies.³ The story of Vitasoy provides an alternative business history of the lesser known “local” businesses that flourished in the emerging market of Hong Kong in the aftermath of World War II. Vitasoy’s business development draws our attention to the dynamics of a budding clientele in a developing economy. This “local” Hong Kong beverage stemmed from a notion emanating from outside East Asia that the soybean was to save the region from its alleged nutritional plight. As a beverage processed from soybeans, soymilk did not blossom into a single food phenomenon but took on specific forms in the foodways of Asian cities in response to the conditions of the host locations and business maneuvers of local merchants.⁴ This transnational discourse took root in Hong Kong as Vitasoy’s maker deployed bottling techniques and business practices acquired from its Western partners, developed its operations with local sensitivities, and marketed the beverage against the backdrop of the city’s economic growth.

Focusing on the sale of a soy beverage in a single city with a predominantly Chinese population, this study links business practice and

² Vitasoy North America, “During cold weather when I attending grammar school,” Facebook, 28 Aug. 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/MyVitasoy/photos/a.10155636676644699/10155636696184699>. See also Files Relating to Applications for Television Advertising—Vitasoy (2), Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (documents dated 18 Mar. 1991, 30 Apr. 1991, 10 Mar. 1992), HKRS2470-1-581, Hong Kong Public Records Office (hereafter HKPRO), which shows how Vitasoy’s television advisements sold the beverage on nostalgia.

³ Gareth Austin, Carlos Dávila, and Geoffrey Jones, “The Alternative Business History: Business in Emerging Markets,” *Business History Review* 91, no. 3 (2017): 537–69.

⁴ This local manifestation echoes James L. Watson’s call “to situate the global in the local” in exploring the globalization of food. Watson, *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia* (Stanford, CA, 1997), ix.

consumer choices with identity formation during a period of economic takeoff. Prior scholars locate the origins of consumerism in the age of industrialization and examined how consumption gives meaning to individuals and their roles in U.S. society.⁵ Matthew McDonald and Stephen Wearing, for example, investigate Western consumption culture from a psychological perspective, highlighting in particular the association between self-identity and consumption.⁶ Research on specific geographical areas reveals the role of consumption in shaping the history of particular locales, with scholars of milk consumption underscoring the impact of urbanization, technological improvements, and geopolitics.⁷ In the case of China, Susan Glosser demonstrates how the consumption of milk symbolized an urban lifestyle of the new, trendy nuclear family, while others show that milk consumption is not novel in China.⁸ The emergence of Chinese nutrition science framed soymilk as a social engineering enterprise in the first half of the twentieth century.⁹ Such a

⁵ Gary Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York, 2000); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982).

⁶ Matthew McDonald and Stephen Wearing, *Social Psychology and Theories of Consumer Culture: A Political Economy Perspective* (East Sussex, U.K., 2013).

⁷ Laura C. Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (New York, 2000); Emanuela Scarpellini, *Material Nation: A Consumer's History of Modern Italy*, trans. Daphne Hughes and Andrew Newton (Oxford, 2008); Kazuo Usui, *Marketing and Consumption in Modern Japan* (London, 2014). In the case of China, Karl Gerth demonstrates how consumers moved their purchase preferences away from items deemed foreign and, in the process, fashioned the modern Chinese nation. Gerth, *China Made: Consumer Culture and the Creation of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA, 2003). With respect to edible consumables specifically, anthropologists have explored regional cuisines and the impact of globalization on food consumption in China; see David Y. H. Wu and Tan Cheebeng, eds., *Changing Chinese Foodways in Asia* (Hong Kong, 2001); and David Y. H. Wu and Sidney C. H. Cheung, eds., *The Globalization of Chinese Food* (Richmond, U.K., 2002). With respect to milk consumption, see E. Melanie DuPuis, *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* (New York, 2002); Richie Nimmo, *Milk, Modernity and the Making of the Human: Purifying the Social* (London, 2010); Kendra Smith-Howard, *Pure and Modern Milk: An Environmental History since 1990* (Oxford, 2013); Andrea S. Wiley, *Cultures of Milk: The Biology and Meaning of Dairy Products in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

⁸ Françoise Sabban, “Un savoir-faire oublié: Le travail du lait en Chine ancienne,” *Zibun: Memoirs of the Research Institute for Humanistic Studies, Kyoto University* 21 (1986): 31–65; Susan Glosser, “Milk for Health, Milk for Profit: Shanghai's Chinese Dairy Industry under Japanese Occupation,” in *Inventing Nanjing Road: Commercial Culture in Shanghai, 1900–1945*, ed. Sherman Cochran (Ithaca, NY, 1999), 207–33; Miranda Brown, “Mr. Song's Cheese, Southern China, 1368–1644,” *Gastronomica* 19, no. 2 (2019): 29–42; Thomas David DuBois, “China's Dairy Century: Making, Drinking and Dreaming of Milk,” in *Animals and Human Society in Asia*, ed. Rotem Kowner, Guy Bar-Oz, Michael Biran, Meir Shahr, and Gideon Shelach-Lavi (Cham, Switzerland, 2019), 179–211; Veronica S. W. Mak, *Milk Craze: Body, Science, and Hope in China* (Honolulu, 2021).

⁹ Jia-Chen Fu, *The Other Milk: Reinventing Soy in Republican China* (Seattle, 2018); Fu, “Confronting the Cow: Soybean Milk and the Fashioning of a Chinese Dairy Alternative,” in *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia*, ed. Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell (Honolulu, 2019), 47–65.

development did not gain traction in Hong Kong in that period, although the discourse of modern nutritional science and the supposedly impoverished diet of the Chinese did circulate in the British colony. What was construed as a “national” solution found little “local” resonance in Hong Kong, where residents considered the beverage to be as foreign as the nutritious Western product for which it was to serve as a substitute.¹⁰ Eventually, the earlier development in Republican China found fertile ground in postwar Hong Kong, not merely in reconstruction efforts but also in appealing to socioeconomically aspiring consumers of modernity in the context of the colony’s economic takeoff.

Vitasoy’s producer leveraged technological know-how and social transformations to render what began as an intellectual discourse into a commercially viable “local” product for its aspiring clientele in postwar Hong Kong.¹¹ In its projection of modernity and as part of the development discourse, Vitasoy does not fit neatly into the classification of Chinese or Western. The soybean’s “Chinese” indigeneity notwithstanding, Vitasoy’s emergence, like the introduction of other Western lifestyle consumables, resulted from and signaled the rise of a middle-class identity in Hong Kong. This consumption pattern manifested itself in a peculiar manner at a specific stage of socioeconomic development, problematizing the notion of being “Chinese” at any given time.¹² Embedded in global capitalism and a national discourse, Vitasoy’s producer overcame initial obstacles to make the product a “local” beverage. Its commercial success was a spatiotemporally specific phenomenon that reflected the historical juncture at which Vitasoy crystallized an identity in postwar Hong Kong and blossomed into a local drink for Hongkongers.

Unfolding as Hong Kong’s middle class emerged, Vitasoy’s story lies at the intersections of modernity and locality, globalization and nationality, consumerism and economic development. Vitasoy won the

¹⁰ This discourse of Western salvation resonates with Emma McDonell’s critique of “global miracle food” for its paternal logic and the attempt of the “curative metaphor” to locate a solution in Western philanthropy or economic development. McDonell, “Miracle Foods: Quinoa, Curative Metaphors, and the Depoliticization of Global Hunger Politics,” *Gastronomica* 15, no. 4 (2015): 70–85.

¹¹ Jia-Chen Fu examines “the materiality of the milk bottle” as an instrumental component of Vitasoy’s effort to market the soymilk as a substitute for cow’s milk to an idealized community of aspiring, health-conscious consumers. Fu, “The Tyranny of the Bottle: Vitasoy and the Cultural Politics of Packaging,” *Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (2018): 4. Vitasoy’s story corroborates claims that commercial strategies create new patterns of food consumption as they alter social and economic practices. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, eds., *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (London, 2002).

¹² Wai-keung Chung, “Made in China or Made in Hong Kong? National Goods and the Hong Kong Business Community,” in *Colonial Hong Kong and Modern China: Interaction and Reintegration*, ed. Pui-tak Lee (Hong Kong, 2005), 185–98; Gordon Mathews and Tailok Lui, eds., *Consuming Hong Kong* (Hong Kong, 2001).

approval of local consumers in post-World War II Hong Kong as its producer capitalized on the discourse of modern nutritional science, leveraged technological breakthroughs, and positioned the beverage to respond to a growing clientele experiencing economic growth and undergoing lifestyle transformation.

Positioning Soymilk in a Discourse of Salvation

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese nutrition scientists found in the soybean the answer to the nation’s nutritional and developmental problems.¹³ In East and Southeast Asia, soymilk also attracted the attention of the colonial authorities and became embroiled in the operation of imperialistic forces through the discourse of diet and nutrition. The discourse of soy among Western and Western-trained medical professionals, which took on an evangelical tone, erupted outside China proper, finding an audience in the colonial ports of Southeast Asia.¹⁴ In 1911, Gilbert Brooke, port health officer of Singapore, explained the virtues of soybeans, which he understood to be produced on a large scale in Manchuria and carried in large quantities to Singapore and Hong Kong. He proposed fostering among the “rice-eating races” “the simultaneous consumption of the soya bean as supplying in abundance those essential food elements that cannot in the least be derived from rice.” The use of the soybean should be “universal” in prisons and “native hospitals,” he advised. Among the food products of soybeans he listed was “Bean Milk,” a “valuable milk” that resembled cow’s milk.¹⁵

Medical and nutritional circles paid persistent attention to soy. The message delivered from the colonial pulpit in Singapore resonated with Chinese specialists trained in the Western sciences. In 1932, an English newspaper in Hong Kong reported that Dr. E. Tso of the Peking Union Medical College had lectured to a full house in Shanghai at a session of the Chinese Medical Conference explaining the virtues of soymilk in infant feeding.¹⁶ Hong Kong played host to a similar scholarly discussion in 1940 when Professor Yan-tsi Chiu of Lingnan University addressed a group at the Café de Chine on the history of soymilk in China. He asserted that soymilk had been recognized as early as two thousand years ago by the Chinese philosopher Huainanzi. Children in north

¹³ Fu, *Other Milk*. This earlier phenomenon parallels “nutritionism,” or the reductive interpretation of the role of nutrients in bodily health, that Gyorgy Scrinis notes of dietary guidance. Scrinis, *Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice* (New York, 2013).

¹⁴ Ines Prodöhl, “Versatile and Cheap: A Global History of Soy in the First Half of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 3 (2013): 461–82.

¹⁵ *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser (Weekly)*, 13 Apr. 1911, 2.

¹⁶ *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, 12 Oct. 1932, 12.

China consumed soymilk in place of cow's milk, and adults also drank it, he noted. Almond milk, he added, was more popular in south China, where it was consumed primarily by adults.¹⁷ The persistent comparison of soymilk to cow's milk reveals a colonial mindset that understood Western consumption of the latter to be the norm in the pursuit of bodily health.

Influenced by the views of educated Chinese elites, select portions of the Chinese population did begin to appreciate cow's milk in the years leading up to World War II. In 1940, the Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire produced a report concluding that the masses in Hong Kong recognized the nutritional value of milk.¹⁸ However, ordinary Chinese people in the colony could ill afford this luxury product, not to mention its limited local production, which would in any case be commandeered as Britain went onto a war footing. The popularity of cow's milk and its derivative products in Hong Kong paled in comparison with that in prewar Shanghai.¹⁹

Despite the discourse in Western and elite Chinese circles of the nutritional value of milk, and of soymilk as a substitute, Hong Kong consumers did not readily adapt to the use of soy as a protein source. In a report titled "Nutrition in Hong Kong" in 1939, the colony's governor spoke of the initial unpopularity of soybean products: "the Southern Chinese are rather inclined to look down upon [the] soya bean as a food for pigs." It was soymilk that proved to be the winning recipe, as the beverage surmounted the initial dislike of soybean products.²⁰ Its nutritional value was recognized as early as 1941, when the Nutrition Research Committee confirmed that soymilk provided nourishment for older children and adults and that children over six months old could easily digest it. The committee noted the popularity of soymilk in

¹⁷ *SCMP*, 2 Feb. 1940, 8.

¹⁸ *SCMP*, 15 Feb. 1940, 7.

¹⁹ Lo Shuk Ying, 盧淑櫻, 母乳與牛奶：近代中國母親角色的重塑 (1895–1937) [*Muru yu niunai: Jindai Zhongguo muqin juese de chongsu* (1895–1937)] [Breast milk and cow's milk: the reshaping of the role of mothers in modern China (1895–1937)] (Hong Kong, 2018), chap. 3; R-22-3-718 (information on condensed milk products and their producers, 1942), S-118-1-17 (market information on dairy products, 1942–1945), U38-2-2394 (market information on dairy products, 1941–1942), U38-5-86 (dairy products, 1942–1943), Shanghai Municipal Archives (hereafter SMA).

²⁰ Section IV General Character of Diets in a report titled "Nutrition in Hong Kong," which the Governor of Hong Kong enclosed in his letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies dated 21 Mar. 1940, CO 859/33/2, The National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA). The soybean was held in low esteem by the ancient Chinese as well; H. T. Huang, "Early Uses of Soybean in Chinese History," in *The World of Soy*, ed. Sidney W. Mintz, Chee-Beng Tan, and Christine M. Du Bois (Singapore, 2008), 46–47. This phenomenon parallels the perception of the soybean not as human food but as an industrial crop in its early history in North America. Mintz, Tan, and Du Bois, "Introduction: The Significance of Soy," in Mintz, Tan, and Du Bois, *World of Soy*, 4.

government refugee camps and welfare centers.²¹ Early reports mentioned soymilk’s taste, which “differ[ed] somewhat from cow’s milk,” but confirmed its popularity, if only in government welfare programs.²²

Vitasoy emerged in this period, with the manufacturer positioning its soymilk as a substitute for milk, or as “poor people’s milk.” “Food for the Poor,” read the newspaper headline on March 11, 1940, when Hong Kong Soya Bean Products Co., Ltd. opened its Vitasoy factory on Hong Kong Island.²³ Addressing what the article labeled as “the nutrition problem,” the factory was to produce “a cheap supply of nutritious food at prices within the reach of the masses.” On hand at the opening ceremony were experts who demonstrated the manufacturing of “Vita” milk from soybeans, calcium, and cod-liver oil.

The company’s founder, Lo Kwee-seong, was born in Guangdong. He spent his formative years in Malaya and Hong Kong, where he earned a degree in business and commerce from the University of Hong Kong.²⁴ While in business in Shanghai, he had learned the power of the soybean as a source of nutrition for the Chinese. At the company’s opening ceremony, Lo claimed that the “soya bean needs no introduction” because “its food value had long been recognized by our great grandfathers, 5,000 years ago.” What “our fore-fathers guessed of its nutritional value has now been verified by the present-day chemists in . . . modern laboratories,” he continued, confirming the purported Chinese roots of the nutritious soybean. Yet it would require tremendous effort to activate the potential of this nonindigenous ingredient in Hong Kong. The British colony did indeed trade in soybeans but its residents needed some time to warm up to the beverage produced from them. Lo’s company was to produce soymilk “cheaply and under hygienic conditions.” He considered it “a public service” to make soymilk available to “the poorer section of the community” in quantity and “at such low prices as to be within their means.”²⁵

The director of medical services, Dr. P. S. Selwyn-Clarke, echoed Lo’s sentiments. As he continued to drive “the social progress” of the colony through his campaign against malnutrition and tuberculosis, what Selwyn-Clarke found wanting in Hong Kong were “cheap sources of

²¹ *SCMP*, 18 Apr. 1941, 8. In certain mainland Chinese cities, Western science foregrounded children in the measure of milk’s social and commercial value (Fu, *Other Milk*).

²² Appendix C1 Soy Bean Milk, “Nutrition in Hong Kong,” CO 859/33/2, TNA.

²³ *SCMP*, 11 Mar. 1940, 15. The company was incorporated in Hong Kong on March 6, 1940. “Memorandum and Articles of Association of The Hong Kong Soya Bean Products Company, Limited. Incorporated the 6th day of March 1940,” HKRS122-5-194, HKPRO.

²⁴ “115th Congregation (1982): Lo Kwee Seong, Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*,” University of Hong Kong, accessed 20 May 2021, <https://www4.hku.hk/hongrads/graduates/c-b-e-b-a-kwee-seong-lo-lo-kwee-seong>.

²⁵ *SCMP*, 11 Mar. 1940, 15.

supply of nutritious food which is within reach of the masses.”²⁶ The newly established soymilk factory worked in concert with the colonial authorities; Vitasoy earned the director’s praise, as the company supplied Queen Mary Hospital and the tuberculosis clinic run by the Maryknoll Sisters in Kowloon City.²⁷ That Lo and Selwyn-Clarke explained the exigencies of Hong Kong in terms of “modernity” and “social progress” reflects the prevailing mentality of the Chinese elite and the colonial government, which considered the colonized subjects of Hong Kong as backward and in need of salvation.

This portrayal did not necessarily conflict with the self-image of Hong Kong Chinese at the time, who appeared eager to improve their physical well-being. A Chinese news article published in 1941 expounded on the virtues of Vitasoy, calling it “a tonic the benefits of which far exceed its costs.” The article detailed the production process of this soymilk, which it claimed was known colloquially as 豆腐漿, or *doufujiang* (literally, the serum of tofu). Elaborating on Vitasoy’s fortifying potential for the masses, the article offered details in terms of Western nutritional sciences.²⁸ Its meticulous description indicates that the local Chinese (even the literate among them who represented the paper’s readership) found not only the nutritional discourse novel but the product itself so foreign that it required an analogy to a local product to render it comprehensible.

The news article referred to the product by its trademarked Chinese name, 維他奶, *Wei-taa-naai* in Cantonese, which combines the prefix “vita” (suggesting vitamins and nutritional elements defined by Western science) with the suffix *naai*, which denotes a milk product.²⁹ Its producer had chosen this name, a son of the company’s founder explained, to convey the meaning of “Vita Milk” in English.³⁰ Lo and his company smartly branded Vitasoy in Chinese as a “milk” with Western nutritional benefits. In fact, its Chinese name conveyed no indication that the beverage was a soy-based product.³¹ The brand’s logo featured its name in Chinese not in traditional Chinese calligraphy but in a font suggesting electrical circuitry, another signal of modernity and scientific advances (see [Figures 1 and 3](#)).³² Vitasoy was a novel product

²⁶ *SCMP*, 11 Mar. 1940, 15.

²⁷ Choi Po King, 厚生與創業 *Enriching Lives and Founding a Business: Vitasoy Looks Back over Fifty Years (1940–1990)* (Hong Kong, 1990), 19.

²⁸ *Ta Kung Pao* 大公報 (*TKP*) 1 Sep. 1941, 4.

²⁹ *Hong Kong Government Gazette*, Supplement, 26 July 1940.

³⁰ Winston Lo Yau-lai, interview, 6 Oct. 2008, 4, Hong Kong Heritage Project.

³¹ Fu describes a similar situation in Shanghai around the same time, where a producer requested endorsement for its product “Vito-Milk” while a health official urged that the product be called “bean milk” in Chinese characters. Fu, *Other Milk*, 170–72.

³² Vitasoy adopted its logo design in Chinese in 1940 (*TKP*, 9 Mar. 1940, 1). In the 1940s, its earliest packaging in the form of a wide-rimmed milk bottle featured this logo; see “Earliest

introduced in Hong Kong, where the general consumption of soymilk was so limited that its production process required explanation.³³

On March 9, 1940, Vitasoy’s first advertisement billed the product—which could be delivered to customers’ doorsteps for eight cents a bottle—as “the most economical and nutritional new beverage,” quoting the American soybean expert Dr. Howard Hoover.³⁴ However, this sales method, which evidently mimicked the delivery of fresh milk, was foreign to Hong Kong residents except for Westerners and Chinese elites used to drinking milk. Consequently, the company’s initial marketing and sales strategy did not realize its intention to popularize soymilk in Hong Kong. As Vitasoy’s sales performance continued to disappoint, in October 1940 the manufacturer opened Vita Café (維他餐室) at 608 Nathan Road, Kowloon. The café, which carried Vitasoy and Chinese cakes and was equipped with a huge refrigerator, served as the company’s retail store and sales headquarters in Kowloon. In June 1941, a branch opened on Pottinger Street on Hong Kong Island, but it had to close in December because of the Japanese occupation. The two cafés helped to boost Vitasoy’s popularity among the public, and the revenue they provided served to sustain Vitasoy’s business.³⁵

The subsequent suspension of that business, and more importantly the devastating conditions caused by wartime food shortages, accentuated the urgency of restoring Hong Kong to health. In January 1946, shortly after the British return to Hong Kong, Chinese residents, probably with speculators among them, flooded the entrances of Lane Crawford and Dairy Farm looking for dairy products.³⁶ The following year, the medical profession called for the introduction of milk to children’s diets for reasons of health.³⁷ For a brief period, milk played a role in the colonial government’s postwar attempt to fortify schoolchildren. The Education Department had considered congee (which the department described in its annual report as “a form of stew containing rice, vegetable and meat or fish”) as an alternative that would be more familiar to the local palate. The authorities ultimately concluded, however,

Vitasoy Bottle,” Hong Kong Memory Project, accessed 22 Mar. 2019, https://www.hkmemory.hk/MHK/collections/Soya_Bean_Milk/vitasoy_snapshots/index.html.

³³ Compared with prewar Shanghai, where there was a vibrant market of soymilk vendors, Hong Kong did not offer a ready customer base for this soy-based beverage. On Shanghai, see R1-16-1013 (list of soymilk vendors, Mar. 1934), SMA.

³⁴ *TKP*, 9 Mar. 1940.

³⁵ Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 19–20.

³⁶ *SCMP*, 4 Jan. 1946, 6; 5 Jan. 1946, 6. Lane Crawford, founded shortly after the establishment of Hong Kong as a British colony, is a retail outlet specializing in high-end products; Dairy Farm, incorporated in Hong Kong in 1886, bred imported cattle locally to supply fresh milk.

³⁷ *SCMP*, 14 Mar. 1947, 5.

that congee was impracticable “since not more than 3% of the schools had any facilities for cooking.” Instead, they issued bottled milk, along with a type of “vitamised biscuit,” to schoolchildren. The government arranged with Dairy Farm for the daily issue of fifteen thousand bottles of milk (reconstituted from powdered milk delivered to Hong Kong as postwar relief) free of charge to schoolchildren in 1947. In 1948, however, it had to discontinue the program for financial reasons.³⁸

This short-lived government campaign notwithstanding, milk still did not constitute a regular component of the diets of ordinary Chinese residents. According to one investigation, only one pupil out of sixty-five drank milk every day. Chinese dietary attitudes continued to privilege rice consumption as the standard of nutrition.³⁹ Furthermore, the cost of milk was beyond the reach of the average family.⁴⁰ By 1949, medical specialists had recognized the difficulty for ordinary Chinese of consuming milk daily, and they suggested soymilk as “an efficient substitute” to provide children with sufficient protein.⁴¹ Accordingly, in an attempt that year to improve the health of children at school, the authorities distributed over three million bottles of “reconstituted [from milk powder] and soy bean milk” to 225 schools to be given to students aged eight and under.⁴² The provision of soymilk alongside reconstituted milk made economic sense, as the price of fresh cow’s milk was significantly higher than that of Vitasoy. In August 1946, when the government implemented price controls to combat the black market, milk cost fifty cents and sixty-five cents for eight ounces and ten ounces, respectively.⁴³ At the same time, a ten-ounce bottle of Vitasoy cost just thirty cents a bottle, or less than half the cost of

³⁸ Annual report of the Education Department for the year ending 31 Mar. 1947, 27; Annual report of the Education Department for the year ending 31 Mar. 1948, 23; Annual report of the Education Department for the year ending 31 Mar. 1949, 24, CO 1045/168, TNA. School lunch programs were not unique to postwar Hong Kong. On school lunches as an educational phenomenon, see Suzanne Rice and A. G. Rud, eds., *Educational Dimensions of School Lunch: Critical Perspectives* (Cham, Switzerland, 2018). On the politics of school lunches and the competing agenda of the various interested parties, see Susan Levine, *School Lunch Politics: The Surprising History of America’s Favorite Welfare Program* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

³⁹ *Kung Sheung Evening News* 工商晚報 (KSEN), 19 Apr. 1948, 4.

⁴⁰ SCMP, 1 Oct. 1949, 8.

⁴¹ SCMP, 30 Sep. 1949, 3. In Shanghai, the same narrative gained currency both in the aftermath of the founding of the People’s Republic of China and during the reform era. In 1952, official reports linked the supply of soymilk to schoolchildren’s health. 关于学校卫生豆浆供应站要求拨款建筑屋三间的报告, 20 Aug. 1952, B105-5-605-53, SMA. In 1980, the authorities explored the possibility of supplying university and high school students with fortified soymilk “in order to alleviate the shortage of fresh [cow’s] milk.” 上海市第二商业局 30 May 1980, B98-6-391, SMA.

⁴² Colonial Social Welfare Advisory Committee’s report on “The Child at School,” dated 7 Jul. 1950, CO 859/244/9, TNA.

⁴³ SCMP, 17 Nov. 1946, 1.

milk.⁴⁴ Even civil servants considered milk expensive. Director of the Supplies and Distribution Department Arthur Clarke had not drunk fresh milk since before the war, consuming only powdered milk since the war’s end. Not surprisingly, milk was far beyond the reach of ordinary residents.⁴⁵ By 1952, the price difference between milk and Vitasoy had widened even further, as Vitasoy had reduced its price from thirty cents to twenty cents.⁴⁶

The concerted efforts of the British colonial regime resonated with Hong Kong’s postwar aspiration (and that of many other Asian cities in the period) to improve livelihoods as defined by Western, and increasingly global, notions of public health and nutrition. In their return to Hong Kong amid escalating calls for decolonization around the world, the British authorities attempted to earn the legitimacy to govern the colony with initiatives to improve the health of its residents as they crafted the Hong Kong body according to Western nutritional practices. Because of the price difference between cow’s milk and soymilk, the issue took on a definite class dimension, one that followed the contours of a discourse on race, wherein the British colonizers, working with enlightened Westernized Chinese elites, became the redeemer of a malnourished Chinese population.

Fruitful Symbiosis: Business Practices and Technology to the Rescue

Against this backdrop, Vitasoy’s producer reviewed its distribution practices after World War II. Previously, with the exception of Lo Kwee-seong, the Vitasoy board had thought that the beverage should be sold in the same way as milk (that is, via home delivery) lest the lower classes such as “coolies” become the major customers, thereby downgrading Vitasoy’s social status and value. Lo had thought otherwise, insisting that the original objective of Vitasoy was to provide the masses with the best nutrition possible at the lowest price. Accordingly, he proposed that Vitasoy be carried by the same vendors as soft drinks. This move, which the board accepted following the war, redirected Vitasoy toward being a company supplying a Western novelty while insisting on its health properties. The move proved successful, earning the company approximately HK\$31,000 in net profits in 1947.⁴⁷ Lo’s proposal also sidestepped the positioning of Vitasoy as intended for a specific clientele; instead, the product was now defined by a particular sales channel and its associated offerings. The great majority of Hong Kong Chinese did indeed belong to the lower classes but socioeconomic

⁴⁴ *Wah Kiu Yat Pao* 華僑日報 (WKYP), 11 May 1947, 3.

⁴⁵ “Fresh Milk—Price of . . ., from 16 Jun. 1950 to 7 Nov. 1952,” HKRS41-1-6212, HKPRO.

⁴⁶ *SCMP*, 26 Nov. 1952, 13.

⁴⁷ Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 28–30.

changes were about to propel them into higher strata, putting dispensable consumable items within their reach.

The earlier bottling and packaging of Vitasoy were simple but failed to prolong its shelf life, as soymilk requires refrigeration to stay fresh. Its distribution was thus restricted to nearby dealers who had refrigeration facilities.⁴⁸ A significant advance in production came in 1950. After winning a contract to produce Green Spot (an orange-flavored carbonated drink), Hong Kong Soya Bean Products Co., Ltd. employed Green Spot's bottling technology to supply Vitasoy in wide-mouthed bottles. However, the initial effort to extend Vitasoy's shelf life to six months ended in failure. Green Spot's food expert explained to Lo that the pasteurizing temperature of milk was below the temperature needed to sterilize highly alkaline soymilk. With the expert's assistance, a research laboratory was set up in 1952 to determine the temperature needed to both sterilize soymilk and maintain its taste without refrigeration. Thereafter, the company adopted soft-drink manufacturing machines to produce and sterilize its soymilk. Its production facilities were also transformed from semi-automation to full automation, which increased production from 38 bottles per minute in 1950 to 120 in 1957 and then to 400 in 1962.⁴⁹ A Chinese newspaper featured the 1958 visit of three actresses to Vitasoy's automated facilities, which were said to be capable of producing up to 240 bottles per minute, or over 100,000 bottles a day.⁵⁰ The manufacture of soymilk now blended the features of milk and soft-drink production (Figure 1).

Vitasoy's success in this period stemmed from its ability to leverage differentiated access to new technologies. Not all technologies are created equal in terms of access and function. Industrial production had made refrigeration available to certain nations but only at the individual level; access to refrigeration remained privileged and followed the socioeconomic divide. Through sterilization and packaging, Vitasoy bridged that divide. By aggregating technological issues at the production level (sterilization to prolong shelf life and eliminate the need for refrigeration), Vitasoy overcame the limited access to another technology (refrigerators) at the individual level of Hong Kong households.

By leveraging the discourse of health and modernity, on the one hand, and taking advantage of a technological breakthrough, on the other, Vitasoy found a winning recipe for its beverage. Encouraged by Lo and others, the discourse that sprang forth from "modern" notions of health circulated along the Chinese interface with the West, a zone

⁴⁸ *SCMP*, 14 June 1964, 8.

⁴⁹ *SCMP*, 9 Mar. 1970, 35; Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 38–39, 60–61, Appendix IV.

⁵⁰ *WKYP*, 28 Sep. 1958, 9.



Figure 1. From the milk bottle to soft-drink packaging: a Vitasoy bottle (front) displayed alongside a Green Spot bottle, at “The History of Hong Kong Industry” exhibition, Hong Kong Museum of History. Photo by the author.

that encompassed Shanghai and Southeast Asia as well as Hong Kong. Although Chinese elites were instrumental in shaping modernity in an inter-Asian context, the discourse on soymilk did not bear fruit readily. Only with the arrival of another technology from the outside—sterilization and bottling know-how—did the discourse produce commercial results.

Beyond sterilization and bottling, working with Green Spot in 1950 and subsequently with Pepsi-Cola in 1957 provided Hong Kong Soya

Bean Products Co., Ltd. with opportunities to upgrade its logistic facilities and improve its sales strategy. Sometime around 1948, Lo had purchased trucks and light-duty vehicles to speed up the delivery process to various sales points, although some salespersons still relied on bicycles. Bottling Green Spot prompted the company to purchase additional trucks to maintain the volume of Vitasoy distributed because it had agreed to deliver Vitasoy and Green Spot in the same trucks. Meanwhile, because of the embargo on China during the Korean War, the Coca-Cola Company rescaled its business in China and Hong Kong and “right-sized” its staff. Hong Kong Soya Bean Products Co., Ltd. absorbed some of Coca-Cola’s ex-salespersons and learned from their district marketing strategies.⁵¹

Bottling Pepsi-Cola also improved the efficiency of Vitasoy deliveries.⁵² Pepsi-Cola was renowned for its high-speed “palletization” distribution system, which was four times faster than the old method of loading and unloading. Elaborating on the benefits of the “palletization system,” a newspaper article explained, “Ordinarily, it will take four persons and forty minutes to load and unload a beverage rack truck, whereas, using this system with the help of a Fork Lift, the entire operation takes only ten minutes and one person.” Adopting “the scientific distribution system” of Pepsi-Cola greatly enhanced Vitasoy’s distribution capacity.⁵³

Working with Pepsi-Cola also allowed Vitasoy to refine its sales system. The company divided up sales districts to shorten the distance that each vehicle needed to travel. More crucially, Vitasoy received training from Pepsi-Cola salespersons, whom a local newspaper described as “the most regular, most dependable and courteous.”⁵⁴ A systematic sales strategy was established. The success of the beverage prompted the company in 1960 to establish a production branch, to be equipped with European machinery, which promised a three-fold increase in capacity.⁵⁵ Vitasoy’s sales give credence to the success of this symbiotic relationship with the soft-drink business. By 1955, synergy with Green Spot had jumpstarted Vitasoy sales, which skyrocketed to 8.4 million bottles from less than a million in 1941. From 1955 to 1960, as the partnership with Pepsi-Cola kicked into high gear, Vitasoy sales expanded even further, registering a fivefold increase (Figure 2).

⁵¹ SCMP 7 June 1957, 13; Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 30, 36–37, 47–48.

⁵² KSEN, 26 Apr. 1957, 4; WKYP, 4 June 1957, 10.

⁵³ SCMP, 7 June 1957, 13.

⁵⁴ SCMP, 7 June 1957, 13; Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 48–49.

⁵⁵ WKYP, 14 Sep. 1960, 7; 11 Oct. 1960, 8; *Kung Sheung Morning News* 工商日報(KSMN), 12 Oct. 1960, 7.

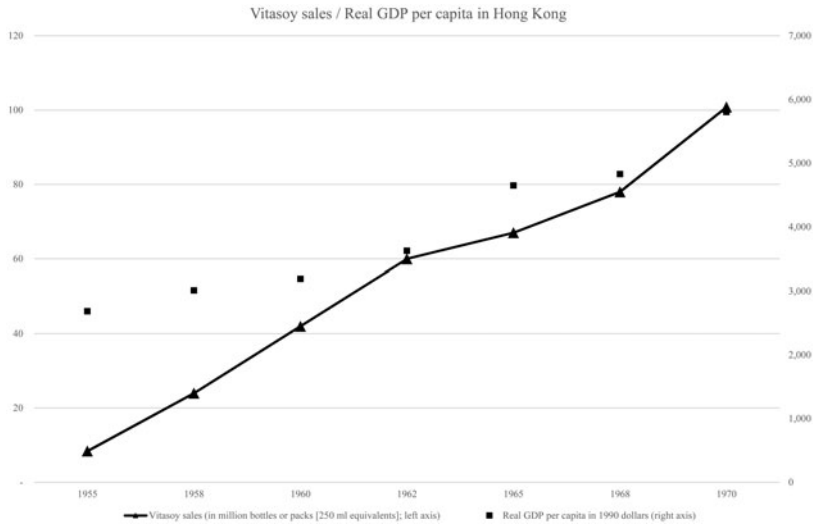


Figure 2. Vitasoy sales in conjunction with real GDP per capita growth in Hong Kong. Sources: William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi, “K. S. Lo and Vitasoy in Hong Kong and North America: Work with Soyfoods” (unpublished manuscript chapter, Soyinfo Center, Lafayette, CA, 2004), https://www.soyinfocenter.com/HSS/ks_lo_and_vitasoy.php; Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *The Soyfoods Industry and Market, Directory and Databook* (Lafayette, CA, 1983), 53A; Jutta Bolt, Robert Inklaar, Herman de Jong, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, “Maddison Project Database, version 2018” (2018).

In addition to the technological breakthroughs that enabled and increased the production of Vitasoy, refinement of the company’s logistics management also allowed the widespread distribution of the beverage. The refined distribution system expanded the circulation of Vitasoy, making it possible to consume “modernity” on an ever-increasing scale.⁵⁶ Just as important as consumer aspirations, “modernity” needed to be produced, as the transfer of technological know-how and business practices facilitated its physical manifestation on an expanding scale.

Public discourse in Hong Kong rarely contained an explicit expression of a “middle class” before the 1970s. Yet, the colony’s robust economic growth, especially from the mid-1950s onwards, had indeed expanded the disposable income of the masses (Figure 2). Previous

⁵⁶ The spread of technological know-how also enabled the gradual expansion of such consumption of “modernity” at multiple locations in similar periods. In Singapore, Yeo Hiap Seng (YHS) experimented with different technologies for its soy beverage Beanvit. In 1955, the Fairs and Exhibition in Ipoh featured YHS’s Beanvit as a soymilk catering to the ethnic Chinese market. While YHS had initially offered canned Beanvit, the company switched to promotion of the bottled version of the soymilk in 1960. *Singapore Free Press*, 7 Oct. 1955, 8; *Nanyang Siang Pau*, 30 Sep. 1955, 11; 3 Oct. 1957, 16; 15 July 1960, 6; *Straits Times*, 3 June 1960, 14.

studies of this emerging middle class have focused on its budding political capacity, and studies connecting consumption to middle-class formation have analyzed the lifestyle changes that took place only in later periods.⁵⁷ The upsurge in Hongkongers' consumption of modernity via Vitasoy calls our attention to articulation of their rising perceptions of prosperity, albeit in more measured consumption, even in the beginning stages of middle-class formation.

Beyond Hong Kong, the idea of producing soymilk to conform to notions of modern science circulated in other Asian cities under Western influence in different time periods. In 1960, Lo flew to Taiwan to explore the market opportunities there.⁵⁸ Decades before, a certain Dr. Miller, a "medical missionary in China," had applied his "professional skill" to identifying "an indigenous food of low cost" to solve "the malnutrition he saw all around him." Miller's efforts came full circle when his son, "intent on making his father's processing system as widely available as possible" to allow people to derive the greatest benefit, opened a soymilk plant in Indonesia in 1955.⁵⁹ Vitasoy's producer also became part of this effort as the company hosted interns dispatched by the Indonesian government to learn about soymilk production.⁶⁰

Circulating in this inter-Asian context was not merely the discourse of soymilk effecting the national redemption of malnourished Asian countries but, more potently, also the technological know-how of soymilk production and packaging. In Hong Kong, Vitasoy seized the opportunity at this critical juncture, playing a major role in delivering "bottled goodness" to fortify a "malnourished" and aspiring clientele. Originating in both a national and regional discourse, Vitasoy benefited from its partnership with soft-drink brands to produce a beverage that conformed to aspirations for a modern lifestyle and promised to deliver bodily health.

Applying Technology to Culturally and Economically Differentiated Bodies

The partnership with soft-drink producers provided a symbiotic opportunity for Vitasoy. Yet the successful adaptation of their technology

⁵⁷ Tai-lok Lui, "Rearguard Politics: Hong Kong's Middle Class," *Developing Economies* 41, no. 2 (2003): 161–83; Annie Hau-nung Chan, "Middle-Class Formation and Consumption in Hong Kong," in *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyle and Identities*, ed. Beng-Huat Chua (London, 2000), 98–134.

⁵⁸ *WKYP*, 13 Jan. 1960, 10.

⁵⁹ *New York Times*, 18 Sep. 1955, 21.

⁶⁰ *WKYP*, 23 Aug. 1954, 5.

required an understanding of local sensitivities. The adroit business maneuvers of Vitasoy’s producer responded to Hong Kong’s climatic conditions and cultural proclivities, as well as its stage of economic development. Through those maneuvers, the company was able to craft Vitasoy into a soymilk delivery and consumption experience that was distinct in the inter-Asian context.

In an early maneuver, Vitasoy’s producer responded to the requirements of the Hong Kong regulatory authorities while at the same time adapting the beverage to local cultural particularities. A 1937 medical report stipulated the parameters for the proper pasteurization of milk.⁶¹ In the same year, the Urban Council required that all dairies pasteurize their milk prior to its sale.⁶² All milk was to be heated to between 145°C and 150°C, kept at that temperature for twenty minutes, and then cooled immediately to between 55°C and 60°C.⁶³ The sterilization of soymilk followed a different procedure. Professor Chiu Yan-tsi wrote in 1931 that soybean drinks, like any animal milk, would keep for two to three days and that their small-scale production posed no difficulty to preservation.⁶⁴ This did not apply to Vitasoy’s producer, however, as it intended to produce soymilk on a large scale. In the 1940s, the company heated Vitasoy to remove the enzyme in the soybeans. In addition to prolonging its shelf life, this practice also rendered the soy beverage a “cooked” product (as opposed to a “raw” food, or 生冷食物).

In those early days of production, the general public harbored “a strong prejudice” against soymilk, which the Cantonese called *hon-loeng* (寒涼; “something that wears down body energy”).⁶⁵ That prejudice highlights the diverging notions of health even among communities within East Asia. While the northern Chinese had long incorporated soymilk into their diets, the southern Chinese conceptualized soy beverages differently in terms of their effect on bodily health. Such differences translated into initial resistance to Vitasoy in Hong Kong. Although the objective of pasteurizing milk by heating it was improved food safety, the process also allowed Vitasoy to overcome cultural resistance to and gain popularity for its novel product.

⁶¹ *SCMP*, 9 Feb. 1937, 8.

⁶² *SCMP*, 15 Apr. 1937, 11.

⁶³ *SCMP*, 12 May 1937, 10.

⁶⁴ Zhao Enci, 趙恩賜, “豆漿之物理及化學性質之研究” [An investigation of the physical and chemical materiality of soymilk], *Lingnan Journal* 2, no. 3 (1931): 19.

⁶⁵ *SCMP*, 14 June 1964, 8. Fruits and vegetables eaten raw or lightly cooked are considered “cooling,” or *hon-loeng*, and drinking cold drinks can lead to *yang* deficiency. Katherine Gould-Martin, “Hot Cold Clean Poison and Dirt: Chinese Folk Medical Categories,” *Social Science & Medicine* 12, no. 1B (1978): 39; Youzhi Sun, Pei Liu, Yi Zhao, Lei Jia, Yanhua He, Steve An Xue, Xiao Zheng, et al., “Characteristics of TCM Constitutions of Adult Chinese Women in Hong Kong and Identification of Related Influencing Factors: A Cross-Sectional Survey,” *Journal of Translational Medicine* 12, no. 140 (2014): 7.

In later periods, Vitasoy's producer continued to demonstrate its business ingenuity in responding to regulatory demands in the face of material limitations in postwar Hong Kong. For the preservation of food and beverages, refrigeration is the ideal option, and yet few in Hong Kong could afford a refrigerator in the postwar period. The lack of refrigeration had resulted in Chinese consumers boiling milk to preserve it. For more than just technological reasons, ordinary Chinese people in Hong Kong were more likely to preserve milk by boiling it than to store it in a refrigerator. Boiling milk was such a well-instilled good habit among the Chinese that an unofficial member of the Sanitary Board had observed that they never "eat anything raw or drink any milk without boiling it."⁶⁶ The Food Shops (Amendment) By-laws passed in 1954 mandated that all food shops selling or displaying food for sale must warehouse or store the foodstuffs in a refrigeration facility with a cold-storage chamber showing the temperature of the compartment.⁶⁷ This new rule meant that every retail store selling milk and/or Vitasoy had to purchase a refrigerator.

Refrigerators gradually came within the reach of storeowners. In 1950, the Bosco Corporation's refrigerator was advertised at a price of HK\$850, a sum that exceeded the food and fuel expenditures of an average working-class person for an entire year.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Bosco's price was probably exceptionally low, as a GEC model was available in 1952 for HK\$1,700.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, refrigerator prices subsequently fell, as the industry engaged in a price competition. By June 1959, a 5.5-cubic foot model was being advertised for HK\$795 and a 7-cubic foot model for HK\$980. A refrigerated soft-drink compartment with a capacity of 144 bottles retailed at \$1,550.⁷⁰ The increasing demand for stores to sell food and drinks was probably behind such competition. The introduction of a new payment method also made it easier for stores to own cooling compartments. By 1955, the installment payment method had become an important way for British, French, American, East German, and Italian home appliance manufacturers to boost sales in Hong Kong.⁷¹ By 1958, it was not uncommon to pay for a refrigerator in ten to twelve installments.⁷² For those who still found purchasing unaffordable, they could rent a refrigerator for HK\$30 per

⁶⁶ *SCMP*, 30 July 1924, 10.

⁶⁷ *SCMP*, 3 June 1954, 8.

⁶⁸ *SCMP*, 20 Dec. 1950, 11; Hong Kong, Census and Statistics Department, *Hong Kong Statistics, 1947–1967* (Hong Kong, 1969), 215.

⁶⁹ *SCMP*, 17 Dec. 1952, 9.

⁷⁰ *KSMN*, 2 June 1959, 1.

⁷¹ *TKP*, 2 June 1955, 4.

⁷² *KSEN*, 2 July 1958, 8.



Figure 3. Vitasoy containers, in a re-created shop in the Hong Kong Museum of History. Photo by the author.

month.⁷³ Although refrigerators were no longer completely beyond reach for the average storeowner, their presence remained far from widespread.⁷⁴

Against this backdrop, a container innovation became a critical success factor in subverting the seasonality of Vitasoy sales. Its producer's profits had hitherto been heavily dependent on Vitasoy sales in the summer, which accounted for 80 percent of its annual turnover. The problem of seasonality also plagued the soft-drink industry. With the cooperation of a German machinery corporation, Lo Fong-seong, Lo Kwee-seong's brother, successfully designed in 1957 a container in which water could be heated and maintained at 62.8°C (Figure 3). Complementing the introduction of this new container, Vitasoy's producer advertised its revamped product offering as follows: “Hot Vitasoy is

⁷³ WKYP, 6 July 1958, 3.

⁷⁴ Access to capital-intensive technology leads to differentiated industry dynamics. Alessandra Tessari and Andrew Godley demonstrate that while the British poultry industry worked with supermarkets in leveraging improvements in refrigeration technologies and shaped the supply lines of frozen birds, the fragmented Italian poultry industry resisted mass production and modernized by innovating around refrigeration processes to produce dry chicken. Tessari and Godley, “Made in Italy, Made in Britain: Quality, Brands and Innovation in the European Poultry Market, 1950–80,” *Business History* 56, no. 7 (2014): 1057–83.

the single best beverage in the autumn and winter months. Increasing your body heat and moisturizing your skin.”⁷⁵ The new container, essentially an icebox that doubled as a heating unit, served as a Vitasoy distribution tool, boosting sales of the beverage during the cold season to 50 percent of its peak summer sales.⁷⁶ More than a primitive substitute for a refrigerator, the container warmed Vitasoy during the cooler months, thereby reinforcing the brand’s effort to alleviate cultural biases stemming from soymilk’s presumed “cooling” quality. What started out as a remedy for the inaccessibility of technology yielded a product distribution system that responded to local cultural peculiarities and, in the process, provided a tremendous counterbalance to business seasonality.

Vitasoy soon registered another meteoric rise in popularity, with annual sales increasing 324 percent from 1960 to 1970.⁷⁷ By 1968, 78 million bottles of Vitasoy were being sold per year, second only to Coca-Cola’s 100 million. More than just a soy beverage, Vitasoy had established itself as a competitor to soft drinks. “Vitasoy has become the new soft-drink craze of the British Crown Colony,” noted *Time* magazine in 1968, a year in which the bottled soy beverage captured 25 percent of the Hong Kong soft-drink market.⁷⁸ Its rise unfolded as the economy of Hong Kong was experiencing tremendous growth. Between 1961 and 1970, GDP per capita in Hong Kong logged six years of double-digit growth, aggregating in an increase of over 70 percent in real terms during the decade.⁷⁹ Its genesis as “poor people’s milk” notwithstanding, Vitasoy had become the beverage of choice for the upwardly mobile people of Hong Kong (Figure 2). As the Hong Kong economy took off, the city’s residents began to develop the financial wherewithal to consume items that conveyed modernity and prosperity. Through product positioning and customer reception, what began as a cheaper version of cow’s milk had morphed into a competitor for carbonated soft drinks.

By the late 1960s Vitasoy’s producer, as well as the dairy companies that bottled the product, were finding bottling a cost burden. A new packaging format, the Tetra Pak carton, provided the answer in the mid-

⁷⁵ *KSMN*, 5 Nov. 1957, 8.

⁷⁶ William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi, “K. S. Lo and Vitasoy in Hong Kong and North America: Work with Soyfoods” (unpublished manuscript chapter, Soyinfo Center, Lafayette, CA, 2004), https://www.soyinfocenter.com/HSS/ks_lo_and_vitasoy.php; Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 41.

⁷⁷ Choi, *Enriching Lives*, Appendix I.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Shurtleff and Aoyagi, “K. S. Lo and Vitasoy,” n.p.

⁷⁹ Hong Kong, Census and Statistics Department, “Gross Domestic Product (GDP), implicit price deflator of GDP and per capital GDP,” released 14 May 2021, https://www.censtatd.gov.hk/en/web_table.html?id=31.

1970s. In the late 1950s, the Swedish company Tetra Pak had invented a fully automated packaging system that sealed milk in cardboard containers lined with sterilized polythene. The new technology could keep milk fresh in an ordinary refrigerator for three days.⁸⁰ By 1965, the technology had improved to the extent that milk contained in Tetra Pak cartons could stay fresh for up to six months without refrigeration.⁸¹ This breakthrough in milk packaging promised to reduce transportation and pasteurization costs.⁸² Not only did the new technology minimize the risk of contamination from bottles that may not have been thoroughly washed, but it also eliminated the cost of handling fragile glass bottles. Another important advance was that milk beverages could be offered in a format that allowed easy storage and stacking.

This change in packaging also responded to the market environment in Hong Kong. The first supermarket opened in the colony in November 1965, with more to follow in the remaining years of the 1960s.⁸³ Although the appearance of supermarkets did not change people’s purchasing behavior overnight, their increasing popularity brought about changes in the packaging of beverages in the 1970s. Supermarkets aimed to keep the manual handling of merchandise to a minimal level, rendering it problematic to handle the distribution and sale of bottled drinks, which required the processing of a cash deposit.⁸⁴ Just as important as the shift in beverage packaging from reusable containers to disposable packages was to inventory control and sales efficiency, it also facilitated the changing lifestyle of the people of Hong Kong. In response to these changes, Vitasoy’s producer faced a repackaging decision. Despite signs of an initial preference for reusable bottles, the board ultimately decided to adopt the paper carton package.⁸⁵

Local interest in the new packaging design accumulated sufficient momentum in Hong Kong for Tetra Pak to set up a temporary Far East office in the city in November 1973, promising to “contribute to the further development of the dairy industry in East Asia and to the efficient distribution of the important milk proteins in the area.”⁸⁶ Within three years of the office’s establishment, Vitasoy’s producer had adopted the Tetra Pak system to present the beverage in a “keep fresh package.”⁸⁷ This move reduced the company’s transportation

⁸⁰ *SCMP*, 6 Oct. 1959, 8.

⁸¹ *SCMP*, 20 Oct. 1965, 8.

⁸² *Times* (London), 21 Apr. 1967.

⁸³ *SCMP*, 13 Oct. 1965, 9; 14 Oct. 1966, 17; 18 Oct. 1966, 6; 23 Oct. 1967, 12; 22 Mar. 1968, 24; 30 Sept. 1969, 29; *TKP*, 20 Oct. 1966, 5; *WKYP*, 30 Sep. 1969, 11.

⁸⁴ Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 75.

⁸⁵ Lo Yau-lai interview, 19–22.

⁸⁶ *SCMP*, 7 Nov. 1973, 24.

⁸⁷ *SCMP*, 21 Nov. 1975, 40.

costs.⁸⁸ The producer of “the popular soyabean milk” adopted the new packaging, which it said was “ideally suited to local climatic and living conditions.”

By the mid-1970s, the company had firmly established Vitasoy as a local Hong Kong product, delivering this liquid form of soybeans, which, a local English newspaper claimed, had served as “the most important source of protein for the Chinese people for 3,000 years.” Its technologically advanced packaging was designed to keep “this highly nutritional and refreshing product . . . conveniently stored.”⁸⁹ In 1975, Vitasoy’s producer launched a new advertising campaign with the slogan “Not just a simple soft drink” (點只汽水咁簡單). Instead of simply echoing the company’s earlier strategy, this campaign targeted customers aged fifteen to twenty-four who had consumed the beverage because of their parents’ belief that it was a healthy beverage. The new campaign succeeded in consolidating a generation that had grown up with Vitasoy, cementing its image as a fashionable and healthy beverage.⁹⁰ Indeed, the beverage had achieved its local status not for its origin in an indigenous protein source but for its connotation of modernity. In the early days, Lo had invoked the “Chinese” origin of the soybean to render the beverage it produced less foreign to the ethnic majority in Hong Kong. More importantly, his company’s ingenious marketing strategy and technological enhancements made Vitasoy a Hong Kong icon, a beverage that represented a material embodiment of Hong Kong’s broader social and economic transformation during a period of robust development.

Conclusion

Vitasoy entered the scene in colonial Hong Kong as a means of national and bodily salvation, traditionalizing modern (read: Western) notions of science, medicine, and health. Rather than drawing a sharp

⁸⁸ Choi, *Enriching Lives*, 56. In Singapore, YHS adopted the Tetra Pak design in 1968, pioneering the production of cardboard-boxed soymilk worldwide (*Straits Times*, 17 Sep. 1969, 19). Before that, the company had bottled its soymilk product (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 15 July 1960, 6). Despite its substantial investments in bottling machinery (*Straits Times*, 30 Oct. 1962, 14), the company understood the shortcomings of bottling Beanvit. So, to enhance delivery convenience, eliminate the need to return empty bottles, and make it easier for consumers to carry Beanvit (*Nanyang Siang Pau*, 18 Aug. 1968, 32), YHS turned to Tetra Pak, creating an alternative to its bottled offering.

⁸⁹ SCMP, 21 Nov. 1975, 40. This technology would catch the attention of the beverage industry as the market revitalized during the reform era in the People’s Republic of China. 上海市经济委员会、上海市生产技术局关于锦江食品联合公司从香港引进无菌纸包装软饮料生产线可行性研究的审批意见书, 26 May 1983, B43-1-103-1, SMA.

⁹⁰ Leonie Ki recounts this famous campaign in 點只廣告咁簡單 [Not simply advertisement] (Hong Kong, 1985), 119–26.

distinction between “tradition” and “modernity,” Vitasoy’s producer told a tale that appealed to one or the other at different stages of the beverage’s development. Vitasoy constituted a form of liquid protein that nourished modernist notions of public health and nutrition, celebrated the Chinese origin of its primary ingredient, and assumed packaging deemed efficient by cutting-edge modern business know-how.⁹¹ In the emerging market of Hong Kong, not only could notions of Western modernity readily become incorporated into the local repertoire, but what could be construed as “Chinese traditions” also varied according to the contours of regional differences. Mindful of this nuanced landscape, Vitasoy promised to deliver nutritional goodness, as calibrated by Western science, while adhering to what were considered longstanding practices of Chinese materiality in Hong Kong. The company availed itself of technological developments and solved the practical problems of preservation and cultural resistance. During Hong Kong’s era of economic takeoff, this combination proved to be a powerful formula for selling the beverage to a growing Hong Kong clientele, who adopted the product as their own in their pursuit of physical, economic, and material well-being.

The story of Vitasoy follows the usual development of invented tradition while offering a local twist that underscores the geographical particularities of Hong Kong at a specific moment in the city’s economic development.⁹² The fabrication of soymilk as a “traditional” Chinese food product that promoted health did not constitute a claim of authenticity for the purpose of cultural preservation but an act of creative storytelling for the purpose of commercial marketing. Into this beverage initially made from traditionally Chinese ingredients, Vitasoy’s producer infused meaning by drawing upon the search for modernity and material well-being in everyday life that blossomed in early twentieth-century China.⁹³ In particular, the soy beverage was intended to provide a solution to “the nutrition problem,” a problem that West-centric discourse had created for the “impoverished” East. In a bid to circumvent Western supremacy, a number of resourceful social reformers and scientists claimed to have found answers in Chinese history and traditions.⁹⁴

⁹¹ In her study of canning, Anna Zeide highlights canners’ battle with the opacity of the package and the need to establish consumer trust. Zeide, *Canned: The Rise and Fall of Consumer Confidence in the American Food Industry* (Berkeley, 2018). Instead of being a potential liability, the packaging of Vitasoy accentuated a modern lifestyle for its aspiring consumers.

⁹² Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, U.K., 1983).

⁹³ Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, 2014).

⁹⁴ Sean Hsiang-lin Lei, “From *Changshan* to a New Anti-malarial Drug: Re-networking Chinese Drugs and Excluding Chinese Doctors,” *Social Studies of Science* 29, no. 3 (1999): 323–58; Sigrid Schmalzer, *The People’s Peking Man: Popular Science and Human Identity in Twentieth Century China* (Chicago, 2008).

In the case of soymilk and Vitasoy, muted references to “Chinese tradition” were regional differences and locational specificities with respect to ingredient supplies and consumption patterns. The soybean is not indigenous to Hong Kong, and although the city had long traded actively in the commodity and produced various food items from it (including soy sauce and tofu), the consumption of soymilk was far from widespread, as indicated by Vitasoy’s initial difficulties in explaining the product to prospective customers.

The representation of Vitasoy as a modern beverage that energized a particular Chinese tradition calls for more nuanced analysis of what constitutes foreign and local in Chinese foodways. Its producer made Vitasoy a “local” product despite its foreignness to Hong Kong consumers on multiple levels: its purported function as a substitute for the cow’s milk that constituted part of a healthy Western diet, its alien nature as a northern Chinese import, and its commercial presentation, which stemmed from the West. “Local” does not merely serve as a geographic marker but also denotes a specific temporal dimension, which, for Vitasoy, was the emergence of a modern Hong Kong middle class in the postwar period. The product’s sales growth, while reflecting a desire for better bodily health, pivoted on technological and commercial enhancements in areas beyond nutritional discourse, underscoring the aspirations of a population with rising socioeconomic standing. From mimicking the packaging and delivery of milk, to following the practices of soft-drink operations, to expanding its distribution to supermarkets in the Tetra Pak format, Vitasoy readily adopted the imports of a modern lifestyle that increasingly resonated with its aspiring clientele. Through marketing and technological adaptations, Vitasoy’s producer created a local beverage to respond to the sociocultural conditions of a growing clientele experiencing economic growth and undergoing lifestyle transformation, articulating for the emerging market of postwar Hong Kong a modernity that had its origin in Chinese national discourse but then blossomed into a celebration of a lifestyle that economic progress enabled.

Food and drink do not have to come from the same place as their consumers in order to be considered “local.” Conversely, “global” is but a cultural imaginary through which consumers enhance their prestige or sense of well-being through consumption.⁹⁵ Vitasoy was “local” not because the beverage, or its key ingredients, had come from Hong Kong. Its producer rendered global meanings into local significance, offering a “local” alternative to a “global” desirable initially beyond the reach of Hong Kong consumers. To the people of postwar Hong Kong,

⁹⁵ Benjamin N. Lawrance and Carolyn de la Peña, eds., *Local Foods Meet Global Foodways: Tasting History* (Oxford, 2012).

Vitasoy’s producer provided a local articulation of global consumption that was economically affordable and within cultural proximity. In contrast to “culinary politics,” the consumption of this soy beverage was embedded not in a particular cooking style but in a specific historical context. Vitasoy’s producer offered an item that appealed to a middle class in the making (at least in its own perception of itself). In addition to the influence of a global/Western discourse and soymilk’s genesis in a project of national salvation, the making of Vitasoy into a local Hong Kong beverage needs to be contextualized in terms of technological availability, as well as handicap, alongside the economic trajectory the residents of Hong Kong experienced during a very particular historical period.

What makes Vitasoy a “local” beverage? Despite its leverage of discourses of Western origin, its producer has never touted the beverage as foreign. Nor does Vitasoy resonate with the population of Hong Kong, which is predominately Chinese, merely because its primary ingredient hails from China. Rather than offering “a taste of place,” or *terroir*, Vitasoy appeals with “a taste of home”—the home of an emerging modern middle class at the time of its introduction.⁹⁶ That specific taste emerged at a particular historical juncture, at a time when technological progress and socioeconomic conditions precipitated in a colonial city inhabited by Chinese residents a concoction that fused together a modernist notion of well-being and a purportedly national ingredient without the imposition of a hegemonic Chineseness. Modern Chineseness is not a predetermined identity but a complex system attuned to shifting local and external factors. More than political or national considerations, Vitasoy’s producer engineered its acceptance as a local beverage in Hong Kong by engaging a series of interrelated cultural, economic, and technological elements. More than the potential of soymilk as an elixir of national salvation, Vitasoy embodies a signifier of progress and modernity accessible to the aspiring consumers of Hong Kong’s emerging middle class.

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⁹⁶ On *terroir*, see Julie McIntyre, “Worlds in a Wine Glass: Rethinking the Global and the Local,” *Global Food History* 5, no. 1–2 (2019): 1–4.

House of Houqua and the Canton System (2016), demonstrates how China trade partners sustained economic exchange on a global scale long before Western imperialism ushered in the era of globalization in a Eurocentric modern world.