Chinese Protein PR: Selling Soymilk to Build a Nation, 2010-Present

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Introduction

In the 2010s, China was a hungry consumerist society with millions of mouths to feed. Chinese food producers targeted this vast consumer market with advertisements for "time-honored brands" that featured lovable characters and mascots, or picturesque imaginings of consumers enriching their lives by indulging in the food or beverage offerings. For these companies, a particularly lucrative market was and still is the "connected spender" and their families. This demographic was first defined by the US non-profit think tank The Demand Institute in 2017 as "the most engaged consumers from each income group, with no lower or upper boundary."[1] In China, they are urbanites whose disposable income and Internet savviness allowed them to make educated, health-conscious purchases in stores.[2] Chinese soymilk firms appealed to this demographic by portraying soymilk as an all-natural product that tasted good and made the consumer feel good. As a prime example, Vitasoy's 2009 print ad for low-sugar soymilk boasted of "low fat," "no artificial sweetener," "non-genetically modified soybeans," listing these attributes alongside a young woman in the middle of a cartwheel effortlessly executed while holding a carton of Vitasoy (See Figure 1).

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[1] "The Conference Board; Report Identifies A New Consumer Group: The Connected Spenders," *Investment Weekly News*, February 17, 2017.

[2] The Demand Institute, "No More Tiers," *China Business Review*, March 7, 2016, https://www.chinabusinessreview.com/no-more-tiers/. Due to an excessive difficulty in locating Chinese trade journals or market reports, in order to identify soymilk firms' target consumers, the closest equivalent was this online magazine run by "the US-China Business Council, a nonprofit and nonpartisan trade association that represents more than 200 American companies doing business in China."

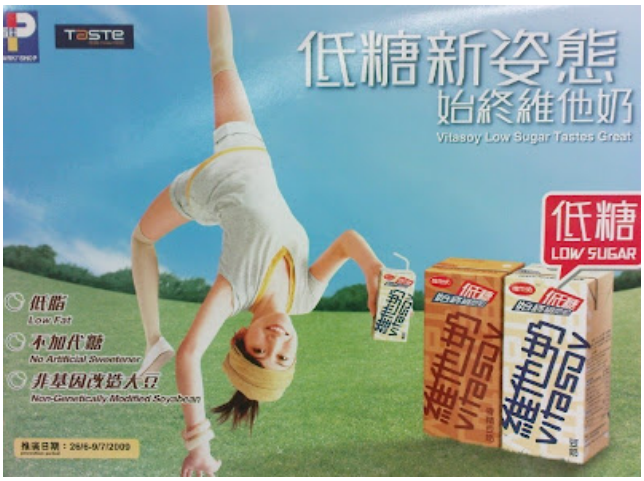

Figure 1. A Vitasoy Low-Sugar Soymilk Advertisement, 2009. Zhuizong Zhe 追蹤者, "Guanggao Pinglun Yi 廣告評論一 [First Advertisement Review]," *Chuncui Yougan Er Fa 純粹 有感而發 [Purely Inspired]* (blog), December 9, 2010, http://tong-www.blogspot.com/2010/12/blog-post_09.html.

The tagline, "New low sugar form, still the same Vitasoy," (*Di tang xin zitai, shizhong wei ta nai* 低糖新姿態，始终维他奶) insinuates that drinking soymilk was responsible for the drinker's health and impressive physical achievements.[3] The ad implied that Vitasoy has long been the preferred drink for health-conscious consumers and that Vitasoy could unlock the consumer's untapped potential. If Vitasoy could deliver newfound abilities, who knows what the future would hold for the individual, for their families, and for China?

And yet, these nutritional appeals were nothing new. In fact, soymilk advertisements of the present draw upon many of the same themes as soymilk's promotional materials from nearly a century ago in 1930s Republican China. Back then, the dairy milk celebrated by Western nutrition science was physically and financially out of reach for most of the population, and nutritionally fortified soymilk became the symbol of national fortitude and stamina that Chinese nutritionists promoted. A postcard produced by the China Nutritional Aid Council and kept by Julean Arnold, the former US commercial attaché to Shanghai and outspoken supporter of

[3] The direct translation of *zitai* 姿態 is "posture" instead of "form," referencing the pose held by the woman in the advertisement. The rhyming tagline is a wordplay connecting this new form of soymilk to the vitality of the Vitasoy consumer.

soybeans in Republican China, showed a vigorous Nana Soybean wielding a stick to chase Granny Cow into a museum. This postcard, which banished dairy milk to a place of historical spectacle and asserted Chinese authority over its own health, portrayed an active China reinventing itself in defiance to Western perceptions of its supposedly antiquated image. Rather than the soybean, it would be the cow that would be left behind. In this scenario, the "milk" derived from widely available soybeans symbolized dietary self-empowerment for the Chinese (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. Postcard issued from the China Nutritional Council, Julean Herbert Arnold Papers, Box 13, Folder "Soy Protein," Hoover Institution Archives. Jia-Chen Fu, The Other Milk: Reinventing Soy in Republican China (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 178.

Although the Republican Era portrayals of soymilk and the Vitasoy ads of 2009 both emphasize soymilk's health benefits, modern marketing has inflected health-consciousness with new meanings. Much has changed in the near century since the China first began promoting soymilk. Since the early 2000s, Chinese dairy producers have aggressively promoted dairy milk as a healthful beverage that rivals soymilk's nutritional benefits.[4] China today is nearly unrecognizable from what it was ninety-four years ago, with a Communist regime replacing the

[4] William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry and Market: Part I. Worldwide and Country-by-Country Analysis*, vol. 1 (Lafayette, CA: The Soyfoods Center, 1984), 90-91, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/007527924.

Republican one and a flourishing market economy. A big contributor to this market economy is China's industrialized food sector. At the same time, according to Pew Research Center data from a 2012 survey, forty-one percent of Chinese adults identified food safety as a "very big problem" in the country, and only two percent stated it was "not a problem at all."[5] In light of these circumstances, many Chinese consumers regard nutritional claims with greater skepticism. Yet, despite competition from dairy milk and consumers' rising fears of mass-produced food, the modern Chinese soymilk industry has continued to emphasize many of the same nutrition claims they made during the Republican Era.

This paper explores how the modern Chinese soymilk industry has leveraged the association between their product and health in its advertising to generate profit, which it converts into a tangible form of Chinese national strength. It analyzes how soymilk firms have *extended* soymilk's ties to nutrition-based nationalism in the past decade and a half by shaping their brand ethos around physically improving China through philanthropic projects. It builds on scholarship that demonstrates how soymilk and other soyfoods have been the sources for social and cultural change.[6] Because soy has managed to fold itself into the "cuisines, local rituals, social patterns, and economies" around the world, it has molded the dietary habits of a significant portion of the global population, including China.[7] Food studies scholars have emphasized the connections between national identity and diet. Historian Angela Ki Che Leung and anthropologist Melissa L. Caldwell point out how "consumers— as well as their bodies and their palates— in modern Asia were conscripted into national and global projects of state

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[5] Pew Research Center, "Growing Concerns in China about Inequality, Corruption" (Washington, DC, October 16, 2012), https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2012/10/16/growing-concerns-in-china-about-inequality-corruption/.
[6] Christine M. Du Bois, Chee-Beng Tan, and Sidney W. Mintz, eds., *The World of Soy*, Food Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 20-21. The editors emphasize the soybean's capacity to adapt to different societies and their foodways as a reason to consider it as a potential solution to international environmental and malnutrition crises.
[7] Du Bois, Tan, and Mintz, *The World of Soy*, 303.

making."[8] As a result, "what it means to be a good, virtuous, and even productive person, family member, or citizen is deeply enmeshed in how food and health are imagined, constituted, provisioned, and managed."[9] Therefore, when health experts, the government, or soymilk firms defined soymilk's role in society as a means of achieving wellness, those that drank soymilk contributed to the image of a virile China on the world stage.

Recent research has demonstrated how soymilk promoters, which included Julean Arnold and Chinese nutritionist Wu Xian, contributed to the development of a health-based Chinese national identity in the early twentieth century.[10] Between 1949 and the late 1970s, the Maoist regime further developed this association between health, nationhood, and soymilk by creating and dispensing nationwide nutritional standards that included soymilk as part of a balanced diet.[11] The discourse surrounding dairy milk, especially in recent times, has been far more critical. Historian Hilary Smith has suggested that "as rates of obesity have risen in rich Western countries, and China's political and economic power have grown, the proposition that eating like Americans or Europeans confers strength and health has lost credibility."[12] This discourse might lead one to believe that the development of a soymilk industry in China was inevitable, and that soymilk owes its market dominance to its aggressive government promotion of soymilk as a nutritious Chinese staple and an emblem of national progress. But these assumptions

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[8]Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell, eds., "Introduction: Food and Health: Fortification and Modern Asian State Making," in *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 1–22 at 2.
[9] Leung and Caldwell, "Introduction: Food and Health," 2.
[10]Jia-Chen Fu, *The Other Milk: Reinventing Soy in Republican China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 5, https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/book/63490; John D. Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local' in Post-World War II Hong Kong: Traditionalizing Modernity, Engineering Progress, Nurturing Aspirations," *Business History Review* 95, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 275-300 at 277, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007680521000210.
[11] Renée Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life in Maoist China, 1949-1980* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 64, https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/lib/ucsb-ebooks/detail.action?pq-origsite=primo&docID=7119950.
[12] Angela Ki Che Leung and Melissa L. Caldwell, eds., "Good Food, Bad Bodies: Lactose Intolerance and the Rise of Milk Culture in China," in *Moral Foods: The Construction of Nutrition and Health in Modern Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 262–84 at 280.

oversimplify a more complex and interesting story. In reality, mass-produced soymilk was not immediately welcomed by consumers when it was first introduced. Further, soymilk's success was not paved by government support alone. The traditional narrative assigns soymilk firms a passive role in establishing brand longevity and advancing soymilk's credibility. It assumes that the merits of soymilk's nutritional value alone could dispel the public's dissatisfaction with food safety in the 2010s, and that Chinese dairy is a trend rather than another government-supported industry encroaching upon the exact nutritional appeal soymilk has held for so long.[13] Current scholarship fails to consider how exactly today's soymilk firms have persevered through shifts in Chinese corporate law, and actively tried to repair consumers' trust with industrial food.

Following the Melamine Milk Scandal of 2008, the Chinese government severely punished dairy milk manufacturers involved. Moreover, it demanded that the rest of the industrial food industry hold itself accountable when protecting consumer safety by requiring that businesses prioritize their moral duty to consumers and society at large. Rather than approach these developments with passivity, soymilk firms have expanded upon this loosely defined corporate "social responsibility." They enhanced soymilk's role as a source of national pride as a domestic product and a protector of national interests. With a two-pronged approach, soymilk firms continue to advertise their health benefits and "Chineseness" to maintain a consistent image for soymilk. Taking to the Internet and social media, they have extended their reach to customers beyond what traditional print and TV ads could accomplish. Then, they burnished their image by highlighting the firm's donations and sponsored projects that target national crises and rural poverty. In doing so, they incorporate the consumer into these nation-building exercises. Rather than challenging Chinese dairies to reclaim their title as the "milk" of

[13] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry and Market*, 1:90; Leung and Caldwell, "Good Food, Bad Bodies: Lactose Intolerance," 276.

China, soymilk firms have reframed soymilk's role in dietary state-making as a pragmatic way to tackle societal issues and national crises, strengthening the association between the soymilk industry, the consumer, and domestic prosperity. By reinforcing their product as the milk of the people and for the people in their cause marketing, soymilk firms demonstrate proactivity, rather than reactivity, to both market competition and public scrutiny.

Chapter 1: China, The State of Soymilk

Soymilk has been part of the Chinese diet since the invention of stone rotary mills in the Warring States period (475 BCE— 221 BCE).[14] Yet despite soymilk's long-time presence, today's Chinese soymilk firms have to build rapport with existing customers and forge relationships with connected spenders before they can justify the existence of a soymilk industry as a net positive for society. To understand how they accomplished these goals, the first step is to define the ideological framework upon which nine decades of soymilk advertising have been scaffolded: nutritionism. Nutritionism, or the breakdown of foods into their micronutrient composition, gave soymilk's claim to health a numerical value. The following step is to document the socio-political circumstances that molded nutritionism into an expression of national identity. The final step is to connect this nutrition-based nationalism to the formation of the soymilk industry. In doing so, one can observe how mass-produced soymilk only achieved widespread success in China when all of these elements— nutrition, nationalism, industry, and marketing— converged. Chinese soymilk firms have wielded nutritionism against a variety of obstacles between the twentieth century and now. Nutritionism informs their marketing strategies today.

Actualizing Nutritionism with Soymilk in 1930s Republican China

Before documenting the proliferation of mass-produced soymilk, the terms "soymilk," "soybean milk," and "mass-produced soymilk" require further explanation. In Mandarin Chinese, the beverage of ground soybeans boiled in water, was first referred to as bean slurry (*doujiang* 豆浆) and is served as both a salty or sweet variety, sometimes with garnishings like

[14] Du Bois, Tan, and Mintz, *The World of Soy*, 52.

scallions or pickled mustard greens, or paired with deep fried crullers.[15] The ground soybeans must be heated to remove enzymes that can upset the stomach. The bean slurry can be drunk plain, with or without an egg beaten in. The reason for this variation is due to the many regional tastes that form Chinese cuisine: *doujiang* was and is still more widely enjoyed in northern China, where these varying methods of preparation persist.[16] *Doujiang* can be thought of as both a soup and a beverage— but as a slurry, its defining characteristic is that it is simply strained, seasoned (or not), and served in street stalls or at home. To further complicate this somewhat amorphous definition, *doujiang* can at times be used interchangeably with bean milk (*dounai* 豆奶) by native speakers.

Dounai is directly translated as "soybean milk," with emphasis on "proper engineering" to infuse soymilk with key nutrients that ensures its nutritional equivalence to cow's milk, hence the replacement of "slurry" with "milk" for easier association.[17] As part of the engineering process, *dounai* is typically filtered to render it texturally similar to cow's milk. By the late 1920s, Chinese nutrition scientists and physicians, who believed in the nutritive benefits of dairy milk in the everyday diet, distinguished *dounai* from *doujiang* in order to present the former as a viable alternative to dairy milk.[18] It is the processed, packaged drink later made available for consumer purchase that will be the focus of this paper.

To understand how Chinese mass-produced soymilk achieved its current stature as a rival to popular sodas and dairy milk's major competitor, we need to examine developments in nutrition science that emerged more than a century ago. It was "in 1912 [that] Polish chemist Casimir Funk coined the term vitamines to refer to those still unidentified factors associated with

[15] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry & Market,* 1:84-85.
[16] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 276.
[17] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 282.
[18] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 110.

deficiency diseases," which then "captured the popular imagination and brought to life these invisible and otherwise inert micronutrients."[19] That same year, American scientist Elmer McCollum's research team discovered vitamins A and B and identified their deficiency as the cause of vision impairment and beriberi respectively.[20] These discoveries opened the floodgates for vitamin research in the following two decades in Europe and the US. Soom scientists added vitamins C and D, as well as riboflavin, folic acid, beta-carotene, vitamin E, and vitamin K to the list.[21] A Western nutrition science community corralled around these breakthroughs, intent on developing a scientifically constructed, well-rounded diet to prevent deficiency diseases.

The resulting approach to eating, nutritionism, is the "focus on the nutrient composition of foods as the means for understanding their healthfulness" to form an "interpretation of the role of these nutrients in bodily health."[22] In layman's terms, nutritionism assesses a food's utilitarian value based on its vitamin, mineral, protein, fat, carbohydrate, and water content. This "discovery of vitamins… set into motion a paradigmatic shift in dietary ideals" that reframed food as the building blocks of the human body, and added a quantitative element to the qualitative enjoyment of food.[23] Arriving in China from Europe and the US in the late nineteenth century and peaking in the 1930s, nutritionism first circulated among nutritionists and scientists in the country. Nutrition scientists promoted nutritious eating as a way to generate national strength by curating citizens' diets in a methodical, scientific regimen.[24]

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[19] Gyorgy Scrinis, *Nutritionism: The Science and Politics of Dietary Advice*, Arts and Traditions of the Table: Perspectives on Culinary History (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 63-64.
[20] Scrinis, *Nutritionism,* 64.
[21] Scrinis, *Nutritionism,* 64.
[22] Scrinis, *Nutritionism,* 2.
[23] Charlotte Biltekoff, "Anxiety and Aspiration on the Home Front," in *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food & Health* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 45-79 at 46.
[24] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 8-9.

For thirty-seven years, China underwent a period of political instability, beginning with the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the subsequent Republican takeover in 1912, which was interrupted by the devastating Second Sino-Japanese War that lasted from 1937 to 1945, and ended with the Chinese Communist Party's takeover in 1949. Against this backdrop of chaos, nutritionism was significant not because it allowed China to co-opt Western dietary standards in some meager form of imitation. During the Republican Era, nutritionism for the Chinese people became an actionable form of nationalism, a means of growing individual strength that could be recorded by numerical targets of individual vitamins and minerals. Cultivating individual strength in turn fostered eventual power in numbers. Even as the government buckled and swayed from internal and external conflict, nutrition scientists believed people could weather the storm physically if they ate the right foods. Rather than a government-peddled nationalism, nutritionism began as a grassroots movement of newly minted Chinese food scientists who stripped food down to its biochemical composition, in order to simultaneously decry the insufficient Chinese diet and cite it as the reason for national weakness.[25]

As researcher Jia-Chen Fu described throughout *The Other Milk*, it is one thing to proclaim the merits of a scientific health paradigm to the masses, and another to persuade them to adopt new food habits, especially in an era of turbulent changes. Thus, nutritionists began their very own marketing, not of a particular product at first, but of nutritionism itself. Nutritionist Wu Xian "attributed China's moral turpitude, as evidenced by ongoing scandals and corruption" to a lack of "physical fortitude [leading to an] unprogressive, risk averse" population.[26] He and his contemporaries noted the harm that prolonged malnutrition was inflicting on individuals and the nation at large, and gave speeches at medical institutes to spread the message. By linking moral

[25] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 69.
[26] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 74.

degradation in Republican China to physical health, nutritionists hoped to identify a solution to societal ills. They also collected sociological data about the rural farming poor who desperately needed protein in a vegetarian diet dominated by grains.[27] This lack of protein, they argued, must be the source of societal degradation.

In Wu's 1927 publication, "Chinese Diet in the Light of Modern Knowledge of Nutrition," he depicted the state of the Chinese diet, and what might be done to improve it. He anticipated the argument that the Chinese diet was adequate enough "on the ground that it has maintained the Chinese race for thousands of years," countering it with how "the Chinese people may well have adopted the diet… because it is the most economical."[28] He insisted that these "economical" eating habits turned into the customary Chinese diet, and that these deeply ingrained dietary choices stood in the way of the Chinese population achieving optimal bodily health. Most notably, he focused on protein consumption, citing the main difference between the Chinese and the American diet as "the former [being] mainly vegetarian while the latter contains a considerable portion of animal food.[29] He points out that

> With few exceptions, even the animal proteins when used alone cannot give adequate nutrition… Theoretically it is possible to obtain all the necessary amino-acids in the right proportion from a purely vegetarian diet, but it stands to reason that this supplementary relation is more easily realized with the animal than with the vegetable proteins.[30]

He concluded that while animal protein was the most efficient source of protein, the economic Chinese diet reflected the scarcity of those animal protein sources for the population. Wu's

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[27] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 70.
[28] Wu Xian, "Chinese Diet in the Light of Modern Knowledge of Nutrition," in *The Chinese Social and Political Science Review*, vol. XI (Beijing: Peking Express Press, 1927), 56–81 at 59-60, https://books.google.com/books?id=-eAgAAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=wu%20hsien&f=false.
[29] Wu, "Chinese Diet," 77.
[30] Wu, "Chinese Diet," 62.

suggestion was to reach a healthy compromise. If animal proteins were out of reach for the vast majority, then

> The use of soy bean and its products should be extended… there is only one-tenth as much soy beans as there are cereals in the Chinese diet. It has been found that the deficiency of wheat proteins is efficiently supplemented by the proteins of the soy bean… [which] would improve the vitamin B and the mineral as well as the protein factor.[31]

Therefore, introducing a source of plant-based protein would kill two birds with one stone. Asking the Chinese to increase soy consumption would be an easier hurdle to clear than to persuade them to incorporate the less available animal protein into their diet.

By 1928, Wu and others in the domestic and international nutrition science community extolled the importance of proteins as the building blocks for muscles and a means of promoting human growth. They bemoaned the fact that a Chinese diet was sparse in meat and dairy, and cited protein consumption as the factor that would determine a nation's productivity.[32] To drive home the point of national productivity, the government's idyllic notions of Republican motherhood portrayed child-rearing as the focal point of women's "'patriotic and virtuous lives,'" and turned the spotlight onto the diets of the nation's children.[33] Dairy milk, nutrition science's first beverage of choice for children, was neither well received nor available for widespread distribution.[34] Soymilk was a more viable option. "Chinese investigation into the nutritional benefits of the soybean aimed to recast a local foodstuff as a scientific food," and as the savior of the country's future. "So long as soybean milk was scientifically produced" with an exact ratio of protein, fat, and water-carbon to support infant development, it could be used in

[31] Wu, "Chinese Diet," 80.
[32] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 79-83.
[33] Quoted in Fu, *The Other Milk*, 101.
[34] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 91, 105.

infant feeding programs.[35] Eventually, the Refugee Children's Committee used this soymilk to supplement the diet of young children in Shanghai's refugee camps when the Japanese invaded in 1937.[36] Through this process, soymilk won out against dairy milk in China, for soy's protein content and accessibility over the dairy cow, paired with a newfound conviction in the transformative capabilities of nutrition science, meant that "With the proper engineering, the goodness of cow's milk could also be found in soybean milk."[37]

It is important to keep in mind that Chinese nutritional progress should not be viewed as a blind acceptance of Western nutrition science. Nor should the Chinese be rendered "passive players in their own history."[38] The choice to leverage Western science was to serve a very specific national goal. Rather than being prescribed the Western standard of health, nutritionism was learned and localized so that the country could regain its footing. The transplantation of nutritionism was the dual effort of Chinese and Western scientists to solve a specific societal problem they identified as a hindrance to Chinese stability. It took the careful consideration of a budding scientific community to build a plan for self-actualization that citizens could follow. Mobilizing the people to take control of their bodies served a collective effort.[39] The narrative of soymilk begins as one of resilience and self-assurance amidst adversity, a viable solution made available after open-minded inquiry as nutritionists took on a national identity crisis.

Nutritionism helped to increase the demand for soymilk and attracted the commercial suppliers willing to meet it. In 1934, public health inspectors from the Shanghai Municipal Council could easily spot the difference between street stall *doujiang* and the soymilk produced

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[35] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 105.
[36] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 130.
[37] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 108.
[38] Grace Shen, "Murky Waters: Thoughts on Desire, Utility, and the 'Sea of Modern Science,'" *Isis* 98, no. 3 (2007): 584-596 at 586, https://doi.org/10.1086/521160.
[39] For a parallel justification for US wartime eating during WWII, see Biltekoff, "Anxiety and Aspiration on the Home Front,"45-79.

by the fifteen or so factories.[40] Soymilk firms began plying their wares by differentiating their newly formulated, protein-laden products from the bean slurry of yesteryear. The advertisements from this period in Republican Shanghai document an organic transition from Chinese medicinal theory and Daoist principles to nutritionist language. Chinese medicinal theory noted how *qi*, "the life force of the human body, the foundational energy of all physical vitality" that "naturally diminishes over a lifetime" and must be aligned through one's lifestyle choices, including what one ate or drank.[41] Meanwhile, Daoists believed that "an improper diet disturbed the qi equilibrium of the body" and that special attention should be taken when preparing foods to maximize their "qi-nourishing power" in efforts to sustain a long life.[42] One company, Beneficial Soybean, promised in an advertisement that its product would "nourish blood and drain fire, normalize qi and moisten the throat.[43] The same advertisement then celebrates the soybean as "'rich in nutrients… and full of proteins, as much as 35%, surpassing all other plant foods.'"[44] Meanwhile, the Good Fortune and Health Soymilk Company included the image of Shouxing, the god of longevity, to harness Daoist ideal for health in its appeals.[45] These companies' promotion of soymilk offset "The foreignness conveyed by glass bottles, bicycle deliver, and industrial-style hygiene via pasteurization." These companies heavily couched this hygienic modernity on a product image of "neotraditionalism," a philosophy of repackaging older traditions and customs to serve a contemporary context.[46]

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[40] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 109.
[41] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 112-113.
[42] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 113.
[43] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 113.
[44] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 114.
[45] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 115
[46] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 119.

Federal Soybean displayed a trademark that incorporated a nuclear family ideal to form a new image of hygienic modernity contained within a hot water bottle of pasteurized soymilk.[47] Picturing a father seated at the table enjoying a glass of soymilk, next to his wife who pours their two children a glass each from a thermos.[48] These thermoses would be delivered straight to the door, emphasizing convenience while further differentiating it from the *doujiang* that required one to leave the house to purchase from street vendors. Rather than completely casting aside Chinese understandings of health and wellness in favor of a pure nutrition science-based approach, the advertisements included "traditional elements [that] were neither radically different nor temporally dislodged from… economy, bourgeois domesticity, and scientific nutrition."[49] By blurring the lines between past and present, these companies attempted to reconcile a future where Chinese families did not have to cast away familiar diets in order to attain a nutritious lifestyle. This transition into modernity would be seamless, because soymilk itself was familiar, but the brands' new formulations were nutritionally superior to the *doujiang* of the past. Selling soymilk was more than just selling the drink— advertising presented soymilk, nutritionism, and medical advancement as the foundation of a utopian future of familial prosperity and national greatness.[50] Soymilk was not just an indicator of socio-economic status but also an instrument to bring about a family-centric peace in China. By targeting urban families, Shanghainese soymilk companies drew upon the yearning for national unity and a tentative hope for prosperity. They suggested in a similar fashion to nutritionists that individuals and family units have a part to play in improving the overall well-being of the country.

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[47] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 113-117.
[48] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 117.
[49] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 119.
[50] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 154.

Beginning with the family and ending with the nation, their soymilk would usher in a new era, one swig at a time.[51]

Such advertising attempted to transform a previously localized beverage into a novel commodity for urbanites, and transplanted nutritionism into the public consciousness during this formative period of Chinese history. But with their limited capacity to distribute their soymilk beyond the cities they were based in, soymilk firms could not fulfill nutritionists and public welfare officials' lofty aims of nationwide distribution.[52] In 1940, the Shanghai branch of the China Nutritional Aid Council, a nutritional activist organization that replaced the Refugee Children's Committee, sought to partner with different firms to mass-produce soymilk with scientifically "correct formula."[53] It pictured a public in need during the Second Sino-Japanese War as consumers.[54] But even when nutrition scientists and activists partnered with firms, fortified soymilk production was confined to four of the thirty-four Chinese provinces in which the China Nutritional Aid Council was present. Neither soymilk firms nor nutritionist organizations commanded the authority or resources necessary to deliver mass-produced, fortified soymilk across all of China; their combined efforts proved to be a failure as well.

Nutritionism in 1930s British Hong Kong and the Rise of Vitasoy

China is not a uniform entity, and the semantic differences in naming soymilk are just one indication of the nation's diverse food cultures and food practices. By the time nutritionism

[51] To reflect upon etymology, country/ nation (*guojia* 国家) combines state/nation (*guo* 国) and home/ family (*jia* 家), begetting a common adage: Without the family, whence comes the nation, and vice versa? (*Mei you jia na you guo, mei you guo na you jia?* 没有家哪有国，没有国哪有?) This notion of family-centric nationhood is embedded into the Chinese language itself. Whether consciously or not, soymilk companies wove this linguistic context into their neotraditionalist nutrition platform as another element of traditional ideology to be preserved by their novel soymilk products.
[52] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 157.
[53] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 166-168.
[54] Fu, *The Other Milk*, 168.

took hold in 1930s Republican China, Western medicine had been a fixture in British Hong Kong for roughly sixty years. After Britain officially took the island as its colony on January 26, 1841, missionaries and locals began to set up hospitals starting in the 1870s. They introduced germ theory and other elements of Western medicine to counteract epidemics in a population that, in the eyes of the British, treated disease with sagely wisdom and "ancient custom" rather than "the study of comparative anatomy."[55] In actuality, Chinese Hong Kongers fostered a "spirit of charity," as Tung Wah Hospital and other locally run hospitals provided services to those in need and funded relief projects in the rest of China by the 1920s.[56] These hospitals are again a testimony to Hong Kong's active participation in their own health, paralleling the transmission of nutritionism in the scientific community of Republican China.

Under these circumstances, nutritionism might have been easier to grasp for Hong Kongers exposed to biomedicine than for Republican Chinese during the 1930s. Hong Kongers' skepticism of the soybean, however, created barriers to selling soymilk. Hong Kong's elites already appreciated the merits of dairy milk. In general, colonial perceptions of bodily health made locals more receptive to British nutritionism. However, many Hong Kongers regarded the soybean "as a food for pigs."[57] Despite the establishment of Western medicine, pervasive ideas about the soybean's inherent qualities remained as the remnants of folk knowledge. Soymilk was thought to wear down the body because of its inherent "cooling" properties, which would affect the body's yin-yang balance— a drastic difference from how soymilk was viewed in northern China.[58]

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[55] Pui-tak Lee, ed., *Colonial Hong Kong and Modern China: Interaction and Reintegration* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005), 71; as quoted in Ka-che Yip, Man Kong Wong, and Yuen Sang Leung, "Local Voluntarism, Healing Spaces, and Medical Education before 1941," in *A Documentary History of Public Health in Hong Kong*, 1st ed. (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2018),147,178.
[56] Yip, Wong, and Leung, "Local Voluntarism, Healing Spaces, and Medical Education before 1941," 161.
[57] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 279-280.
[58] As quoted in Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 291.

Between 1947 and 1952, British anxieties about protests over colonial rule meant the colonial government latched onto anything that would allow them to maintain control over Hong Kong; in this case, it was their authority to police public health and welfare.[59] In a similar vein to Republican soymilk initiatives targeting infants and children, British officials first supplied the bottled dairy milk they were familiar with to schoolchildren.[60] But this plan proved too expensive and was abandoned in 1948. British officials arrived at the same conclusion as Republican nutritionists had: the soybean would be the best cow for Hong Kong.[61] Vitasoy, China's most popular mass-produced soymilk in the present day, seized this marketing opportunity. Here was a government-identified nutrition issue that the government could not remedy on its own, a ready-made market without a supply, and a high potential for robust consumer demand. Soymilk firms aligned themselves with British authorities' administrative goals to gain initial acceptance with Chinese Hong Kongers. Whatever progress soymilk then made on the island would rest upon Vitasoy's ability to advertise the nutritional benefits of its product to the people.

Lo Kwee-Seong founded his company Vitasoy, then named Hong Kong Soya Bean Co., Ltd., in 1940 using the business acumen he acquired at Hong Kong University.[62] He made it immediately known that his product, transliterated as Vita Milk, was meant to bridge the gap between the nutrition science and the lower classes of Hong Kong using a formula that originally included "soybeans, calcium, and cod-liver oil."[63] The formula aimed to approximate the nutritional profile of dairy milk, rather than match its taste or disguise its beany flavor.

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[59] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 285.
[60] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 285.
[61] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 285.
[62] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 281.
[63] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 281.

Generally, most of the population did not regularly consume dairy milk, so the taste of soymilk and dairy milk would have been a weak point of comparison for Hong Kongers. Local newspaper coverage of Vitasoy the following year implied that people found "the nutritional discourse novel but the product itself so foreign that it required an analogy to a local product to render it comprehensible."[64] The decision to label it as "milk" somewhat successfully eased initial suspicions toward soymilk by giving it the legitimacy enjoyed by dairy milk.

Lo defied his board members' suggestions to limit Vitasoy to home delivery in order to emulate the social status of dairy milk, insisting that accessibility to affordable nutrition should remain ingrained in Vitasoy's brand image.[65] His goal was "to make soymilk available to 'the poorer section of the community' in quantity and 'at such low prices as to be within their means.'"[66] At just thirty cents for a ten-ounce bottle, Vita Milk was half the price of bottled dairy milk in 1946.[67] Starting in the 1940s, Vitasoy pasteurized its soymilk to remove soybean enzymes, dispel consumer concerns of soymilk's "cooling properties," and vastly extend soymilk's shelf life.[68] To the consumer, cooking a food or beverage would prevent it from upsetting the aforementioned yin-yang balance in the body— which is what flash-heating soymilk boiled down to. The Hong Kong Urban Council, which required that all dairy milks be pasteurized in 1937, saw this preemptive food safety measure on Vitasoy's part as a sign of good faith.[69] Vitasoy made a name for itself by democratizing nutritional literacy in the decades following WWII. Through Vitasoy's widespread availability, and its competition with dairy milk, the Hong Kong community learned of how important an adequate amount of protein was

[64] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 282.
[65] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 285.
[66] As quoted in Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 281.
[67] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 294.
[68] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 291.
[69] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 291.

for its diet. Rather than a government or nutritionist campaign, Vitasoy's advertising conflated soymilk with health in the public consciousness.

By partnering with the soft drink industry and absorbing their advertising and distribution methods, and later capitalizing on the new wave of at-home refrigeration, Vitasoy brought its glass bottles first to the consumer's door and then invited itself into their homes.[70] Vitasoy partnered with Pepsi-Cola in 1957 and acquired its efficient palletization system to load trucks. Vitasoy also gained access to Pepsi-Cola's vendors, sales-district delivery system, and later its employees when Pepsi-Cola reduced its staff following a Korean War trade embargo on China. It adopted the etiquette Pepsi-Cola salesmen used to win new customers and cultivate their loyalty.[71] In the 1970s, when their fragile glass bottles became costly, Vitasoy switched to Swedish-invented Tetra Pak cartons (cardboard cartons with polythene lining); this extended shelf life to six months and made Vita Milk stand out in the Hong Kong beverage market's sea of glass bottles.[72] Vitasoy concentrated not only on the nutritional benefits of its soymilk, but also its price point and its methods of distribution and access. Lo's business venture successfully combined soymilk, nutritionism, mass production, and affordability in a way that Republican Chinese nutrition scientists and soymilk companies had not.

Yet, it is important to recognize that Vitasoy's commercial success was heavily undergirded by the presence of British colonialism. Republican soymilk companies did not have the privilege of leaning on a robust soft drink giant like Pepsi-Cola, an American company that was most likely friendly with British institutions and regulations. Likewise, Republican soymilk companies were tasked with introducing their clientele to nutritionism and selling them soymilk,

[70] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 288-291.
[71] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 285, 288.
[72] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 295.

contrasting British Hong Kong's exposure to biomedicine by the time Vita Milk made it to doorsteps and corner stores. Vitasoy only served customers within the confines of Hong Kong Island, whereas Republican soymilk companies would have had the Herculean task of branching out from industrialized cities towards the rest of the country on their own. Vitasoy rose to prominence due to impeccable timing and the presence of British infrastructure and support. It then fueled its trajectory with business decisions that amplified its nutritional message.

Nutritionism has been a constant theme that soymilk companies have gravitated to. If sagely Chinese medicinal theory and Chinese folk knowledge are any indication, wellness and its relationship to diet have been a major part of Chinese medical epistemology long before the arrival of Western biomedicine.[73] Chinese nutritionists corroborated these extant views on diet and gave soymilk companies a legitimate foundation to advertise from. And that is why, even though the sociopolitical backgrounds of Hong Kong and Republican China differed, soymilk's "objective" appeal to bodily health in their advertisements would have been a point of curiosity for the Chinese, if not a reason to give it a try. Citing nutritional benefits in advertising lent itself to another advantage for Vitasoy: consistency. Between the 1950s and 1980s, Vitasoy's advertisements emphasized soymilk's widespread availability and its ability to protect Hong Kong consumers' health and well-being. While overt mentions of nutrition have faded, its implication in each round of advertising campaigns has provided a narrative through-line for consumers. The following sections will feature the author's own analysis of advertisements mentioned in Fu Lai Tony Yu and Diana S. Kwan's article, "A Subjectivist Approach to

[73] Another Chinese idiom to take note of: Illness enters from the mouth, trouble comes out by the mouth (*bing cong kou ru, huo cong kou chu* 病从口入，祸从口出。)A combination of the English "you are what you eat" and "loose lips sink ships," this phrase captures the Chinese association of health and wellness with the ingestion of certain foods.

Advertising: The Case of Vitasoy in Hong Kong," due to the difficulty in obtaining older Vitasoy advertisements between the 1950s and the present day.

The initial 1950s radio advertisement was simple and direct for parents and children: "Vitasoy makes you taller; Vitasoy makes you stronger; Vitasoy makes you healthier and fitter."[74] The direct yet nondescript "you" addressed in this advertisement captures the broad appeal Lo wanted to permeate his brand image. Vitasoy customers could be anyone and everyone, and its competitive prices to dairy milk made sure of that. With Vita Milk's price further reduced from thirty to twenty cents by 1952, and because even civil servants found dairy milk expensive, this advertisement welcomed the listener to make the switch to Vitasoy.[75] In addition, while dairy milk is also not explicitly mentioned, the nutritionist dialogues paired with the dairy milk initiatives in schools at the time would have placed the dairy-versus-soymilk debate in the back of people's minds. By not addressing cow's milk directly, Vitasoy could avoid making a direct call-out to Hong Kong's dairies, emphasizing itself as a standalone beverage, the more affordable form of "milk." To ease its listeners into nutritional dialogue, Vitasoy chose to focus on the physical results of drinking their soymilk, with "taller," "stronger," "healthier and fitter" rather than percentage breakdowns of its calcium and protein content. Aside from how these adverbs bring to mind dairy's appeal to those with a growing body, these words are evidence of Vitasoy's goals for accessibility. Rather than just focus on product availability, it also broadcasted nutrition as a biomedical concept with easy to understand, observable results. To sell soymilk was to sell the efficacy of micro- and macronutrients discovered merely thirty years prior, to an audience an ocean away from where they were discovered. The more tangibly

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[74] Fu Lai Tony Yu and Diana S. Kwan, "A Subjectivist Approach to Advertising: The Case of Vitasoy in Hong Kong," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Management Research and Innovation* 11, no. 2 (2015): 153–60 at 157, https://doi.org/10.1177/2319510X15576250.

[75] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 285.

Vitasoy could convey the importance of nutritional eating to such an audience, the more successful its sales would be.

Rather than cornering itself as the affordable competitor to dairy milk, Vitasoy pivoted to advertising its Vita Milk as the healthier alternative to soda. The 1970s slogan was "It's easier than ordering a soda," which reflected improved living standards through references to the abundant beverage options vying for both parents' and children's attention— while ensuring Vitasoy stood out as the healthy option (See Figure 3).[76] The advertisement with this slogan displayed people of all ages joyously erupting out of a bottle of Vitasoy, and clarifying that it was as healthy for the young and the elderly, and that rather than a passing trend, it was popular for both ends of the age spectrum, and everyone in between. By 1968, annual sales of Vitasoy reached seventy-eight million bottles, "second only to Coca-Cola's 100 million," making it a serious market competitor to the soft drink industry.[77] By developing its business model around a soft drink giant, then subsequently taking them on as an alternative beverage, it brings to light an interesting dynamic. Now that roughly two decades had elapsed, the novelty of being the "new milk on the block" would have long expired. By distinguishing itself as a soft drink competitor rather than "The Other Milk," it instead became a healthy, uncarbonated refreshment competing against a range of sweet fizzy drinks. The explicit reframing of Vita Milk's superiority over soft drinks simultaneously groups it together with soft drinks, while setting it apart. Surely, a soymilk that won out against dairy milk would be better than a carbonated soda. This marketing towards children would also have ingrained Vitasoy into the collective childhood experience of an entire generation, strengthening Vitasoy's place in Hong Kong's regional identity.

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[76] This was the only advertisement available from the late 1900s that was available on the Vitasoy North American branch's official website. The text in the advertisement reads: 點只汽水咁簡單。

[77] Wong, "Making Vitasoy 'Local,'" 294.

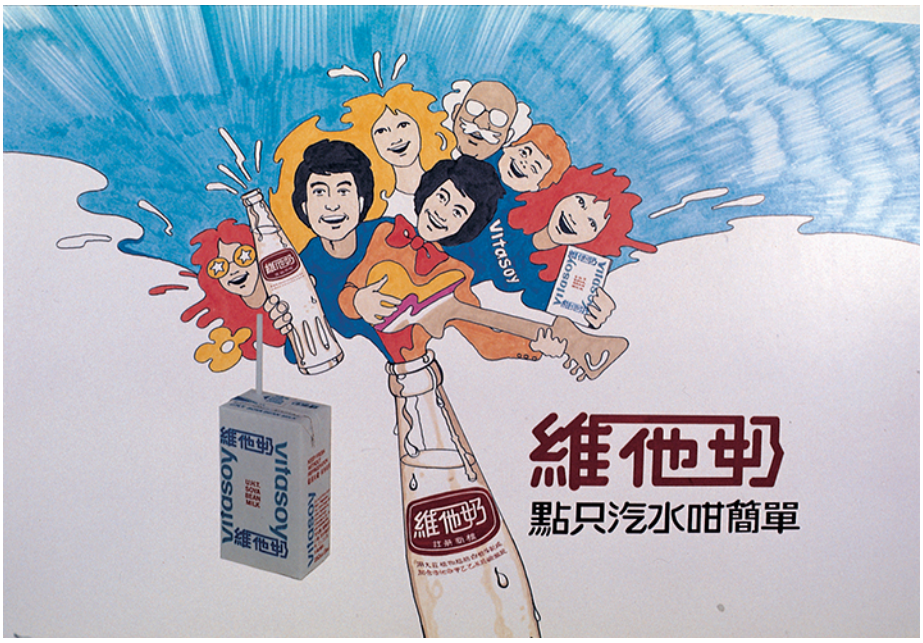

Figure 3. "It's easier than ordering a soda"advertisement. Vitasoy North America Inc., "About Vitasoy North America," accessed February 29, 2024, https://vitasoy-na.com/about-us/.

By the 1980s, Hong Kong's baby boomers, who were now established members of society and formerly children during the 1950s radio campaigns, were targeted with the nostalgic tagline, "From childhood to present, life [Vitasoy] is equally cute!"[78] This shift from forward-thinking, nutritional-and-technological-breakthrough soymilk to timelessly evocative soymilk fully realized Vitasoy's goal to become a cornerstone of Hong Kong's identity. By channeling the nostalgia of its consumers, Vitasoy manufactured an image of indigeneity to the island, and a sense of duty to its loyal customers who have kept coming back for more in the past three decades. It is also a parallel to the neotraditionalism of the Republican Chinese soymilk advertisements. This element of "novel familiarity" in soymilk advertisements was an anchor point for the Chinese consumer to latch onto, a constant during periods of instability or rapid growth in society. The message is clear: not only was Vita Milk there to keep Hong Kong healthy (and cute) in its times of crisis, it is still here, and will continue to be for decades to

[78] Yu and Kwan, "A Subjectivist Approach to Advertising," 157.

come. Successive TV campaigns continued to echo this nostalgia factor by portraying young and old characters interacting with each other and with Vitasoy soymilk, to again fully traverse the age spectrum when appealing to prospective customers.[79] Each installment acted as a novel form of recruitment for a new generation of customers, while taking older audiences on a trip down memory lane. These advertisements repackaged nutritionism into an everyday lifestyle to educate and reassure their consumers. They promise that while the times may change and the consumer will age, Vitasoy's values, and by extension its soymilk, will remain constant.

***Doujiang* in Maoist Chinese Nutrition, 1949-1978**

While Vitasoy was booming in Hong Kong, China's Republican government fell in 1949. In the aftermath, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ushered in its own food reforms. In the first few years of Maoist China, the country replaced their eating habits with "totalitarian laws and regulations."[80] Facing an imminent food shortage caused by the termination of all imports and population growth that was exceeding agricultural capacities, the CCP had a lot on its plate.[81] As noted by William Henry Adolph, a biochemistry professor in the Peking Union Medical College and a contemporary of nutritionist Wu Xian, living standards had fallen in 1951 when,

> brought about in part by decree, but carried into effect by an overwhelming wave of patriotic feeling that made it unbecoming for anyone to be found eating food better than that available to laborers and farmers. Few could withstand being accused of being bourgeois.[82]

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[79] Yu and Kwan, "A Subjectivist Approach to Advertising," 158.
[80] Wm. H. Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," *The Scientific Monthly* 73, no. 2 (August 1951): 128–30 at 128.
[81] Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," 128.
[82] Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," 128. Adolph is referenced by Wu Xian's "Chinese Diet" for the dietary data he collected on Northern Chinese farmers' diets.

Ironically, the goal merely a decade ago for nutritionists had been to try and alter the existing food habits of those laborers and farmers to increase their protein intake, not replicate their diet in the rest of the population. This brand of nutrition seemed to value quantity over quality of the food (although quantity was reduced as well).[83] In effect, the CCP initially chose to discard the basic tenets of Republican nutritionism, based on the allocation of carefully calculated vitamin, mineral, and protein percentages, in favor of egalitarian party principles, temporarily setting back nutrition science's goal of increasing China's standard of living. Instead of raising the collective bar, communist officials chose instead to lower it. As an increasing number of Chinese citizens worked for the government, they received government food rations depending on their positions— those "of high-ranking government officials and others engaged in strenuous intellectual work" received decent rations of meat, and the amount dwindled towards the bottom of the totem pole.[84] The government championed millet as the staple grain. Millet was low in protein content, and so the government sought to find a high-lysine food to pair it with in order to increase its protein efficiency.[85] Now back at square one, "soybean milk [was] being re-emphasized."[86]

From the 1950s onwards, the CCP built up a system of what historian Mark Swislocki has termed "nutritional governmentality…[where] a state controls, regulates, and fosters its population's nutritional status."[87] Earlier Republican Era goals for national productivity and the aforementioned egalitarianism of Maoist China combined to form a state-directed health regimen that sought to dispel the Western narrative of China as "the Sick Man of East Asia."[88] This

[83] Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," 128.
[84] Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," 128.
[85] Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," 129.
[86] Adolph, "Nutrition under the Chinese Communist Government," 129.
[87] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 29.
[88] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 2.

attempt to address the nutritional health of the entire population was "more prescriptive than coercive," as government-drafted meal plans were disseminated to both canteens and households alike for maximum reach.[89] Because "the body… in the Mao era was linked to its physical ability as a malleable object that has a function in labor and revolution," nutrition was tantamount to the success of the communist state.[90] Spearheaded by the Ministry of Health, the nutrition movement was meant to bolster the nutritional knowledge of the population, in hopes that the collective population could maintain itself like a perpetual motion machine of health. Yet again, nutrition science was the path to achieving national self-improvement and a renewed national image.

During this time, protein was emphasized for the same reason as it was in Republican China. As "the building blocks of the human body and of life itself," it was a central focus for nutrition scientists working for the government; the issue was in sourcing the right balance of animal and plant protein.[91] Animal protein was seen as "complete" compared to plant protein, which had to be consumed in specific combinations so that certain amino acids were present to form those complete proteins.[92] And yet again, soy was argued to be the only source of plant protein comparable to animal protein, to supplement a deficient diet.[93] These were the dialogues within the nutritionist community. For the public, direct access to a well-rounded diet came in the form of meal plan handbooks, meant for canteens, hospitals, and households to reference.[94] The assumption is that these handbooks translated nutritionist research into more accessibly written government-endorsed manuals. In Chen Meiyu's Nutrition Hygiene handbook from 1954, "a pound of soy milk" was to be consumed per day; food, "and thus the nutrients— [were

[89] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*,10.
[90] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*,13.
[91] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 41-42.
[92] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 43.
[93] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 43.
[94] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 64.

measured] via weight" to bridge the gap between nutritionist percentages and everyday meal prep.[95] Later books published in the 1970s and 1980s broke down ingredients into micro-and macronutrient compositions alongside recipes, indicating an improved literacy for nutritionism among the general population.[96]

While there is documentation of how nutritionism and the demand for protein held sway over the Chinese people in Maoist China, it is hard to trace the exact story of soymilk during this time. Historian Renée Krusche described the many issues she encountered when engaging in research of the Maoist definition of health, from the difficulties of accessing Chinese informational pamphlets and studies held in local archives, to the propagandization of these materials, which complicated their message.[97] Likewise, accessing concrete data on soymilk production in this thirty-year span has proven unfruitful for the same reasons. However, as these pamphlets and handbooks reiterated the soy products' role in a balanced diet, and included instructions for local and home-based production, it can be inferred that soymilk regressed into *doujiang* once more. Commercializing access to nutrition, as the China Nutritional Aid Council had tried in 1940, would have been a paradox for a communist government implementing its vision of national nutrition. The emphasis on Chinese citizens taking back their health through government guidance meant a diet of self-sufficiency free of the implements of industrial capitalism.

This is not to say that industrialization did not exist, but that it is difficult to establish a solid connection between mass production and soymilk during this era. Between 1949 and 1958, the government "published data on the physical output of a large number of industrial

[95] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 64.
[96] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 69-70.
[97] Krusche, *The Healthy Socialist Life*, 17.

commodities," but The Great Leap Forward of 1960 led "the regime [to impose] an almost complete blackout on the disclosure of specific economic facts and figures," with the cutoff starting as early as 1959.[98] The Great Leap Forward was the CCP's attempt to expedite the country's industrialization through sheer manpower rather than the accumulation of capital and machinery. It met a disastrous end when the government's misapplication of the Soviet Union's model of agricultural production, paired with a series of natural disasters, led to a catastrophic famine across the entire country. Perhaps the CCP's attempt to disguise the severity of these catastrophes within and outside of its borders, this nondisclosure of data indicates a hitch in, but not a complete halt of industrialization in China. But because "the food processing industry [had] grown more slowly than most other branches of industry" as a result of agricultural supply chain failures, localized *doujiang* would have been the most viable, efficient distribution method in Maoist China.[99] This unfortunate gap in data highlights the varied paths that soymilk has taken to arrive at today's soymilk market, and how some of these paths have been explored further than others.

Despite disruptions to the mass production of soymilk, the CCP nutrition movement and the Great Leap Forward ultimately did more to solidify the connection between soymilk and nutritionism than private firms had accomplished in the Republican Era. While nutrition scientists successfully advocated for refugee children to receive soymilk, they failed to tackle the affordability and availability issue that alienated a majority of the rural poor from soymilk companies. Nutritionists placed the onus on mass-produced soymilk advertisements to broadcast

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[98] Robert Michael Field, "Industrial Production in Communist China: 1957-1968," *The China Quarterly*, no. 42 (1970): 46–64 at 46, https://www.jstor.org/stable/652030. Field cross-referenced "fragmentary materials" discussing the raw materials consumed in the country to provide a recalibrated estimate of Chinese industrial output in the decade following the Great Leap Forward.

[99] Field, "Industrial Production in Communist China," 51.

soymilk's benefits to the masses, contradicting their original goal. They depended on soymilk companies, which had profit-driven goals, to distribute both soymilk and basic nutrition knowledge to everyone, including the rural poor, who had neither the money nor the background in such a foreign health paradigm. Nutrition scientists failed to reach the population they had deemed the most vulnerable to malnutrition. By contrast, Maoist nutritional governmentality dispensed nutritionism in digestible forms beyond elite and scientific circles, demystifying a highly technical biomedical term for the public in efforts to expand government control over the population's health. All that was left was to convert the *doujiang* in this equation back into soymilk.

Deng Xiaoping's New Economy and the Chinese Soymilk Industry, 1978-1997

Mao Zedong passed away in 1976, marking the end of the decade-long Cultural Revolution. The CCP's next chapter began in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping became the leader of China and replaced chaotic revolutionary fervor with a distinctly Chinese economy. His vision was to confine "economic reform within the principles of socialism and communist party rule."[100] This expansion of the economy produced an initial system of entirely state-owned enterprises (SOEs); following a series of reforms in 1997, this became a shareholding system in which SOEs were divided into large, medium, and small and subsequently entirely state-owned, with shares jointly held by employees and the state, or liquidated respectively.[101] It is from this backdrop that the Chinese food industry emerged, and where a new phase of nutritional

[100] Hochul Lee, "A Dilemma of Success: The Reform Path of State-Owned Enterprises in China," *Asian Perspective* 46, no. 3 (July 26, 2022): 451–71 at 451, https://doi.org/10.1353/apr.2022.0018. Lee argues that the economy eventually overtook socialist rule in China, becoming a direct source of the CCP's legitimacy. This illuminates how the formation and control of industries became integral for maintaining central authority, which is the reason why the state refused to relinquish its direct involvement in those industries.
[101] Lee, "A Dilemma of Success," 455.

governmentality developed. The combination of government, industry, and widespread nutritional knowledge would finally beget the soymilk industry that Republican Era nutritionists had envisioned, with the authority and reach necessary to dispense soymilk nationwide.

Mainland China did not need to look far for inspiration on how to start up a soymilk industry, nor did it have to start one from scratch. According to William Shurtleff's research notes from his trip to China in mid-1983, "Interest in modern soymilks… began to increase rapidly during the early 1980s… Reasons for this… include the success of Vitasoy."[102] This interest was so profound that in "January 1983 the American Soybean Association sponsored… a delegation of six people from the Ministry of Light Industry (MinLight) in Beijing… to study soymilk production in Hong Kong (Vitasoy)."[103] Meanwhile, "various ministries, provincial governments, and research institutes and colleges" began to tussle over who would lead Chinese soymilk production.[104] Soymilk plants were provincially installed with the support of foreign soymilk companies, who had questions on "how members of joint ventures with the Chinese government (the inevitable partner) will get profits out of China in hard currency."[105] The surprising American presence, made possible through newly-established Sino-American diplomatic relations in 1979, resulted again from a Chinese desire for self-sufficiency, and its willingness to take advantage of international resources to attain it. The transactional relationship between the CCP and foreign companies in 1983 defies the notion that the aforementioned "economic reform within the principles of socialism" was a cautious introduction to the market economy in the early years of the Deng Xiaoping Era. In fact, this is evidence of aggressive government opportunism, where soymilk was a tool to attract foreign investment, and the

[102] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry and Market*, 1:89-90.
[103] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry and Market*, 1:92.
[104] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry and Market*, 1:92.
[105] Shurtleff and Aoyagi, *Soymilk Industry and Market*, 1:93.

industrialization of soymilk would invigorate the economy and elevate China's standing on the world stage. This time, rather than nourishing the people to contain political strife and warfare, as happened during the Republican Era, the promotion of soymilk aimed to strengthen the CCP's legitimacy and Chinese economic prosperity.

1997 was a very eventful year. Deng Xiaoping passed away, SOE reforms clarified the scale of government involvement in industry, and the British relinquished Hong Kong's sovereignty to the Chinese. While the reforms affirmed the CCP's dedication to evolve Deng's economic legacy and foreshadowed an upward socioeconomic trajectory in Mainland China, the same optimistic future seemed uncertain for Hong Kongers. Since the 1900s, select British Hong Kong businesses have branded their products as Chinese national goods (*guohuo* 国货) to legitimate their products in different markets in Sino-centric East and Southeast Asia, despite the Chinese government's consistent refusal to grant them the designation.[106] This dynamic persisted in both business and nationality discussions for Hong Kongers in 1997. Many locals had anxieties about the reintegration, unsure if they would be outcast as foreigners despite their Chinese ethnicity and if their familiar ways of life would be disrupted. As for Hong Kong's soymilk powerhouse, Vitasoy had to face the same questions as the members of its community. If reintegration happened, what would its future look like? Would it stay an industry leader, or would its colonial past make the firm an emblem of national shame?

The Mainland Chinese officials visiting Vitasoy in 1983 was a good sign that they were receptive. But Vitasoy was put on a pedestal then, viewed as foreign in a way that might prove difficult to overcome once it joined the Mainland Chinese soymilk industry and tried to court Mainland customers. Not to mention their localized advertising campaigns for the past fifty

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[106] Lee, *Colonial Hong Kong and Modern China*, 185-186.

years— how would they reconcile their brand image of being "from Hong Kong, for Hong Kong," if that identity was the exact source of Sinocentric consumers' disapproval? With no answers yet to these difficult questions, Vitasoy did its best to reassure its customers in the meantime. In 1993, four years before Hong Kong's handoff, Vitasoy aired a TV advertisement addressing the impending reintegration. In it, a young grandson stays with his grandfather for the summer, after he and his parents relocated overseas to escape the uncertainty of Hong Kong's upcoming fate; the advertisement ends with the grandfather buying Vitasoy as a send-off for his grandson at the train station.[107] This advertisement, which characterized the reciprocal loyalty shared by Vitasoy and its beloved Hong Kong community, was perhaps Vitasoy's farewell to its distinctly Hong Kong philosophy, or a token of solidarity for viewers who shared the same wistful nostalgia and apprehension in the face of such change. Most importantly, it carried a hopeful note of unity for those watching. Hong Kongers' connection to Vita Milk, just like grandfather's love, would endure no matter the sociopolitical circumstances. And endure it did: Vitasoy continues to enjoy a top spot in the Chinese soymilk industry today.

Through this extensive narrative of Chinese mass-produced soymilk's multiphasic development, one can identify the many institutional actors that have extolled its benefits, and come to understand how important it was to sell soymilk's role in society before it could take off in a consumer market. This is still the task that sustains the soymilk industry today— drawing upon this wealth of nutritional history and a legacy of crisis control to remedy social issues of present-day China.

[107] Yu and Kwan, "A Subjectivist Approach to Advertising," 158.

Chapter 2: The Future is Brighter with Soymilk, 2010-Present

By the 2010s, the major social issue on consumers' minds was food safety, and the major headache for soymilk firms was the dairy milk industry. While both presented as significant threats to soymilk's hold on the market, they converge in one event: the Melamine Milk Scandal. This scandal would reshape how consumers viewed the dairy industry, reveal the CCP's disastrous lack of oversight, and leave the entire Chinese food industry uneasy about where they stood in the eyes of the government and consumers. But for soymilk firms, it was the golden opportunity to both reassert their product's incumbency as the safe, reliable, protein-rich alternative to the dangerous dairy products on the market, and enrich their own ties to nationalism in the process. After bombarding health-conscious connected spenders to buy their soymilk, firms used these profits to fund their cause marketing campaigns, where a for-profit business dedicates itself to improving society or supporting a charity. Thus, they fashioned a brand image dedicated to improving society and consumer well-being, and in the process attempted to enhance the firm's trustworthiness.

The Dilemma of the Decade: Chinese Food Safety and Soymilk Social Responsibility

On September 13, 2008, the headline broke: "Preliminary Confirmation of Criminals Adding Melamine to Raw Milk (Sanlu Problematic Infant Formula Investigation)."[108] Sanlu 三鹿 Group Co. Ltd., based in Shijiazhuang, Hebei, was now under government investigation for adulterating their product and endangering Chinese children. Much to the chagrin of Beijing

[108] Zhang Honghe 张洪河, Sun Wen 孙闻, and Fu Zimei 富子梅, "Chubu Rending Bufa Fenzi Zai Yuannai Zhong Tianjia Sanju Qingan ('Sanlu Wenti Naifen' Zhuizong)" 初步认定不法分子在原奶中添加三聚氰胺 ('三鹿问题奶粉'追踪) [Preliminary Confirmation of Criminals Adding Melamine to Raw Milk (Sanlu Problematic Infant Formula Investigation)], *People's Daily*, September 13, 2008, 2nd edition, http://data.people.com.cn/rmrb/20080913/2/0f02ac0dffb145c395999ca1286ea592_print.html.

officials, Hebei municipal authorities, and parents nationwide, there was finally an explanation for the alarming number of infants and children who had begun passing crystals in their urine and falling seriously ill. Melamine is especially dangerous for this age group's underdeveloped organs, which are incapable of handling renal stones— but when added to milk it "increases the nitrogen concentration, which suggests a false increase in protein concentration," thereby improving its nutritional value on paper.[109] Confirmed cases flooded in from Beijing, Hubei, and Hunan.[110] By the time November rolled around, "300,000 victims were reported in China, with six infants dead from kidney stones or other kidney damages and 860 ones hospitalized."[111]

Just a year prior, dairy product sales increased by 14 percent, totaling $10.3 billion in China.[112] And now, during dairy milk's bid to establish itself as the mainstream "milk" of choice, the dairy industry collapsed under the weight of this scandal, selling cows and hemorrhaging profits.[113] Meanwhile, nutritional governance and the SOE system in the food industry directly implicated the government— how could one trust a government who had a part to play in poisoning their dairy milk supply? As the Chinese public reeled over the corruption in their food system and government, the other shoe dropped. According to another *People's Daily* headline roughly half a month prior to the Melamine headline,

> After research with the Education, Science, Culture and Health Committee of the National People's Congress and the Legislative Affairs Office of the State Council, the Law Committee of the National People's Congress proposed to amend the draft to read: "Food producers and operators shall engage in production and operation activities in accordance with laws, regulations and food safety

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[109] E. Y. Y. Chan, S. M. Griffiths, and C. W. Chan, "Public-Health Risks of Melamine in Milk Products," *The Lancet (British Edition)* 372, no. 9648 (2008): 1444–45 at 1444, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(08)61604-9.
[110] Zhang, Sun, and Fu, "Chubu Rending Bufa Fenzi."
[111] Yingheng Zhou and Erpeng Wang, "Urban Consumers' Attitudes towards the Safety of Milk Powder after the Melamine Scandal in 2008 and the Factors Influencing the Attitudes," *China Agricultural Economic Review* 3, no. 1 (2011): 101–11 at 103, https://doi.org/10.1108/17561371111103589.
[112] "Chinese Consumption up: Dairy Industries International," *Dairy Industries International* 73, no. 3 (March 2008): 29–29, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=31541486&site=ehost-live.
[113] Roselind Zeng to William Shurtleff, "Soymilk Marketing Interview," December 17, 2023; Zhou and Wang, "Urban Consumers' Attitudes," 103.

> standards, be responsible to society and the public, ensure food safety, accept social supervision, and assume social responsibility."[114]

This clause was later finalized in February 2009 as a part of the Food Safety Law of the People's Republic of China, which had 104 articles mandating more stringent food safety measures at every point of production, and harsher punishments on bad actors in the market. The key term to focus on here is "social responsibility," which generally has an ambiguous definition in Chinese law, and is often weaponized by firms to "reduce the likelihood of negative political or societal behaviors, minimizing the resulting cost and allowing corporations to generate moral capital."[115] In the hands of the Chinese soymilk industry, this concept was an invaluable reminder from the CCP: now that milk was demonized in the public eye, it was time to play the angel on the consumer's other shoulder. Soymilk already held an impressive stature in Chinese society after decades of promotion. If the firms played their cards right, then they could work this food scare to their advantage, generating organic marketing powered by consumer goodwill, while updating soymilk's nutrition-based image for a contemporary audience.[116] And with that, it might leave dairy milk in the dust.

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[114] Mao Lei 毛磊 and Huang Qingchang 黄庆畅, "Qianghua Shipin Anquan Jingyingzhe de Minshi Zeren (Jujia Shenyi)强化食品生产经营者的民事责任（聚焦审议）[Emphasizing Civil Liability of Food Producers (Deliberations)]," *People's Daily*, August 27, 2008, http://data.people.com.cn.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/rmrb/20080827/10/cce5a3f779224ec79513e3e55203cade_print.html. The original text reads：全国人大法律委员会经同全国人大教育科学文化卫生委员会、国务院法制办研究，建议将草案此条规定修改为：食品生产经营者应当依照法律、法规和食品安全标准从事生产经营活动，对社会和公众负责，保证食品安全接受社会监督，承担社会责任。

[115] Jingchen Zhao, *Corporate Social Responsibility in Contemporary China*, (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2014),1-3, 179-180, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=688126&site=ehost-live&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_179.

[116]Jordan Sand, "A Short History of MSG: Good Science, Bad Science, and Taste Cultures," *Gastronomica* 5, no. 4 (2005): 38–49 at 45, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2005.5.4.38.

By all accounts, it seems their connected spender audience would be receptive. According to the C*hina Business Review*, in 2014 "27 percent of the total population [lived] in Connected Spender households across all City Strata. These households accounted for 44 percent of total consumer spending."[117] They are usually "more educated, urban, and younger than consumers overall… though they are far from rich," and many are "more likely to trade up to higher-quality goods and services… In higher strata, more advanced trade-up categories… such as… soy milk" are of interest to them.[118] This consumer demographic's high engagement rates online, paired with their purchasing power, make them the perfect pairing to contemporary soymilk marketing's message: a healthy drink with a good cause. But their interconnectedness with each other and their engagement with current events also make them a skeptical crowd. Therefore, to seem the most socially responsible to the largest group of connected spenders possible, companies needed to 1) maintain their creative nutrition-based advertising appeals, 2) meet the consumers where they were on social media, and 3) support causes that targeted popular social causes.

Due to a lack of accessible Chinese trade journals and company profiles that might corroborate this abovementioned marketing approach, it is necessary to compare soymilk firms to confirm this as an industry practice. It would be myopic to focus on a single Chinese soymilk firm as representative of the entire soymilk industry. Instead, the following analysis will consider two Chinese soymilk brands, Vitasoy and VV Soymilk 维维豆奶. The former is the pioneer of the industry and an international shareholder firm, and the latter is a soymilk brand owned by VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd. 维维股份, a firm whose largest shareholder is an SOE-operated

[117] The Demand Institute, "No More Tiers."
[118] The Demand Institute, "No More Tiers."

firm, Xinsheng Group 新盛集团. Comparing these two firms' marketing strategies will reveal whether the same socially responsible marketing approach has been effective for soymilk firms with extremely different backgrounds.

The following advertisements and marketing campaigns are sourced from online advertising archives, image hosting websites, video streaming websites, personal blogs, each brand's official WeChat accounts, and each firm's official website. This Internet-based search was necessary because there have been no unified archives for Chinese advertisements in the past decade and a half, much less one specifically for the Chinese soymilk industry. Because official accounts and sites are kept as up-to-date as possible, the soymilk advertisements available there are either the most recent or curated by the company as a showcase. Thus, other online sources will supplement the visual and TV advertisements not covered by official channels.

Modern Soymilk Advertisements: New Look, Same Nutrition

As seen in prior eras, soymilk's nutritional benefits were adapted to serve national agendas that bolstered contemporary ideals of Chinese strength. Today's soymilk advertisements have retained this strategy in the past decade and a half. Vitasoy and VV have used their advertisements to recontextualize soymilk nutrition's importance in China today. Their goal was not to prove whether soymilk was nutritious enough when stood alongside dairy milk. Rather, it was to prove that soymilk's nutritional benefits were distinctly "Chinese enough" for a younger consumer to self-identify with their brands in store aisles. In short, the firms faced the same question of past eras: At present, what does a healthy Chinese lifestyle look like with soymilk?

The first answer comes from Vitasoy International Holdings Ltd.[119] No longer the soymilk giant serving Hong Kong exclusively, the company has branched out to Mainland China, Australia and New Zealand, Singapore, The Philippines, and North America. To clarify how Vitasoy fits into the Chinese soymilk industry today, "International Holdings" means that the firm is structured as a parent firm located in Hong Kong which oversees the operations of its subsidiaries in each country. The "Limited" designation indicates the owners' limited liability to its public shareholders, meaning that business assets, rather than the owners' assets, would be liquidated in the case of bankruptcy. This caution on Vitasoy's part is warranted, as the decisions of the firm's elected board members affect the earnings of the entire international community of shareholders.[120] It then stands to reason that advertising campaigns approved by said board for a particular geographical area have the potential to affect the earnings of all shareholders. Therefore, it was in Vitasoy's best interests to minimize controversy in their advertisement campaigns.

When it came to advertising the nutritional "Chineseness" of its soymilk, Vitasoy could no longer fully rely on its Hong Kong identity. That was its source of controversy: for many Sinocentric consumers, Vitasoy's colonial origins were a reminder of a previously divided China. Since 1997, the CCP molded Hong Kong's "business environment [to] increasingly [take] on the appearance of any other Chinese city, centered on mainland investment, with its firms having to contend with complex and at times contradictory regulations emanating down

[119] Vitasoy International Holdings Ltd., "Our Products and Global Presence," Global Presence - Vitasoy, accessed March 1, 2024, https://www.vitasoy.com/global-presence/.
[120] Vitasoy International Holdings Ltd., "Governance," accessed March 2, 2024, https://www.vitasoy.com/governance/. The site states that "The Board of Directors is committed to achieving high standards of corporate governance practices as well as the company's mission of building value for our shareholders."

from Beijing."[121] As recently as July of 2021, Vitasoy "saw its shares tumble the most since 2008 amid online calls for a consumer boycott in China, following a stabbing attack on a Hong Kong policeman… carried out by a company employee… The topic 'Get out of Mainland, Vitasoy' [began trending on] the Weibo social media platform after an internal memo at Vitasoy extended condolences to the attacker's family."[122] Faced with both government pressure and consumer outrage to acquiesce to a Mainland Chinese expectations, Vitasoy's advertising has had to navigate a caustic relationship with its "key growth driver," Mainland China, without neglecting its "most developed market, Hong Kong SAR."[123]

To do so, Vitasoy's advertisements have decided on the theme of nurturing human connection through nutrition as an appeal that would apply to both Mainland and Hong Kong audiences. Its goal was to capitalize on Chinese societal collectivism and use shared values to create a unified Chinese identity that both groups could relate to. By emphasizing the importance of relationships in its advertising, Vitasoy defined the modern Chinese consumer as a younger, social, family and community-oriented individual who looked out for others' health. The newest role of Vitasoy's soymilk was to strengthen community and foster relationships so that its soymilk could represent a compassionate Chinese experience, rather than be a reminder of historical differences.

The first step was to make the association between Vitasoy, youth, and the potential for friendships and social connection. In Vitasoy's 2009 TV advertisement, "Stand By Me," groups

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[121] U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, "2023 Annual Report to Congress, Chapter 5 Section 1 - Hong Kong" (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission), accessed February 4, 2024, 639-695 at 660, https://www.uscc.gov/annual-report/2023-annual-report-congress. This report is drafted each year to aid Congress in "assessing progress and challenges in U.S.-China relations."
[122] Jeanny Yu, "Vitasoy Plunges Amid Boycott Calls After Hong Kong Cop Stabbing," *Bloomberg*, July 5, 2021, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bth&AN=151260155&site=ehost-live.
[123] Dow Jones Newswire, "HK Bourse: Announcement From Vitasoy International," *Dow Jones Institutional News*, November 20, 2023, https://snapshot.factiva.com/Search/SSResults.

of teenagers and young adults partook in extracurricular activities and sleepover selfies while enjoying their cartons of Vitasoy as a pick-me-up (See Figure 4). While doing so, they belted out the lyrics of the advertisement's titular song. Particularly notable lyrics include "You join me in cracking jokes, we meet up when I feel bored," "You stopped the winds and rain," and "This happiness carries on into fall and winter."[124] These lyrics and scenes, presumably referring to both the characters and Vitasoy, portrayed friends living out the best time of their lives with Vitasoy and each other to look after them. This implied that it is the soymilk, as well as their friendships, that sustain them. Without the soymilk, they would not be able to run quite as fast, dance quite as hard, or hang around quite as long to make the most of each other's company. This message of harmony, entertainment, and companionship culminated in the sentiment that without Vitasoy, life would be more isolated. Youth was an experience that required Vitasoy to truly unlock. Most importantly, it did not matter whether the viewer was from Mainland China or Hong Kong – youth was a universal experience that transcended geographical boundaries and cultural differences. Thus, the "Vitasoy experience" was also universally Chinese, and just a purchase away.

[124] "Wei Ta Nai Stand By Me 2009 Guanggao 維他奶 Stand By Me 2009 廣告 [Vitasoy Stand By Me 2009 Advertisement]." The original lyrics are 伴我開玩笑 悶了相約見，風雨擋住了，and 這快樂延續到秋冬。

Figure 4. A group of friends singing in Vitasoy's 2009 "Stand By Me" advertisement.
"Wei Ta Nai Stand By Me 2009 Guanggao (Zhengque Geci Zimu) (維他奶 Stand By Me 2009 廣告(正確歌詞字幕) [Vitasoy Stand By Me 2009 Advertisement (Correct Lyrics and Subtitles)]", YouTube Video, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNYKvfAOYiE.

Vitasoy's association between youth, interpersonal connection, and nutrition extends beyond social relationships and into the family home. As a part of the 2023 "For You, For Me, Vitasoy" TV campaign, a pair of ads described how older family members should reconcile their disapproval of younger family members' lifestyles: they should look out for their health as a form of solidarity and comfort. In the first advertisement, a rudely awakened older brother reminds his younger brother, a cellist, in an irritated tone, "I need to work tomorrow," after which the younger replies "I have an audition tomorrow. Let me practice a little longer?"[125] When the cellist scrambles out the door after having overslept, his older brother sacrifices his morning routine to see him off to his audition, offering the younger brother a carton of Vitasoy as they both ride off on a motorbike (See Figure 5).[126] This message of self-sacrifice solidifies the connection between soymilk and a brother's compassion. Vitasoy attached its nutrition to

[125] "For Me, For You, Vitasoy 為我 為你 維他奶," YouTube Video, 0:09-0:14, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEaJHx-7Kk0. The advertisement itself includes translated English subtitles.
[126] "For Me, For You, Vitasoy 為我 為你 維他奶," 0:51.

family dynamics to emphasize the importance of guardianship in Chinese families. In doing so, it implies its role is much the same; it is uniquely Chinese because it looks out for the health and success of its Chinese consumers, much like a big brother does when one runs late and misses breakfast. Vitasoy implied that its consumer base is part of an interconnected family, and it was their caretaker.

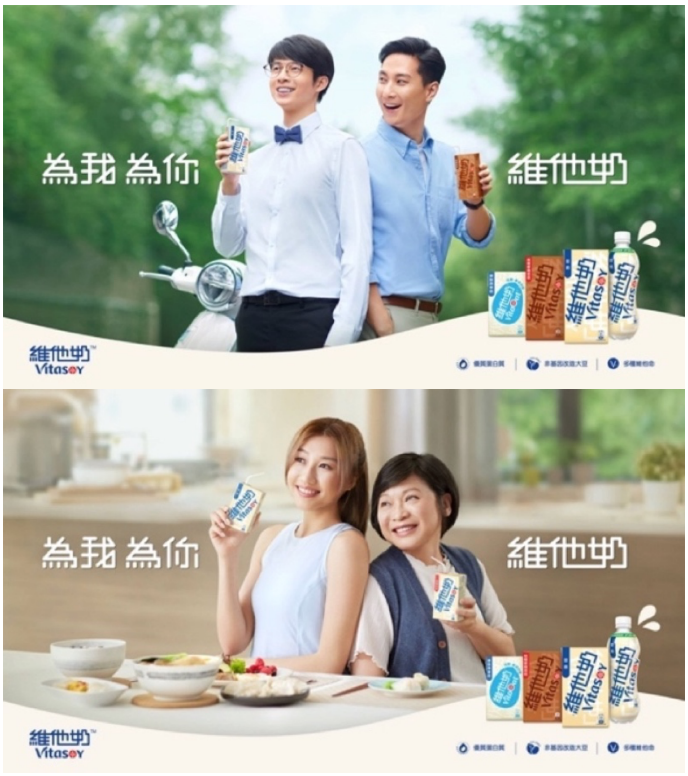

Figure 5. For Me, For You, Vitasoy Campaign Visual Advertisements.
"For Me, For You, Vitasoy 為我 為你 維他奶," Ads of the World, accessed March 4, 2024, https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/for-me-for-you-vitasoy.

While the second advertisement featured the same themes on family and youth, it also included commentary on Internet culture to draw in connected consumers. The main character, a workout live-streamer, stays up late to film exercise videos for her viewers, much to the silent irritation of her mother. However, when she leaves the room, she is greeted by a bowl of

steaming noodles paired with a Vitasoy, prepared by the mother she calls her "No. 1 Fan."[127] In this case, two types of relationships were shown: the fleeting adoration of fans, and the endurance of a mother's love. The viewer finds that love communicated via gifting Vitasoy is as unspoken, dependable, and unconditional as a mother-daughter bond, a love far more substantive and reciprocal than anything offered online. So long as family bonds exist, then so would Vitasoy be there to support them. The consumer is prompted to emulate the same kind of relationship as the pair of women onscreen, by purchasing and consuming soymilk worthy of being placed next to a mother's hearty, nutritious home-cooked meal. True to the advertisement's tagline, Vitasoy is "For me, for you (*Wei wo wei ni* 為我為你)" because it fulfills both the gifter and receiver emotionally and nutritionally (See Figure 5).[128]

Vitasoy's advertisements invert Republican Era appeals by dismissing the elite nuclear family ideal maintained through soymilk purchases. Nowadays, rather than picturing soymilk as an exclusive harbinger of family prosperity, Vitasoy is now easily attainable and enjoyed in both familial and friendly relationships. It is portrayed as the drink that brings people together, rather than sets them apart from their community. In these ads, nutrition was not meant to enhance the physical health of the population to promote national strength, but rather to promote national unity through the solidification of social and family connections.

Meanwhile, VV could take a more direct approach when defining "Chineseness" and soymilk in the present— overseen by a Mainland SOE, it represented the state itself and was entitled to a sense of belonging in the Mainland Chinese industry that Vitasoy has had to earn with its marketing. To preface, the following analysis will depend almost entirely on VV's

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[127] "For Me, For You, Vitasoy 為我 為你 維他奶 II," YouTube Video, 0:22, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEaJHx-7Kk0. The advertisement itself includes translated English subtitles.
[128] The character "for" *wei* 為 is the homophone of 餵, meaning "to feed."

official website as a primary source, aside from business news articles. Coverage on the company has been spotty in business press, and searches for VV's soymilk advertisements return with Vitasoy advertisements instead. To prevent the inclusion of erroneous information, VV's company profile will be built around its own "About US" and "Press Centre" sections and corroborated with business press when possible.

VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd. was founded "in 1988 and formally set up in 1992" in Jiangsu province, self-identified as "the initiator of China soybean milk industry," and has grown into a "large industry and trans-regional enterprise group" today.[129] However, in 2008, "VV… scored total sales of CNY 2.83 billion last year, down 10.92 percent from 2007" following "a blow amid the financial crisis and a series of tainted foods scandals," with "ever rising raw material and energy prices."[130] This story matches the upward trajectory that mass-produced soymilk enjoyed from the Deng Xiaoping Era to the mid-2000s, riding off of the back of overseas interest and increasing government. It also verifies that the 2008 milk scandal did have an impact on the general food industry— perhaps even more so than previously expected. By January 2018, the firm regained its footing, despite a "declining total revenue and profit of beverage industry" according to Chinese industry experts.[131] But its crowning achievement was in 2019, when an SOE, Xinsheng Group, became its largest shareholder at 17 percent stake following the recommendation of the State-Owned Assets and Administration Commission of the State Council.[132] Interestingly, this partnership resulted from state directives to "encourage

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[129] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "VV Profile," accessed March 14, 2022, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/aboutus/introduce. The site is already translated in English.
[130] "VV 08 Net Profits Down 40.82%," *SinoCast Consumer Products Beat*, accessed February 6, 2024, https://snapshot.factiva.com/Search/SSResults.
[131] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "VV Soybean Milk Earned More Profits than Any Other A-Share Listed Soft Drink Companies," January 19, 2018, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/news/1516291200.
[132] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Xinsheng Group Purchased 284 Million Shares of VV for RMB 955 Million," November 22, 2019, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/news/1574352000.

SOE to take a bigger role in the development of the grain industry," in which VV already participated.[133] This process sheds light on how private firms are incentivized to align themselves with state industry reforms under the SOE system and, in turn, what an SOE stands to gain from mobilizing private firms to its cause.

One of these gains was to learn how to run a listed business.[134] This is where advertisements come in— VV has experience in producing them for a public audience, while Xinsheng does not. Because Xinsheng takes on commercial activities on the CCP's behalf, the advertisements produced by VV, now operated by Xinsheng, reflect state values. VV became the state's billboard, and its advertisements mirror what the state envisions the connected spender as when drinking soymilk.

VV's soymilk advertisements involve the same young adult subjects as Vitasoy. But VV's advertisements prescribed drinking soymilk to achieve a clearly defined healthy lifestyle as a contemporary Chinese consumer, rather than allowing the connected spender to visualize what a healthy lifestyle might look like to them. As a result, VV's advertisements incorporated nutritional governmentality in a subtler form, taking the imagination out of soymilk drinking and returning to earlier nutritional soymilk advertising's pedagogical approach. As a prime example, in "Neutralizing Spice, Nourishing the Stomach" (*Jie la yang wei, Weiwei dounai* 解辣养胃,维维豆奶), a man dressed in a Chinese opera outfit repeats the word "spicy" before he douses the flames in his mouth with canned soymilk and returns to his "normal" self (See Figure 6). The advertisement followed a step-by-step approach, demonstrating the destructiveness of spice while emphasizing to the viewer that soymilk is "nourishing,"—the exact jargon used in the Chinese medicinal theory of neotraditional advertisements from the

[133] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Xinsheng Group Purchased 284 Million Shares."
[134] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Xinsheng Group Purchased 284 Million Shares."

Republican Era.[135] Previously, traditional understandings of health and nutrition were integrated with biomedical nutritionism to form a smoother transitional understanding of why soymilk was good for the body. Now, the traditional and the modern are bisected, and drinking VV soymilk led to a complete transformation of the man to his currently healthy, refreshed self. The Chinese opera was used as a cultural prop, rather than an educational tool to communicate VV Soymilk's nutritional value. Perhaps a bit ham-fisted in its presentation, it is nonetheless clear that 1) soymilk is a healthy gustatory delight and 2) drinking it would bring the young person back to the present (See Figure 7). VV Soymilk's role in this advertisement is to rescue the drinker from antiquated perceptions of what it means to be Chinese. For the government, soymilk was not a relic of the past, but instead a convenient way for modern Chinese consumers to access nutritional health thanks to the expansion of industrial production. VV's soymilk was characterized as a marker of national progress and personal health for the consumer, rather than a drink of a bygone era.

Figure 6. Advertising video for VV Group, before the transformation in "Neutralizing Spice, Nourishing the Stomach." VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Home Page," accessed March 11, 2024, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/home.

[135] Fu, *The Other Milk,* 119. The Republican Era advertisements borrow the Daoist longevity concept of "nourishing life" *yangsheng* 养生. The same character *yang* 养 is used in "nourishing the stomach" *yang wei* 养胃.

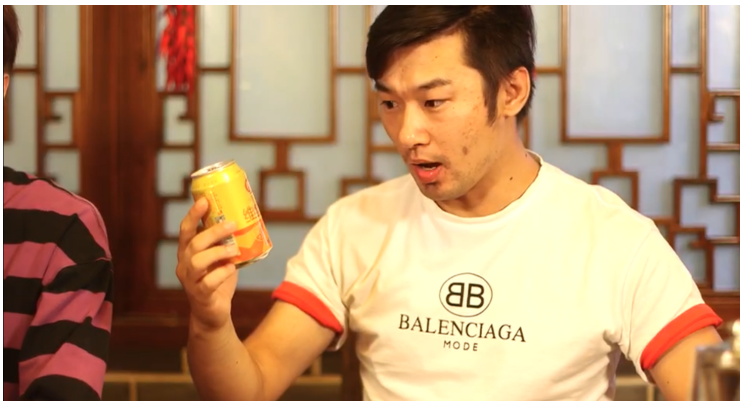

Figure 7. Advertising video for VV Group, after the transformation in "Neutralizing Spice, Nourishing the Stomach." VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Home Page," accessed March 11, 2024, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/home.

To summarize, modern Chinese soymilk advertisements needed to strike a balance between reinventing brand image to entice a younger crowd and acknowledging the history of both their firm and soymilk itself. To win over connected spenders, soymilk firms attempt to capture the spirit of youth in their advertisements and manually attach soymilk to a younger crowd with self-insert characters. Rather than reinvent the wheel, they instead repurpose previous appeals to soymilk's associations with family and traditional health to justify the compatibility of soymilk's past with a contemporary Chinese lifestyle. As a result, they maintain a consistent message that soymilk is nutritionally Chinese and will continue to nurture consumers in the present day.

Social Media and Social Responsibility

While soymilk advertisements updated soymilk's nutritional image to reflect a contemporary Chinese identity, soymilk firms' most pivotal marketing strategy was to leverage the profits earned from Internet engagement with their nutrition-based advertising to physically build up China. Rather than confine nation-building to the individual body as a purely health-based endeavor, soymilk firms took nation-building quite literally. They channeled their brand

influence and wealth into charity projects they then posted to their WeChat accounts and official sites to target the connected consumer, adding a tangible and performative element to their marketing. In doing so, they converted the government's call for social responsibility into social capital for their brand image. Through cause marketing, soymilk firms injected a new purpose into their previous nutritional profile: drinking soymilk in China was patriotic because it provided disaster relief in times of national crises and supported disadvantaged rural communities with monetary and product donations.

This was not an entirely original approach—instead, the soymilk firms adapted this strategy directly from its dairy firms' damage control policies in the wake of the Melamine Scandal. In 2007, Chinese dairy giant Mengniu 蒙牛 released its first *Social Responsibility of Business Report* (1999-2007), wherein Board Chairman Niu Gensheng stated that "A genuine name brand company… will not develop well if it is not concerned about major national events" as the firm's reason "to bear the special historical responsibility of China's dairy enterprises making due contribution to develop China.[136] These contributions included the "Chinese Caring Milk Movement," which "invested more than 100 million RMB Yuan… [to launch] large charity movement to give free milk to 500 elementary schools" across "31 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions," as well as Niu Gensheng's Laoniu Foundation, which had "helped 36 projects with a total input of 41,892,090 Yuan" that were "oriented towards medical treatment, education, agriculture, farmers, and rural areas."[137] But while the report promised "an annual

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[136] *Mengniu Shehui Zeren Baogao* 蒙牛社会责任报告 (1999-2007 年) [Mengniu Social Responsibility Report (1999-2007)] (Shengle Economic District, Helin Geer Hunhot: Inner Mongolia Mengniu Dairy (Group) Co., Ltd., 2007), 10,4, https://media-mengniu.todayir.com/20170704171145178873609 2_tc.pdf. The report includes fully translated English pages.

[137] Inner Mongolia Mengniu Dairy (Group) Co., Ltd., *Mengniu Shehui Zeren Baogao,* 26, 36. The given translation is "Chinese Milk Love Action," but was retranslated to better reflect its Chinese title, *Zhongguo Niu Nai Aixin Xingdong* 中国牛奶爱心行动.

social commitment report" to maintain a dialogue with its consumers, Mengniu's next report arrived six years overdue, in 2013.[138] Now, the firm's charitable projects were relegated to the sixth and last section, while the first section was dedicated to addressing the food safety measures Mengniu implemented in each step of the production process since the Melamine Scandal.[139] As part of these efforts to re-establish transparent communication and win back consumer trust, Mengniu was the first dairy to set up a WeChat account on May 21, 2013, for customers to scan QR codes, put forward their concerns, and receive timely, detailed responses from company experts once these questions were aggregated.[140] While dairy firms were early to the game by publicizing their socially responsible charity campaigns via company reports, this originally proactive public relations strategy was stunted by the Melamine Scandal. Their use of social media, rather than an archive of their social responsibility, was first created to tend to the aftermath of shattered consumer trust.

Meanwhile, soymilk firms remained unencumbered by direct controversy in 2008 and were opportunistic enough to recognize the combined value of the Internet and charity work. They took inspiration from Mengniu to start utilizing WeChat and the Internet as a public scoreboard for their philanthropic, socially responsible contributions as well as a billboard for their soymilk's adherence to Chinese values. Soymilk firms' strategy was to bring their own industry compliance into the public eye and to emphasize what soymilk firms had that dairy milk

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[138] Inner Mongolia Mengniu Dairy (Group) Co., Ltd., *Mengniu Shehui Zeren Baogao,* 4.

[139] *Zhi Wei Diandi Xingfu: Zhongguo Mengniu Ruye Youxian Gongsi Shehui Zeren Baogao* (2008-2013) 只為點滴幸福：中国蒙牛乳业有限公司社会责任报告 (2008-2013) [For a Drop of Happiness: China Mengniu Dairy Co. Ltd. Social Responsibility Report (2008-2013)] (Shengle Economic District, Helin Geer Hunhot: Inner Mongolia Mengniu Dairy (Group) Co., Ltd., December 31, 2013), 13-22, https://media-mengniu.todayir.com/20170704171145178873609 2_tc.pdf.

[140] "Mengniu Kaitong Zhongguo Ruye Di Yi Jia Weixin Kefu" 蒙牛开通中国乳业第一家微信客服 [Mengniu Launches China's First Dairy WeChat Customer Service], *China Daily*, May 30, 2013, http://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/2013-05/30/content_16548486.htm. The original text reads: 消费者可以用手机扫描二维码，关注蒙牛乳业官方微信平台，提出自己关心的话题或想要了解的知识，蒙牛客服、内部专业人员将会给出详实的答复。

firms did not: an unstained record when protecting Chinese national growth. By broadcasting through social media and the Internet at large a "balance between developing financial capability through business activities [… and] the interests of the public with ethical principles," soymilk firms would "develop a competitive advantage" over a struggling dairy industry.[141]

Chinese soymilk advertising has evolved into a curated experience on WeChat, to match the Chinese connected consumer's shrewdness when deciphering their advertisements. Instead of waiting for consumers to come across their advertisements, firms proactively reach out to them. WeChat, which launched in 2010, is China's largest instant messenger with "over 600 million registered users in January 2014," and housed "more than 10 million WeChat business firms on the platform in China" by that same year.[142] According to Shuai Yang, Sixing Cheng, and Bin Li's study of WeChat business dynamics, "firms who have product-related information and customer feedback in their news feeds intend to provide sufficient information to attract and educate customers to maximize their utility by choosing their business."[143] Because "WeChat business is people-oriented, based on social networking interactions," soymilk firms have the potential to build rapport with individual subscribers, sculpting their feeds to cultivate a specific type of connected spender who willingly returns for updates about either the firm's soymilk or its brand goals.[144] This social media platform was therefore perfect for "generating moral capital" to elevate firms in the eyes of Chinese citizens.[145] As soymilk firms expanded in influence and capital, they have answered the call of social responsibility to improve their public image, for

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[141] Qijun Jiang and Ying Zhu, "Confronting the Crisis of Food Safety and Revitalizing Companies' Social Responsibility in the People's Republic of China," *Asia Pacific Business Review* 19, no. 4 (2013): 600–616, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602381.2013.789659.
[142] Shuai Yang, Sixing Chen, and Bin Li, "The Role of Business and Friendships on WeChat Business: An Emerging Business Model in China: Journal of Global Marketing," *Journal of Global Marketing* 29, no. 4 (September 2016): 174–87 at 174, https://doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2016.1184363.
[143] Yang, Chen, and Li, "The Role of Business and Friendships on WeChat Business," 176.
[144] Yang, Chen, and Li, "The Role of Business and Friendships on WeChat Business," 174.
[145] Zhao, *Corporate Social Responsibility in Contemporary China*, 3.

further self-gain. The purpose of social responsibility in China began as "compliance and philanthropy" but has transitioned into a way to build "better supply chains and [attract] more international talent and investment."[146] Therefore, the more loyal eyes one can direct to one's cause, the more potential there was for a firm's growth. If soymilk firms want to stay competitive and gain an upper hand in the industry, they needed to draw in an audience before engaging in government-defined performative activism.

In the past decade, soymilk firms advertising on WeChat have used the app's channel feed format to foster a more intimate friendship dynamic with consumers, creating a reciprocal environment meant not only to inspire purchases, but also a sense of kinship. Both created in 2017, the Vitasoy Engagement Platform (*Weita nai hudong pingtai* 维他奶互动平台) and VV Soymilk's official feed contain multimedia articles meant to humanize what would otherwise be faceless corporations. In Vitasoy's case, they offer nutrition advice to the consumer through interactive quizzes, like a friend sending one an online quiz for entertainment (See Figure 8). In a recent self-test for the consumer to check whether they "have recovered from post-holiday syndrome" following the start of the 2023-24 school year, by asking whether they "have trouble getting up in the morning," whether their "appetite has deteriorated," and whether they have "difficulty concentrating" and "social anxiety."[147] While the post ends with an advertisement

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[146] Zhao, *Corporate Social Responsibility in Contemporary China*, 3.

[147] Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "Jiaqi Zonghe Zheng Ceshi Juan Lai La! Dianji Zi Ce, Chakan Ni 'Zhi' Le Mei? 假期综合征测试卷来啦！点击自测，查看你「植」愈了没？[The Post-Holiday Syndrome Quiz Is Here! Click to Check, Have You 'Recovered' Yet?]," Weixin Official Accounts Platform, September 15, 2023, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5OTk3NjIxNA==&mid=2652874062&idx=1&sn=fe2117991770064817532cbec4e6b3c0&chksm=8b111037bc66992124e5471f8d6d44f132c69290a8bfce6a487b7738619f600c0010de605099#rd. The title, "Have You Recovered from Post-Holiday Syndrome Yet?" is written as 你的假期综合症「植」愈了没? The character 植 *zhi* is the homophone of 治 *zhi*, which is part of the term 治愈 *zhiyu*，meaning recovery. The title is a pun alluding to how plant protein is the cure for post-holiday syndrome. The original quiz questions in Chinese are: 你是否犯起床困难症了？ 你息否胃口突然变差？你是否难以集中，易感疲惫？你是否犯社交困难症了？

prescribing Vitasoy to the consumer, the method of delivery simulates the caring concern of a peer rather than the pesky requests of a business.

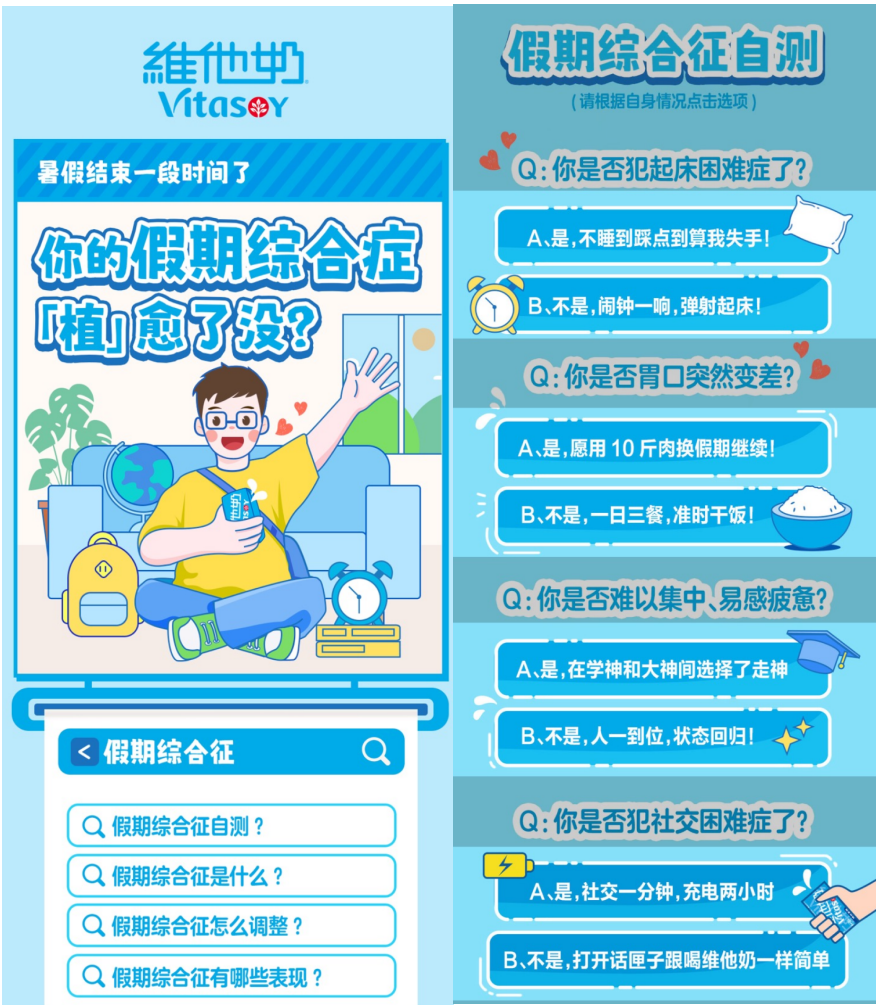

Figure 8. Vitasoy's interactive quiz post. Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "The Post-Holiday Syndrome Quiz Is Here!"

Meanwhile, VV specializes in traditional Chinese holiday posts on WeChat. Its 2021 Winter Solstice Festival post, "Winter Solstice | Dumplings & Tangyuan, Which Do You Choose?" is written in the voice of VV Soymilk's mascot, Little Bean, who asked readers from both Northern and Southern China to savor their respective winter dishes, dumplings and

glutinous rice balls, while they enjoyed their family reunions (See Figure 9).[148] The post's regional inclusivity, its celebration of a Chinese holiday, and its layout mimicking Chinese poetry promote VV soymilk as a new addition to traditional food customs and celebrations. While it ends with an abrupt reminder that "a cup of VV soymilk is the best way to honor this season," it is formatted as a greeting card sent from one friend to another.[149] As the firms spoke to consumers as their equals, they also expected a response they would not receive through traditional advertising. To complete the interaction, soymilk firms invite consumers to leave comments with their thoughts, or answers to a prompt question in exchange for a prize (usually a case of soymilk).[150] VV went a step further to turn these parasocial relationships into social ones by responding to comments affirming the consumer's dish of choice (See Figure 10).[151]

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[148] VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "Dongzhi | Jiaozi & Tangyuan, Ni Xuan Na Yi Ge? 冬至丨饺子&汤圆，你选哪一个？[Winter Solstice | Dumplings & Tangyuan, Which Do You Choose?]," Weixin Official Accounts Platform, December 20, 2021, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzU4OTIyMTQxNQ==&mid=2247484423&idx=1&sn=18dfc446b82182cb2c285106b46f8618&chksm=fdd19f4fcaa6165995c13c404684146ea058eeb5ca98207e4f501559fe46be7a4b1f58ec3f9e#rd. The original text reads: 不管是吃饺子还是吃汤圆， 只要一家人能团在一起… 幸福感便萦绕满屋。

[149] VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "Winter Solstice | Dumplings & Tangyuan." The original text reads: 这时候记得再来一杯维维豆奶，就是对这个季节最大的尊重。

[150] Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "The Post-Holiday Syndrome Quiz Is Here!"

[151] VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "Winter Solstice | Dumplings & Tangyuan." The comments are only available to view via the app; the web link only contains the post. VV's first response to the consumer's answer, "Dumplings" 饺子，is "Dumplings paired with soymilk, both joyous and happy" 饺子配豆奶，欢乐又开怀. It is a rhyme that incorporates its slogan, "VV Soymilk, Joyously Happy" 维维豆奶，欢乐开怀 in it.

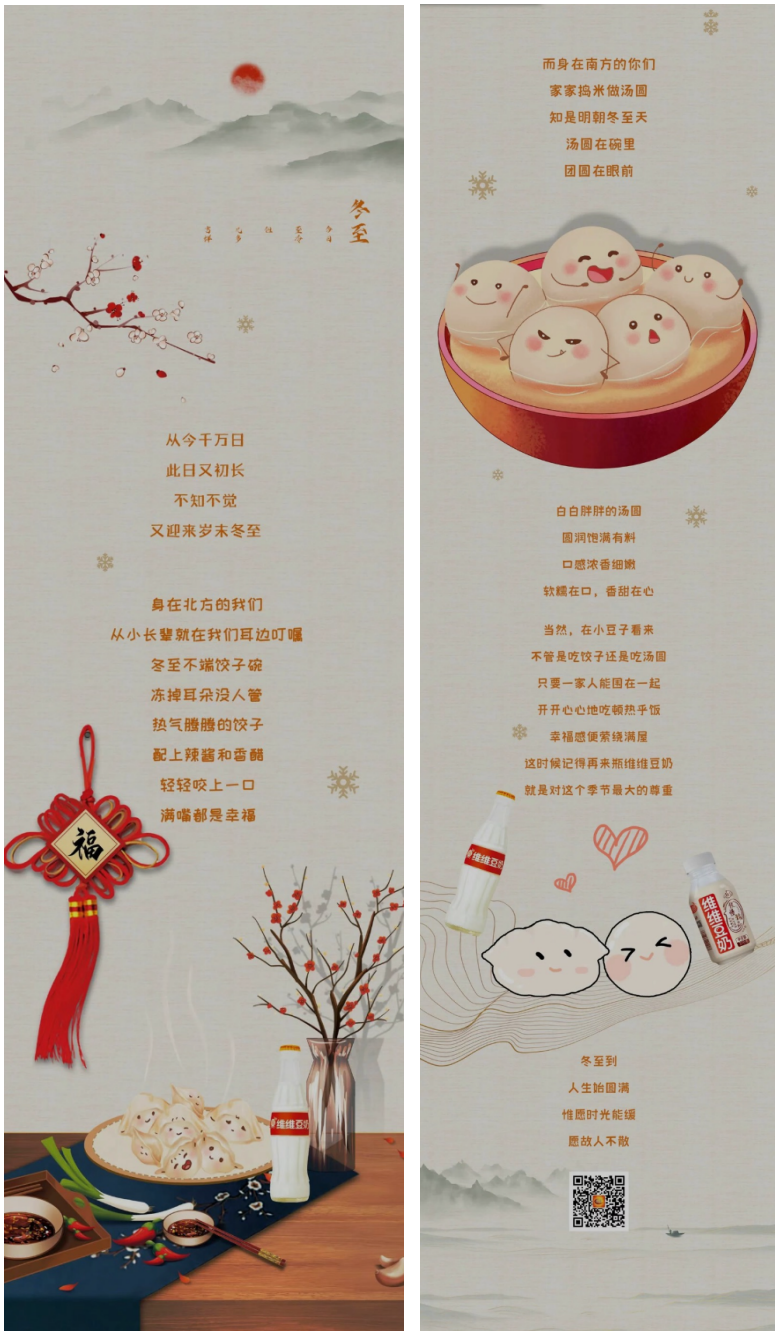

Figure 9. Graphic for VV's Winter Solstice post. VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "Winter Solstice | Dumplings & Tangyuan."

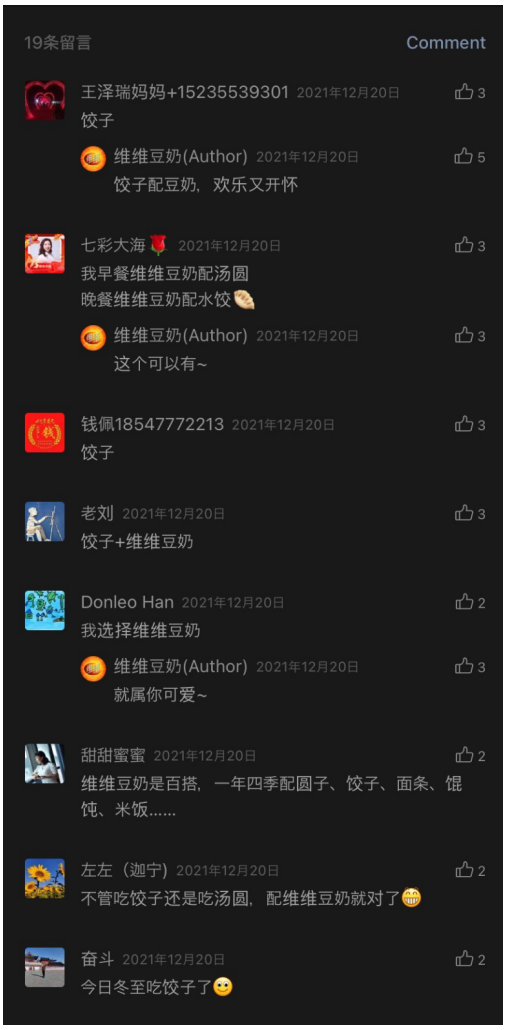

Figure 10. VV Soymilk's official account responding to consumers underneath the Winter Solstice post. VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "Winter Solstice | Dumplings & Tangyuan."

Soymilk firms expected this reciprocal relationship to extend beyond lighthearted content so that consumers would become interested in company news—especially their socially responsible initiatives. On WeChat, acts of charity are converted into the firm's "life updates" that increase the connected consumer's investment in the firm. By befriending the consumer, firms wanted consumers to view their own role as a "valuable exchange partner" to the firm, whose brand loyalty is in some small part contributing to the soymilk brand's social

responsibility efforts.[152] In essence, the firms implied that these acts of philanthropic nation-building would not have been possible without the consumer's relationship with the firm.

Yet, between Vitasoy and VV, there are different levels of commitment to this approach. Vitasoy preferred to use their WeChat as a one-stop shop for the consumer, listing company news alongside their "friend content." Meanwhile, VV chose to compartmentalize most of its social responsibility posts on its company news site.[153] While we cannot be sure why this is the case, VV seemingly takes the opposite approach and relies on its social responsibility initiatives to attract a dedicated audience on WeChat. Currently, the bottom of each page of its site contains a WeChat-specific QR code linking to the VV Group official account, which then links to VV Soymilk's official account (See Figure 11). From this, we can infer that VV believed publicly available Internet information would draw in an audience, whose attention could be retained and refined when converted to followers on WeChat. Therefore, VV used its standing as an SOE-acquired firm aligned with the government agenda to try and secure a bond with loyal consumers. Meanwhile, Vitasoy depended on relationships it formed with the consumer to build legitimacy for its brand.

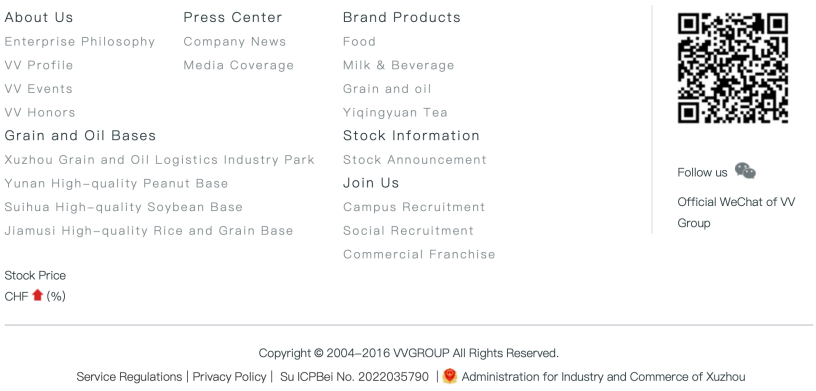

Figure 11: The bottom of each page of VV's site. VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Home Page."

[152] Yang, Chen, and Li, "The Role of Business and Friendships on WeChat Business," 177.
[153] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "News," accessed March 21, 2024, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/news.

With netizens' attention focused on them, soymilk firms began to make a show of where their profits were going to. These types of feel-good updates reinforce for the consumer that they were 1) paying for a good cause in addition to receiving a product that nourishes them, 2) rewarding a company's behavior with their purchase, and 3) were a part of the change they want to see in Chinese industry and society. Now, soymilk firms' online documentation of their accountability was converted into a currency that elevated their reliability in the eyes of the CCP, the food industry, and consumers themselves. It became a positive feedback loop: the more socially responsible updates are given, the more connected consumers engage with the brand, the more likely they are to make a purchase, and the more material firms have for their next socially responsible post. Two notable categories of these posts are national crisis response and the support of impoverished rural communities.

Soymilk firms' posts responding to national crises made firms, and by extension the consumer, national heroes through their generosity. China's most recent national crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, mobilized soymilk firms to open their hearts (and wallets) to medical personnel in Wuhan. In VV's soymilk's single social responsibility WeChat post reported on its coronavirus response in February of 2020, stating that "VV Food donated 10 million yuan to support pandemic control efforts" and following with "2000 boxes of canned VV soymilk and 50 boxes of original-flavored bottled soymilk" to Hanhong Charity to distribute to frontline healthcare workers in Wuhan, China.[154] This post ended with a QR code to "enter VV's flagship

[154] VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "Wei Wei Gufen Xieshou Han Hong Jijin Hui 200 Dun Wei Wei Dou Nai Chiyuan Wuhan Kang Yi Yixian (维维股份携手韩红基金会 200 吨维维豆奶 驰援武汉抗疫一线) [VV Partners with Han Hong Foundation to Distribute 200 Tons of VV Soymilk to Help Wuhan Anti-Pandemic Frontline]," February 24, 2020, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzU4OTIyMTQxNQ==&mid=2247483753&idx=2&sn=3c9211c76bf1bed4c690f7e619717494&chksm=fdd19a21caa6133728c882729016e61edc493dac196ccefbf6ee816f958ee7af9c3d9eb5bb2c#rd. Wuhan was the epicenter of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and local medical infrastructure was overwhelmed in the immediate aftermath. The original text reads: 在此基础上，维维股份向韩红基金会捐赠 2000 箱维维经典易

store," transforming the post into an advertisement that beckoned the consumer to sponsor similar projects.[155] Vitasoy's WeChat also announced its donation of "2 million yuan to the Red Cross Society of Xinzhou District, Wuhan Province" so that three local public hospitals could "procure and replenish medical supplies and resources to protect the health and safety of medical staff."[156] Preceding its QR code to follow Vitasoy's account was a banner reading "Let's Go Wuhan, Let's Go China" (*Wuhan jia you, Zhongguo jia you* 武汉加油, 中国加油) (See Figure 12). This "cooperation between business and society" works much like a crowdfunding campaign, bringing together a community of soymilk drinkers around the entire country, who pay their more powerful savior friend, the soymilk firm, to donate on their behalf.[157] While these posts were written to celebrate the heroic medical staff, it is the money that is saving these frontline workers during their time of need. Therefore, these posts applaud the soymilk firm and the consumer as the benefactors of society, preventing the nation from falling apart in a medical emergency.

拉罐豆奶和 50 箱经典素瓶豆奶… 2 月 7 日，面对疫情愈演愈烈的严峻形势，维维股份捐款 1000 万元支持抗疫工作。

[155] VV Soymilk 维维豆奶, "VV Partners with Han Hong Foundation." The original text reads: 扫二维码进入维维旗舰店。

[156] Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "A Helping Hand for Real Heroes."

[157] Zhao, *Corporate Social Responsibility in Contemporary China*, 218.

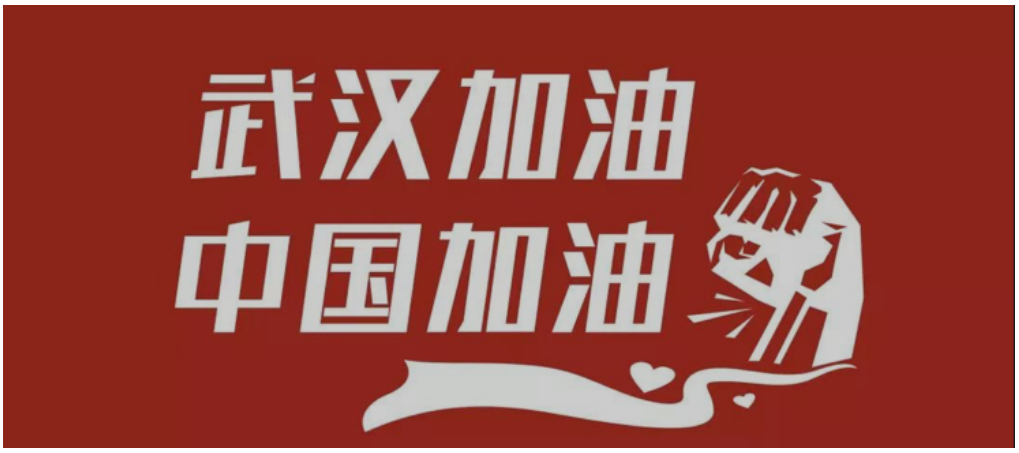

Figure 12: "Let's Go Wuhan, Let's Go China" Graphic from Vitasoy's Pandemic Post. Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "Yi Bi Zhi Li Bang Zhen Ying Xiong 一臂之力 助真英雄 [A Helping Hand For Real Heroes]," Weixin Official Accounts Platform, February 3, 2020, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5OTk3NjIxNA==&mid=2652852911&idx=1&sn=0a4d0f1667a7ea6a1faac39d3d8df23d&chksm=8b11e7d6bc666ec06c8196e18740e2474df38edf5d77fb7306b4a3c308d162f16ed9f2004c94#rd

Likewise, soymilk firms' support for rural development followed the same logic. Both firms sought out rural schoolchildren's nutritional needs, supplying their products and brand influence to raise awareness for the poverty and isolation. In 2009, VV Group "donated 1.1 million yuan to build a comprehensive building for Zhangji Middle School" in Jiangsu province to contribute "to the development of rural education," and returned there in 2019 to "[help] students with VV products'" and "exert a profound influence on both the development of the Group and education."[158] Meanwhile in 2017, Vitasoy distributed "150,000 boxes of soymilk" across "66 local schools" for "more than 33,000 children in mountainous areas" to aid the local government of Ludian, Yunnan in implementing a "student nutrition improvement program."[159]

[158] VV Food and Beverage Co. Ltd., "Giving Back to Society, Realizing Dreams with Quality Products," May 29, 2019, http://www.vvfood.cn/en/news/1559059200. This post has already been translated into English.
[159] Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "Xiaoxiao Mingxing Pian, Rang Wo Men Yu Shijie Zhencheng Peiban 小小明信片，让我们与世界真诚相伴 [With a Little Postcard, Let the World Reach Them]," Weixin Official Accounts Platform, January 19, 2018, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzA5OTk3NjIxNA==&mid=2652851061&idx=2&sn=ce2be9f569276bb91c3a5fdc6d73b607&chksm=8b11fe0cbc66771acf1b06848f2dfed765080533c67a764cc183c215cf05da27583a5fea6c3d#rd. The original text reads: 2017 年 9 月，维他奶带着 15 万盒豆奶来到了云南鲁甸，深入走访到当地 66 所学校、为 3 万多名山区孩子送上了美味的维他奶，协助鲁甸政府推广实施学生营养改善计划，将健康的产品与陪伴带到孩子们的身边。

Later in 2018, Vitasoy partnered with Blue Letter Project, a nonprofit that provides pen pals to the "26.7 million left-behind children in China, whose parents work and live in other places" to make a living and support the household.[160] Together, Vitasoy and Blue Letter Project gathered "more than 8000 postcards" filled with senders' "encouragement, comfort, and life experiences" to give to children in Hanshou County, Hunan Province, and Heyuan County, Guangdong Province.[161] These rural projects allowed urbanites to reach out to the less fortunate communities they would otherwise have little to no contact with. The firms revived the aspirations of Republican Era nutrition scientists, who hoped that soymilk firms would take on the burden of nationwide nutritional empowerment. But instead of forcing those in need to pay, today's soymilk firms channel their profits from paying customers to pay forward to hard to reach rural communities. In addition, these social responsibility projects' focus on children paralleled the Shanghai Era refugee feeding programs and British Hong Kong's school lunch programs; nurturing the future of China makes for a noble goal and an eye-catching headline. Who could resist the feeling of self-satisfaction when inundated with pictures of beaming children via an online update? (See Figure 13). Finally, soymilk firms' follow-up projects attempted to exhibit proper due diligence to netizens, so they would come off as genuinely invested in the future of rural communities, and distract from the fact that this is ultimately a marketing strategy.

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[160] Blue Letter Project, "Blue Letter Project | LinkedIn," accessed March 25, 2024, https://www.linkedin.com/company/blue-letter-project.

[161] Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, "With a Little Postcard." The original text reads: 2018 年伊始，维他奶携手蓝信封机构，共同发起了"守望相助，从信开始"的爱心明信片收集活动，为湖南汉寿、广东河源两地山区共 8593 名山区留守孩子送去新年的温暖与祝福… 除此之外，维他奶还同步发起了线上 H5 的明信片征集活动，共吸引到了 40000 余人次的参与关注，并征集到了 8000 余张爱心明信片，得到了社会各界的热烈反响。每一张明信片的字里行间都蕴含着写信人对孩子们的关心与关怀，这其中有期许，有鼓励，有安慰，也有自己的经历和故事……

Figure 13: Children receiving their postcard and soymilk from the Vitasoy and Blue Letter Project collaboration. Vitasoy Engagement Platform 维他奶互动平台, “With a Little Postcard.”

Instead of standing idly by their long-held association between soymilk’s nutritional benefits and Chinese national integrity, soymilk firms then took advantage of the Internet age to engage in a new form of self-promotion. Chinese connected spenders now funded the very cause marketing they came across on their devices and were active participants in the physical fortification of China’s social issues. Soymilk firms’ act of self-preservation seamlessly integrated them into Internet consumer culture, and reaffirmed soymilk’s role in society as a protector of national interests.

Conclusion

In the past ninety years, soymilk's sojourn to consumer acceptance has been segmented into chapters. First placed in the spotlight by Chinese nutrition scientists in the 1930s Republican Era to stave off China's image as the ailing elder of East Asia, soymilk's presence was limited to refugee camps and cities with the capability for mass production, where well-off families enjoyed them as daily deliveries. Meanwhile, in colonial Hong Kong, it was met with the approval of British authorities and turned into a staple industrialized beverage on the island by Vitasoy. Back on the mainland in the 1950s and 1960s, the instability of Maoist supply chains divorced soymilk from industrial production. And yet, it was Maoist nutrition standards that made soy protein's importance well known throughout the Chinese population. Eventually in the Deng Xiaoping Era of the 19, industry was revived to serve a newly installed socialist economy, and Mainland firms sought out foreign investment, government support, and Vitasoy's experience to form the soymilk industry of today.

In the most recent installment of soymilk's story, soymilk advertisements of the past decade and a half have vastly transformed in presentation compared to those from Republican Era Shanghai. However, their message has not strayed far from mass-produced soymilk's original purpose: to succor China in its arduous journey towards self-improvement. As nutritional literacy and nutritional standards have improved in the Chinese population since the 1930s, today's soymilk firms have defended soymilk's ability to drive societal development by refuting the notion that it is *just* a drink for personal health. Instead of wielding nutritional benefits like a crutch to outright assault consumers with its superiority over dairy milk, soymilk marketing chose instead to return to consumers a sense of control they lost during the 2008 food scare. Soymilk firms took on a role larger than themselves, transforming from productive

contributors to the Chinese economy into influential, responsible entities who acted on the consumer's behalf to monetarily safeguard Chinese prosperity. By taking to the Internet to show connected spenders how their purchases were being converted into productive projects that improved the lives of other Chinese, soymilk firms grew their brand influence, perpetuating a cycle of marketing, profit, and nation-building.

While I have attempted to gather a continuous narrative of how soymilk firms have reasserted soymilk's role in Chinese society, the story is still ongoing. With Chinese dairies cutting into the plant milk market themselves since 2017 to chase consumer demand, and soymilk firms' increasing diversification into other plant milk varieties to increase their competitive edge, what constitutes a Chinese "soymilk industry" may well be a fluid milk hybrid industry the coming decades.[162] My research was severely limited by the lack of primary source advertisements predating the 2010s that are available on the Internet; instead, my original analyses of earlier eras relied on advertisements documented in scholarly literature. In addition, Chinese soymilk firms have released paltry amounts of data regarding their business operations; aside from Vitasoy and the third-party market reports and company profiles that accompany its self-reported revenue reports, other firms have been tight-lipped and sparsely covered by international business databases. Although the comparison between two soymilk firms has confirmed a pattern of marketing behavior, it is still not enough to capture the complexity of an entire beverage industry—this thesis could be expanded upon with a wider selection of companies. Future research could be conducted on how the marketing of dairy milk firms that venture into the plant milk market differs from firms that exclusively offer plant milk. Whether soymilk continues to retain its dominance as dairy milk's rival is now out of the hands of

[162] Bloomberg, "China's Dairies Rush to Plant-Based Milk as Latest Health Trend," *Bloomberg.Com*, April 27, 2017.

nutritionists or the state—it is now up to the soymilk firms to determine soymilk's future image in China.

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