

An Ethnographic Voyage through the Cultural World of Dobra Tea

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Abstract

Dobra Tea Downtown offers a different experience compared to most tea or coffee shops. This is evident through the decorations, teas, tea utensils, and overall environment. Their teas, tea utensils, and decorations are meant to exemplify cultures and places from around the world, most commonly Eastern cultures and religions. An ethnographic exploration of Dobra Tea over the course of a year through participant observations, informal and formal interviews, and online research indicates that Dobra's decorations from various religious and cultural groups have been adopted as something for consumer satisfaction rather than the advertised respectful portrayal of different cultures. This shows up in the space through "slight Orientalism."¹ However, findings have also indicated that Dobra is not attempting to mimic authentic religious or cultural custom, but rather aiming to appreciate and illuminate traditional tea customs from around the world. Through Dobra's advertisement of a "voyage of discovery," Dobra creates an experience unlike anywhere else in Asheville.² This paper explores Dobra's space, how Dobra portrays these cultures, and the gaps in appreciating these cultures honestly and respectfully.

1. Positionality

My positionality has shaped my analyses and interest in doing research on Dobra Tea in Asheville. My interest stemmed from my passion to research natural modalities as a form of medicine. I initially wanted to research the medicinal and recreational effects that the tea Dobra offers has, but focusing on Dobra as a culture would prove to be more rich in information. Customers enjoy the international tea utensils like Japanese, Moroccan, and Czech Republic teapots, and gaiwans, a form of traditional Chinese tea ware that is an important piece in my research.³ Additionally, Dobra is a cultural space in which there are teas from around the world and is advertised as giving "everyone a taste of world culture" not just from the teas, but also through the whole experience.² The idea that Dobra gives a taste of multiple cultures, as well as is considered its own culture, is interesting to research and interpret.

I initially began my research on Dobra with an intention to point out the harmful, offensive parts of the business. I came in with a preconceived notion that Dobra is exemplifying cultural appropriation and Orientalism, the representation of Asia in a stereotyped way that is regarded as embodying a colonialist attitude including fetishization, exoticizing, and Othering. Cultural appropriation and Orientalism are dangerous because it refers to the adoption of parts of a culture out of a "temporary fascination" with the culture, not because there is "an authentic understanding of it".⁴ It misrepresents cultures as the Other. It becomes a problem when something from a less dominant culture is being portrayed in a way that is offensive, and is utilized by someone in a position of greater privilege- for fun, fashion, business, or out of a place of simply not knowing. I argued that Dobra was creating their space solely for consumer satisfaction rather than to mimic authentic religious culture, and that Dobra's space is not a representation of authentic cultures from around the world, but rather tapping into consumerist faddism.

The more I researched and spoke to the people in charge of Dobra in Asheville, I realized the space is much more complicated than that. While the space may seem harmful to some people on the surface level, Dobra attempts to

create a respectful space not to mimic other cultures, but to appreciate them. Through my change in perspective, I argue that there is a “slight Orientalism” to Dobra.¹ The space is more complex than simply being good or bad, black or white, Orientalist or not. Therefore, I attempt not to identify a duality, but rather to describe what Dobra culture looks like.

2. “Where the World Meets”: Description of the Space

The tearoom is designed as Bohemian style, a region in the Czech Republic where many cultures intersect, which is intended to mirror Dobra’s space. Nina Beck, owner of the Vermont location, explains that Dobra is unique because it is where many cultures intersect through tea.² The importance of multiple cultures intersecting is clearly important in the presentation of the space. Prague is the capital of the region of Bohemia, therefore, the tearoom is also representative of Prague.⁵ One reason that Dobra is very popular in Asheville, and around the nation, is the environment as many people have expressed to me.

Imagine walking into a shop and being able to choose one out of three different rooms of which to enjoy a cup of tea. While each section is interesting, the decorations are what make the sections eye-catching. Statues of Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, are placed in numerous spots, and there is a large altar with offerings dedicated to the Hindu god, Ganesh. Each section has pictures or little statues of Hindu gods or of the Buddha. The first room upon entering has a big window the size of the wall itself immersed with different shades of browns and reds with plants in each corner. The wooden chairs are accompanied by blue and red cushions atop of the Indian-style Kashmir rugs.⁶ The cash register on the other side of the room is surrounded by string lights and the many bookshelves displaying mugs for tea. There are the standard mugs and pots that are most familiar in American culture, and there are wavy-shaped mugs that look like they are dancing with paintings of Buddha. There are mugs made out of gourds dedicated for drinking yerba mate, wide, round mugs with tops made for drinking Chinese tea, small teapots that make just enough tea for one, and more.

The second room is sectioned off into two by a mosaic fountain. The room is framed with red cushioned booths with wooden tables in the middle surrounded by warm yellow walls. On one side of the wall, the word “tea” is spelled in five different languages: Czech, Russian, Chinese, Hebrew, and Arabic. The cozy, yellow walls have arch shaped enclaves for framed pictures of Hindu gods and teapots. The walls coming out halfway into the shop blocking off room one and two, and room two and three have arch shaped windows as to be able to look into the different rooms. The blue and red in the Kashmir style rugs, the yellow walls, and the red booths work together to create a sense of warmth and coziness, similar to that of the tea.

The third room, and perhaps the most popular, is a section dedicated for sitting on the floor during which one must take off their shoes before entering the area. There are two sections across from one another in this room, and three steps that raise the sections above the walk space in the middle. On one side there are tiny, short wooden tables, blue and red meditation pillows to perch up on, red carpet, and Indian-style Kashmir rugs hanging on the walls as a form of wallpaper.^{6,7} The other side has the same lay out and decorations. Both sections are semi-enclosed with hemp string curtains which feels like a protective barrier from the hustle and bustle of the shop. Both sides have about four or five tables that can each fit four people. The tables can be pushed together to make room for a bigger party, or can be enjoyed by one person. This section resembles ancient Asian and Middle Eastern culture of sitting on the floor to drink tea or eat food. Sitting on the floor during tea breaks or meals was custom in the Middle East and in Asian countries such as India, Japan, China, and Korea, and is still sometimes practiced. Sitting on the floor while ingesting food or drinks eases the mind and applies pressure to the lower spine which facilitates relaxation.⁸ Our breathing slows down, muscular tension tends to release, and blood pressure declines which facilitates an easier digestion process for our bodies.⁸ This position also aids in mindful eating or drinking, improves body posture, keeps knee and hip joints healthy, and improves blood circulation.⁸ Sitting on the floor can also make it easier to be grounded and connect with those around you, or with yourself. While this section can be beneficial for our bodies, it is also reminiscent of Asian and Middle Eastern countries and cultures which is not common in other tea or coffee shops.

Dobra’s space in Downtown Asheville offers different things for different people. The manager of Dobra in Asheville, Miles, explains that many people come to Dobra looking for “a calm place to relax and to zone into their own world, their computer or just kind of escape into what they’re working on or escape into their minds.”⁹ Additionally, each section of Dobra provides different environments. He explained it as though there is the sunny room in the front where people usually sit to do work, or that “deep, dark hangout” space in the back room where you can take off your shoes, sit or lay on the floor, and relax.⁹ Another informant who spends her time in Dobra often expresses to me that for her, Dobra is a “safe space” and acts as multiple spaces: a homework space, a get-together-

with-friends space, or a personal introspection space.¹⁰ My participant observations from February 2nd, 2018 exemplify this “calm place” that offers introspection as well as discussions with friends even with the buzzing that comes with a restaurant or shop.⁹

My initial impressions of Dobra tea were that it was very loud on this Sunday. It was approximately 2:30, I was beginning to get tired after a long morning of classes. I decided to order something that would help me with my sleepiness. After looking through the menu (or book, rather), I decided to order a tea called Che Xanh because it was described to “awaken a drifting mind” which was exactly the pick-me-up I needed in order to concentrate. As I was waiting for my tea, I couldn’t help but to notice the decorations. The walls are painted with warm colors: burnt orange, dark yellow, deep red, dark green. There are Christmas lights illuminating parts of the shop accompanied by fancy glass covered lights hanging from the ceiling. There are South Asian decorations as well. I noticed the same door hanger bell that Dr. Kapur’s, an International Studies professor, mom gave me as a gift when I studied abroad with her in India which made me smile, and momentarily took me back through my adventures. There were big and small Buddha statues hanging on the wall, and Ganesh statues which I found somewhat ironic because they are not part of the same religion, although, many people engage with both. The Ganesh statue actually had offerings on it, including rupees (Indian currency) and sage. However, something felt off and I could not point my finger to it. After trying to tune out all the people-it hit me. American music, such as Kendrick Lamar and the Blow, was playing on the speakers which seemed like it would not fit with the environment. Then again, who says people in China, also drinking Che Xanh, were not listening to Kendrick Lamar while enjoying their cup of tea? In fact, Che Xanh and Kendrick paired quite well together. As Che Xanh woke me up, Kendrick aided in my day’s motivation resulting in my lazy-day power duo.

There were a lot of people at this time, around ten in just this one section, but one group stuck out to me. An older woman who seemed to be incredibly intelligent having multiple degrees, and an older man with a white beard and round glasses were sitting behind me. “Someday I’ll go back to Brazil,” the woman said. He asked her when she was there and she responded with the year 1983. “In 1983 I was in New Zealand,” the man responded. They were clearly well traveled. She went on to talk about her studies and research. She researches the cosmos as well as religion-an interesting mix. They were talking about “adopting the mind of love” and the man went on to state how Buddha, Christ, etc. were all synonymous to God. Then the server came with my Che Xanh, “It’s a vegetal tea. Have you had this one before?!” the server asked, eyes lit up, as they lifted the pot of herbs for me to smell.

Holding my warm mug, I sat, headphones in, groggy eyed, observing the people coming in and out of the shop. After five minutes or so, I no longer felt sluggish. The Che Xanh really did make my mind feel more awake. I took my headphones out and that took me aback. I was immediately re-immersed into the Dobra culture with the hustle and bustle of my surrounding environment. I heard the woman behind me say “Sanskrit didn’t originate in India?” “No,” the man eagerly replied immediately after the woman finished her question. As odd as that sounds, this is a topic scholars continually debate. It is thought that Sanskrit was brought over to India by the Indo-Aryans during their migration to eastern Iran and India.

Most people came with a friend or partner, and most were taking their time ordering. Those who did have their teas were also taking a long while to drink it, at least an hour. It seemed as though most people were not necessarily going to Dobra for the tea- as you can buy an entire box of tea at any grocery store for around the same amount of a pot from Dobra- perhaps most were there for the environment. I did notice someone slowly picking up their pot with one hand on the handle and the other on the top so the tea would not spill. They gradually filled their cup to just the right amount and put it back down on the tray. Others set timers so that they could re-brew their teas for just the right amount of time. Most people were similarly just as careful with their tea. A timer went off and its volume caught my attention- admittedly, it made me jump. I looked over following the sound and saw a girl explaining something, and laughing between pauses accompanied by a just-as-giggly boy. She was mimicking someone from the TV show Will & Grace, as her long curly, red hair bounced with each pause, unable to contain her laughter. “That’s what they sound like!” she said, sharing a fun, light hearted moment compared to the two people behind me. People were there for different reasons, but most, if not all, were participating in Dobra’s tea practices. Perhaps they were also choosing teas based on their moods, or maybe simply for the fresh tea leaf flavor.

This section of my field notes exemplify the different uses of Dobra’s space. Through people’s cautiousness with their tea, it is evident that the tea preparation is meaningful to them in a different way than making a cup of tea at home with a grocery store-bought tea bag. The experience of ordering an international, fresh tea that often times comes with three different utensils: the pot of water heated by a small candle underneath, a pot of tea leaves, and the mug, is very different. The well-travelled scholars who sat behind me were in their own world, discussing life, love, and God. The space emits warmth and coziness similar to that of a living room, welcoming people to come in and discuss things that vary drastically from Will & Grace to the cosmos.

3. The History and Business of Dobra

To understand Dobra today, we must understand the history and the story behind Dobra Tea. Therefore, in this section I will be focusing on Dobra's history, and how that has affected Dobra's space today. I will be looking at what the business means to Miles and how people envision Dobra's space as a business.

3.1 History

Dobra began in Prague during the last few years of Communism in, what was then, Czechoslovakia. A group of tea lovers came together to taste teas from Japan, India, and China-the "biggest" and "main" tea producers-as Miles informed me. These teas were smuggled into Prague, and because of the shortage of foreign currency, these teas were accessible to only the most elite of the Party, State, and Military. Then came the Velvet Revolution in 1989 in which the non-violent revolution overthrew the Communist party and re-instilled democracy to Czechoslovakia, after 50 years of Nazi occupation and Communist rule.⁵

In 1992, "The Society of Tea Devotees" was formed consisting of the same group of people who smuggled tea into Prague, among others.² The Society began as part of the celebration of freedom and independence "amongst the teacup."² High quality teas were unavailable in the Czech Republic, so the Society went to the roots of tea: to India. Once they were able to purchase the tea legally after the Communist era, they were able to get as close as possible to the tea gardeners and farmers. Some members actually worked side by side with the farmers, went through the process of tea farming, and brewed the teas step by step, a practice that lives on at Dobra.

The first "Dobra Cajovna" opened the following year.² The Cajovna, or tearoom, was meant to be a safe space, where people could gather and taste the world through tea. Dobra became so popular that many small towns opened their own Cajovna throughout the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland.² The tea rooms were all styled as "Bohemian" with the intent to feel less like a restaurant, and more like a living room.² "Bohemian" was used to refer to the Czech people and language before "Czech" became a popular term in the early 20th century.¹¹ Many different countries used to claim different parts of Bohemia territory, now it is a region in the Czech Republic where many cultures intersect. The founders of Dobra believed that decorating the space as Bohemian would represent the intersection of different cultures, and familiarize many cultures to their customers.

3.2 Space and Business

Since 1993, Dobra has opened twenty-six tearooms in Central Europe and eight in the United States.² However, during my interview, Miles emphasized that he did not consider Dobra a franchise. When asking him about the decision to open a Dobra in Asheville, his eyes widened, he sat up a little straighter, and answered quickly as if eager to inform me of the process.

When a Dobra opens up it's because someone has decided to take it on. We have multiple locations, but it's not necessarily a franchise where one person is like 'I'm gonna now open one in Asheville, we're [the company] now gonna open up in Charlotte.' If one were to open one up in Charlotte, it would mean someone (not the company itself) wanted to open one up in Charlotte. And so...Andrew [the Dobra Asheville owner] grew up in South Carolina, so he moved from Burlington to Asheville. He owned the Burlington store and then he moved down here and decided to open up this Dobra.⁹

The purposeful decision to create Dobra's space using a "Bohemian" style lens has guaranteed similarities through every Dobra location whether it be in Asheville or Prague. It attempts to create a living room feel instead of an ordinary restaurant. According to Miles, these similarities across every Dobra are what makes Dobra feel less like a franchise.

Some people call it a franchise or whatever because there are multiple stores...but...I don't like to call it a franchise. I like to call it a family of tea drinkers because the culture of Dobra extends past just this tea room [in Asheville], it extends through all the Dobras. I mean last weekend I was in Northampton, where we have a Dobra in there as well, and I spent a good part of the afternoon just being a customer which was really amazing after working for this company for so long and just being in the store, but to sit and be a customer just kind of observing it. I noticed that, you know, there's this common thread between our store, their store, people who serve the tea. The culture

of Dobra is global, and it can be found in all these different tea houses. If you live in a town that has a Dobra, you can find that reliable refuge in that tea house, in that place. The culture is global in my opinion.⁹

It seems as though the intention behind removing Dobra from the association of franchises attempts to grant the store more wholesome. He stated that Dobras generally tend to end up in towns “like Asheville,” more “open minded, more artistic towns”.⁹

Dobras tend to work in those towns better. So it’s just kind of part of- I don’t want to say business model- but that’s just where our clientele comes from. The yoga community- we have yoga teachers in here all the time- massage therapists, energy practitioners, you know all these people come to Dobra. That’s kind of our regulars- our people- the healing arts community, stuff like that so.⁹

The hesitation to refer to Dobra as having a business model is interesting to note. By associating Dobra with having a business model, one draws attention to Dobra as a business. Miles wanted to steer clear of that association. It seems as though defining Dobra as a business does not do the shop justice because clearly he feels like it is so much more. He has emphasized the feeling of going to Dobras around the country, and feeling the warm familiarity of Dobra in Northampton. “It’s a family of tea drinkers,” not really a franchise.⁹ Many workers and customers have emphasized that Dobra feels like a home with the space emitting living room comfort and openness. An avid tea drinker in the Vermont Dobra expressed that he feels at home there, as do many of the Asheville customers, including my informant expressing Dobra being a “safe space.”¹⁰ Clearly, Dobra acts as more than just a business for many people. Therefore, leading to the separation of Dobra from commercial franchises.

Additionally, it seems like Miles included the types of people that come into Dobra- the healing arts community- to emphasize the morality of Dobra. As if to show that this high-regarded community dedicated to heal others comes into Dobra often, which means it has to be better than just a franchise. This is evident when it is explained that Dobra is more successful in towns “like Asheville,” with “more open minded” people.⁹ It is clear that Miles is trying to distance Dobra from a commercial or commodifying business.

4. Dobra’s Decorations

Dobra’s decorations also seem to play a role in removing the association of Dobra with a commodifying business.

Sitting in Dobra feels a lot like sitting in an unfamiliar country. After noticing that feeling, I began to look around to see what it could be. Is it the international tea options? Is it the traditional teapots originating in China, or the South American gourds created specifically for drinking tea? Is it the careful tea preparations enacted by the customers? A group of young friends I assume around my age inspect each other’s unfamiliar teapots. Their eyes all lifting looking over at one another’s tea order, observantly watching each other prepare their tea. One person from the group lifts the glass pot of boiled water to pour into her gaiwan filled with tea leaves, while another intently stares. While the unfamiliar culture of Dobra is partly due to the tea utensils, it seems like there is more to the “voyage of discovery” that Dobra advertises.² I look around and notice the persian carpets, the small Asian religious figures, the hanging Buddha door bell, the Ganesh altar- I realize that the decorations are a major factor contributing to Dobra’s experience.

The shop was designed to “leave your world, and enter someone else’s,” but what does this exactly mean?² Dobra wants people to drink teas in a traditional fashion from around the world, but why do the decorations only represent cultures from one region? While many people have expressed their love for Dobra’s decorations, there are gaps in Dobra’s intention of respect.

Dobra’s decorations are what makes the shop warm, relaxing, and inviting. “It is a whole new world of culture and relaxation...it is just so aesthetic and beautiful” a regular tea drinker shared about Dobra.² The intention behind the decorations are to “give everyone a taste of world culture, of Moroccan tea rooms, of Chinese tea rooms, not just in the pot but in the whole experience.”²

A friend of mine loves Dobra, and spends her time there often, so I interviewed her wondering where her love for Dobra stems from. She reiterated that Dobra’s space is an open place where she feels she can be herself. “It’s a calming environment where I feel like I can just relax and hangout with friends, do homework, or just sit and decompress.”¹⁰ She says that the physical environment is relaxing “with the lighting and the colors.”¹⁰ Another person expressed the appeal of the “eclectic atmosphere” and its “traditional...and rustic appeal.”¹² Additionally, that the “exotic decoration

makes [them] feel in another country and relaxed.”¹³ The atmosphere and decorations are clearly important to the customers.

“Wait, it isn’t an Asian tea shop?” a friend suspiciously asked after talking with them about my interest in Dobra. Not surprisingly, I have come across several people who have thought that Dobra specializes in Asian teas because of the decorations. While the decorations clearly attract customers, they are only exemplary of one region: Asia. Edward W. Said coined the term Orientalism defining it as “the West’s patronizing representations of ‘The East’—the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.”¹⁴ After battling with my previous idea that Dobra displays Orientalism, I realized that’s not quite right and came to the term of “slight Orientalism.”¹ By using this term, I mean an overrepresentation of Asia as mystic or exotic for consumerist reasons, sometimes behind a good intention. Another difference between Said’s term of Orientalism and “slight Orientalism” is that the latter is not representing the people of the Asian region, but rather the culture and belief system.¹ This is exemplified in the yelp and tripadvisor reviews using words like “exotic,” and “rustic”.^{12,13}

Dobra advertises an around the world experience, one where when you step in through the door, you get a taste of different cultures. It is a “voyage of discovery.”² Why, then, do the decorations include only Asian religious deities? The increase in yoga, meditation events, Buddha figurines, and Asian religious deities on clothing in Asheville, NC has led to this mild obsession with Asian cultures. Almost every downtown store in Asheville advertises and/or sells these things, including Dobra. Other tea drinkers in Dobra said that “it’s more of an Eastern style teahouse” and that “the decoration is cool...I felt like it was like Indian styled interior design” even though they advertise a Bohemian style tea room, as well as an around the world experience. This common theme of “mystic” and “exotic” used to describe Dobra throughout yelp and tripadvisor is seen just as much as “Eastern style teahouse” or “Asian” as if these terms are synonymous.^{12,13}

When asking Miles about the decorations, he responded saying

we’re showing the religious practices of these nations that produce these teas, it kind of helps with the spiritual air of the room, but I personally like Dobra to be religiously and politically neutral. I don’t like when people discuss- I hate to say his name- but Donald Trump in the tea room. It’s so stressful these days as it is, I don’t like it when people discuss that in here, the tea room. To me the tearoom is a neutral space for you to create it any way you want it to be. So religiously we show these idols and these deities and if you chose to engage in Ganesha energy or choose to tap into the Buddha, we invite you to. But, I don’t think that Dobra necessarily represents any of these but, again, just invite you and show you what these cultures *pauses* ...because you know the Buddha is a strong figure for you know, for China and Japan and Thailand and these countries that we get our teas from, so.⁹

On one hand, it is thought to be a neutral space and on the other, Dobra invites you to engage with Asian religious deities if so desired. However, looking at Chinese, Japanese, Thai, or Indian tea rooms on Google images, I can’t seem to find any that include religious deities except for maybe Ganesh used to call upon a prosperous business.

Perhaps the reason for the Asian and Eastern religious deities, and not African or Western, is because Asia is where Dobra gets most of their teas. Using Asian religious deities is probably a form of depiction of these countries. However, this becomes arguably problematic.

Additionally, since Dobra’s space is also representing Bohemia, the question could then become, what do Prague tea rooms look like then? Apparently, nothing like Dobra. One person who went to Dobra Downtown exclaimed that “the place has as much to do with Prague as Disney’s ‘Snow White’ with the Brothers Grimm. And yet, that’s the marketing pitch. Sure it works, because 99.9% of people going to any Dobra in USA have not been to Prague, or they have been to an American equivalent of a “DOBRA” in Prague and not noticed that they got stuck in a tourist trap.”¹⁵ While this quote poses an important perspective, Dobra did originate in Prague by two Praguian people, with the intention of creating an intersect of cultures. However, this review shows that Dobra is not quite reflective of other Prague tearooms. If it is not reflective of Asian tea rooms, or Praguian tearooms-what is the space reflective of? Dr. Harvey, a professor of Religious Studies at UNCA and coiner of “slight Orientalism,” exclaimed that at times, he feels like he’s “paying to taste the Other” when going to Dobra.¹ Other is a term Said uses often to describe how Asian cultures are depicted in the West.

While Dobra is clearly well-intentioned and attempts to bring Asian countries, the majority of their menu, to the store with the portrayal of Asian religious deities, it is crucial to be aware of the common problem of Orientalism in the West nonetheless. Clearly, this is a complex and problematic part of Dobra.

5. The Bell



Figure 1. Bell used to call wait staff.

Dobra's bell in Figure 1 is used to call the wait staff. Not many American restaurants include this feature in their business. This contributes to Dobra's uniqueness, which can be exemplified through customers' reactions when using the bell, and its association with the space. There is a clear intention behind its use, but there is a problem with Dobra's logo placement on the bell that contradicts their business statement of attempting to appreciate different cultures respectfully. I use contemporary examples from other places that relate to this problem to show how this instance in Dobra could be seen as slight cultural appropriation and "slight Orientalism."¹

On March 26th, I walk into the cozy, dark space that is Dobra, and pick a spot to sit in the first section in hopes that it will motivate me to do my homework. It is lighter than all the other rooms making it more likely that I'll actually open up my backpack instead of dozing off in the dark, back section like last time. The same server that I have had for the past few times walks over to my table to hand me the menu as thick as a book as well as my bell. They are wearing a light denim jacket with chunky black doc martens that drag on the floor when they walk. When they bend forward ever so slightly to place the menu and bell on my table, I notice their "they/them" preferred pronouns pin on their jacket. "Hi, just ring the bell when you're ready," they said as their curly brown hair bobbed rhythmically when they spoke. I thanked them and looked down at my bell to notice that the Dobra logo was not on this one like it usually is. I have never gotten a bell without Dobra's logo. I came in wanting specifically to take a picture of the bell because this is part of why Dobra is considered unique, but I wanted one with the logo. Of course, I thought, the one time I come into Dobra to take a picture of the bell is the only time I get a bell without the logo. I rang my imageless bell in hopes that I do not seem too irritating asking for a bell with the picture. They came to my table ready to take my order with a notepad in one hand and a pen in the other, "what would you like?" I responded saying something along the lines that I actually wanted the bell with the logo on it because I'm writing about Dobra, and wanted a picture, if they could maybe check again to see if they have another bell. They paused, staring blankly at me not really knowing how to respond to such a strange request, their pen still resting on the notepad. After an awkward pause, I smiled. They smiled sweetly in return, their hair bouncing with the giggle that followed, and went to the back to find me a logo-engraved bell.

Dobra's logo is a tea cup with what looks like a folding hand fan and a Buddha-looking figure appearing amidst the steam from the cup. Buddha is often depicted with a top knot or a bump on the head and long earlobes that represent auspiciousness exactly as portrayed in the logo.¹⁶ The bell has become synonymous with Dobra's space. For example,

one of my informants and I wanted to grab some tea together. We were on our way to Dobra when she exclaimed, “You know what, can we go somewhere else? I just do not feel like ringing a bell for some tea today.” She made the connection of the bell with Dobra, marking it as its own distinct experiential space. The idea of the bell comes with the intention of giving customers their own space. As Miles put it:

We’re well aware that people feel uncomfortable about it. We actually really like it. It’s a great turn in normal service where people can sit, find their spot, and settle in and it becomes their universe and when they need they ring the bell to call us in. That way it’s not like a restaurant where mid bite someone’s interrupting you saying “how ya doin?” and you’re trying to answer. It’s the idea that it’s your universe, that it’s your space. We’re always here to help and provide, but we want you to have your own space, and your own place in the tea room while you’re here. So the bell just kind of switches that up.⁹

While the bell is used for customers to have their own space, the communal act of ringing the bell is a collective experience in a “public dimension.”¹⁷ The bell creates a unifying public space because of the communal experience of ringing the bell. Most customers express discomfort with ringing it because it is not familiar and feels disruptive. Ringing a bell to be waited on can feel like having your own personal butler. This can be fun and new for many customers, but sometimes ordering a regular cup of tea at the cashier feels more comfortable and familiar.

The connection people have with ringing the bell for service is part of Dobra’s experience. I have observed customer’s hesitation to ringing the bell many times, and have been there myself. However, the minor discomfort brings customers together. There have been many times where I have interlocked eyes with another customer and laughed together at the shared feeling of discomfort that comes with ringing the bell. A poem I have written about the bell portrays this experience:

The bell slowly lifts,
Rings, vibrates, echos, resonates.

No customer feels confident
No ring too loud

Bodies tense
Followed by nervous laughter

The bell chimes cautiously
Ringing softly

Wait staff bouncing
From each ring to ring.

While the bell contributes to Dobra’s overall experience, it also contributes to the idea that Dobra is buying into ideas for consumer satisfaction rather than attempting to appreciate cultures like the company states they do. It is highly likely that the figure on their logo represents Buddha. The problem is that for Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucianists, Buddha is considered sacred. Therefore, he should not be placed in low settings, especially not on the floor.¹⁸ Because of the back seating area, the bell is often placed on very low places such as the short tables just a few inches tall and even the floor.

Many people adopt parts of a culture out of “temporary fascination” with the culture, not because they have an “authentic understanding of it.”⁴ After all, Dobra is a business and wants an abundance of customers like any other business. Dobra continuously advertises the importance of travelling to the countries in which they buy the tea from so that they can share the tea cultures respectfully. Payton Swick, manager of Dobra in Vermont, stated that they “try to give everyone a taste of world culture,” but placing an image of Buddha on the floor would be considered offensive in many parts of Asia.² In fact, Buddha is not often presented in Asian religious communities in a non-religious way.

Dobra is a neutral space, yet includes many Asian religious deities, and only Asian religious deities, in case someone wants to engage with that. How can it be a neutral space when there are an abundance of religious deities? Is it a neutral space that includes Asian religious deities because it is tapping into a fad, or can there actually be a grey area for both to exist respectfully? There is also this advertisement of the portrayal of different cultures respectfully, but putting the bell on the floor or in the back seating area might be offensive to some of these cultures that Miles is

talking about. There is a blurry area here between Dobra advertising a respectful portrayal of cultures around the world, and actually being respectful about it.

6. Asheville Pizza and Brewing Shiva IPA Example



Figure 2. Shiva IPA. *Photo taken by David Forbes.*

Dobra's use of the bell with the logo relates to a similar situation in the Asheville restaurant Asheville Pizza and Brewing (APB). Asheville Brewing Company's Shiva India Pale Ale is named after a Hindu deity and includes his image on the beer. The beer is popular in Asheville, especially in APB where it is brewed. Shiva's picture is printed on the cover of the menu and on a wall in the restaurant. Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, politely demanded the beer to be taken down, renamed, and repackaged using a different picture. "Inappropriate usage of Hindu deities or concepts or symbols for commercial or other agendas was not okay as it hurt the devotees," said Zed. "Lord Shiva was highly revered in Hinduism and he was meant to be worshipped in temples or home shrines and not to be used in selling beer for mercantile greed."¹⁹ A member of the Hindu community in Asheville also reached out to the president of APB asking that the beer be taken down from the menu all together. Owner of Asheville Brewing refused to change anything about the beer stating that there are no future plans to do so.¹⁹ There is now a tile on the floor in APB of Shiva IPA directly in front of the entrance, which is extremely disrespectful to the communities that religiously engage with Lord Shiva.

While this is a more extreme case, it is similar to Dobra's logo being placed on low settings as Shiva figures are in APB. They can both lead to discomfort in these communities and can even be insulting.

7. Example of Cultural Appropriation in Boston Museum of Fine Arts



Figure 3. Boston Museum of Fine Arts exhibit of Monet's painting *La Japonaise*.

The use of Buddha's image on Dobra's logo that happens to be on the bell could be seen as cultural appropriation, the adoption of a minority culture by members of the dominant culture.²⁰ Cultural appropriation often includes taking cultural elements with deep meaning and reducing it to "exotic" fashion or objects by those from the dominant culture. For example, Julie Valk, the author of *Research Note: The 'Kimono Wednesday' Protests: Identity Politics and How the Kimono Became More Than Japanese*, describes how kimonos in Western culture are becoming a form of cultural appropriation.²¹ Valk is specifically referring to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts' event "Kimono Wednesday" where people can try on a kimono to look like Monet's wife in Monet's painting *La Japonaise*.²¹ She describes this event to be linked to contemporary violence and discrimination toward Asian Americans, stating that the fascination with kimonos is an obsession and acts as a muse for trends in the global fashion system rather than a true understanding of the kimono for Western writers and media. This situation can also be seen as "slight Orientalism" as people are exoticizing and fetishising the kimono in the global fashion system without any true understanding of the historical significance.¹

Dobra has many Asian religious decorations such as Ganesh statues and mugs, Buddha statues and pictures, and more. Many people do not know the importance and meaning behind the religious icons. Asian religions are extremely popular in contemporary US culture and society, especially in Asheville.⁴ The use of the Buddha logo on the bell could be a form of discrimination that Valk is describing about the kimono. My findings have indicated that while

Dobra's wait staff are extremely well travelled and want to respectfully show these cultures, the kimono can act as a metaphor for Dobra's logo.

8. Devotion to the Tea

Most of the tea offered in Dobra comes from one single plant called *Camellia Sinensis* which is originally grown in India, China, Japan, and Taiwan. Oolong, black, white, green, yellow, and pu'er tea, all of the main types of tea, are made from *Camellia Sinensis*. Laura Hill, manager of Dobra in Vermont, stated in a public video posted on Dobra's website that Dobra is "showing people a whole new world, and it is all starting from this plant."² Hill states that when she tells people that all these different types of tea actually originate from one leaf "their eyes light up" and "they're like 'no way.'"² The way that Laura Hill, and many others in the video, talk about the tea offered in Dobra shows how the tea shapes Dobra's culture. These tea leaves are "showing people a whole new world."² They invite people to try this tea that, according to Hill, will open people's eyes to a new world from the comfort of their own floor cushion.² In this section I discuss what oolong, black, white, green, yellow, and pu'er tea is, the importance of tea preparation, and the meaning behind the preparation.

8.1 Different China-Derived Teas

The majority of the teas in Dobra come from Asian countries. According to Miles, China is the main source of Dobra's menu because it is a major producer of tea. It produces almost every type of tea that Dobra offers: white, green, oolong, black, and pu'er. Dobra only offers three other types of tea: yerba mate, rooibos, and herbal. White teas are the least processed teas and release the least amount of caffeine.²² At first, it seems like drinking hot water, but there are subtle changes in your throat and mouth that feel nourishingly sweet. Green tea can be plucked in the morning and brewed later that day. It has the second lowest amount of caffeine and has a subtle earthy taste. Oolong's caffeine content is between green tea and black tea, as is the intensity of the flavor.²² Oolong is a popular favorite amongst tea connoisseurs because it has the body of black tea, but the freshness of green tea.²² That being said, black tea is the most popular type in the Western world.²² Lipton, chai, english breakfast tea, earl grey: these familiar blends are all black teas. Finally, pu'er, my personal favorite, is aged and fermented, and is used throughout Asia for its medicinal benefits.²² Pu'er is smooth, dark, and sweet all at the same time.

8.2 Tea Preparation

Although China is a bulk of the menu, there are 100 teas from 12 different countries around the world served in original ceramic and porcelain sets designed by the original Dobra Cajovna in the Czech Republic. Dobra tries to prepare the tea as it is prepared in the country of origin. The water must be at the right temperature, there needs to be the right amount of leaves, and the proper pot must compliment the tea. While conducting research, a customer expressed his embarrassment for not using a gaiwan correctly. He exclaimed in panic to his friends, "I was pouring it out of the wrong side! You are supposed to pour it the opposite way. I am such a dork! Why did no one tell me?" This exemplifies the eagerness to prepare a cup of traditional Chinese tea as is prepared in Dobra.

Right preparation is crucial because each tea has a certain amount of catechins that are released during preparation, i.e. during brewing, steeping, and gathering the tea leaves. Catechins are a type of disease-fighting antioxidant in tea that is the key reason for tea's health benefits. Tea has anti-carcinogenic and anti-tumorigenic components that affect the color and flavor of the tea.²³ While Dobra makes it clear that they are not medical practitioners, the healing arts community enjoys Dobra seeking the environment, but also the taste and healing benefits coming from the correct preparation of Dobra's tea.⁹

8.3 Meaning Behind Preparation

Not only is preparation emphasized, but the meaning behind the preparation is as well. "I'm not only making a cup of tea, I am presenting Chinese culture in this moment, I am presenting Middle Eastern culture when I'm making those kinds of teas that they make in those lands. It is important to do that honestly and respectfully because they have those traditions built. We want to uphold them in our tea room," said Adam Ernst, the owner of Dobra in Wisconsin.² In the video, it was clear that many of the preparations mirror that of the place the tea is from. For example, the video included excerpts from Turkish tearooms and Chinese tearooms catching the presentation of these teas. During each

video excerpt from international tea rooms were Dobra tea rooms presenting those same teas as identical as in the place of origin. While this portrays Dobra's clear attempt to be respectful and honest about presenting international teas, it is important, then, to ask how often those teas are presented in Dobra in the same way of that Chinese tea room or Turkish tea room? Did the tea presentations portrayed in the video excerpt from China or Turkey exemplify Chinese or Turkish tea culture or were those just instances that happened in China or Turkey? Is it a legitimate presentation of those cultures?

8.4 Story behind Dobra's Tea

The story of Dobra's teas weigh heavily on why Dobra is considered unique, and plays a major role to complicating my previous perspective of Dobra culturally appropriating. Miles so eloquently said, "A lot of times I say that we are actually selling an experience. We are selling the chance to exist in the lighting of the back room, the chance to sit on the floor, the chance to drink tea in a nice tea pot. All in all, we are selling the experience of Dobra Tea. And the tea itself is at its core..."⁹ We see Miles' statement exemplified in Dobra's trips around the world. Each year, Dobra organizes a tea trip for its community, usually those in higher work staff positions, to a tea producing country. This year they are travelling to China: Dobra's most popular place.

I walked into Dobra to meet Miles in hopes of being able to come out of this knowing more about Dobra culture. I have never met him before, so I did not know who exactly to look for. I walked to the cash register hesitantly, and saw a middle-aged man with short, brown hair and glasses organizing teas. "Miles?" I said anticipating it would be him. He looked over at me and softly smiled, shaking my hand during which I introduced myself. "Sit wherever you like, I'll be right there," he said sifting through the teas. I sat down going over my questions and preparing my recorder, when he walks up slowly, but with purpose, drinking what he later informs me is Korean tea. Sitting down in the middle section of Dobra, between the sunlit room and the dark seating area, Miles took me through what these trips look like and how it affects the community all the way back in Asheville.

Every pot, mug, even the amount of tea leaves in one order, is intentional in Dobra. The preparation in the back is not just so that the customers receive their tea, it is so that the tea custom is being respected and honored, according to Miles. Different teas have specific pots that are reflective of how each tea is brewed traditionally in its place of origin. Moreover, it is reflective of how different types of cultures found it best to brew the teas.

We know we strive as a company to be facilitators of these cultures and not caricatures of these cultures. Like we're not trying to be, you know, we're not trying to cultural appropriate anything. We're trying to have a transparency of, you know, "this is what they are doing," and I'm extremely happy to present this in Asheville, NC. You know, it's not like you're walking around saying "this IS my culture, I AM part of the Chinese culture." No, we're vessels to understand where it came from.⁹

Adam Ernst, owner of Dobra in Wisconsin, explains that he is "not only creating this cup of tea, but [he] is presenting Chinese culture at the moment," or Turkish culture, or whichever culture the tea being ordered is from.² Dobra is able to be facilitators of these cultures because of the trips they take around the world to visit tea farms.

The trips usually include an agenda where the group meets with the tea farmers. Miles shared his experience in Uji and Shizuoka, Japan. They went to a green tea garden during harvest season, so there were "about a dozen" women in the field picking leaves.⁹ The group of people representing Dobra joined these farmers and learned first hand what ideal picking looks like, followed by a trip to the factories. Here they see how the leaves are being produced into tea, "like with your own eyeballs, you see the small steps that they take to produce the tea" Miles said with excitement ringing through his words.⁹ However, according to Miles, interest in tea culture in Japan has shifted amongst the youth. There's tea everywhere, in vending machines "every 200 feet," but always in bottles. It is shifting into convenience and speed which is why Dobra "strives to honor the traditional, ceremonial tea experience."²⁴ This is noteworthy because Japan is adopting a Western mode of drinking tea: quick and convenient, while Dobra is adopting the traditional Japanese form: slow with intention (i.e. having the right water temperature, the right amount of leaves, and the right time for brewing).

Miles did not share what this green tea garden looked like, but I did my own research and found pictures of that exact Dobra trip to Japan in one of Miles' public articles sharing his experience. The first thing I noticed is how bright the green tea leaves are. They are so vibrant and rich in color, it makes me want to taste the green tea they will transform into. The second thing I noticed is how massive the fields are. In some pictures, the field is overlooking big, bright green mountains and in others, the plants are protected by a tarp-looking cover. In another picture, the viewer is being shown a wooden woven basket filled with green leaves held by a soft-smiling Japanese woman. She is wearing

blue gloves and a visor, and it looks as though her eyebrows are slightly raised. She looks proud of the green tea leaves.



Figure 4. Japanese tea garden. *Photo taken by Miles Cramer.*



Figure 5. Japanese tea farmer showing fresh green tea leaves. *Photo taken by Miles Cramer.*

These farmers are usually part of a family owned business. Miles shared that they met the couple, a man and a woman in their early 80s, in charge of the tea farm in Shizuoka, Japan. Every year, the woman would say she was going to retire that year, and every time Dobra is in contact with the farmers in Shizuoka, Japan, she is still happily up on the steep hills picking tea to this day. These connections with the tea farmers attach significance to the tea leaves, and bring a meaningful experience back to Dobra's customers. Miles says,

I think it's important just to reveal what has been going on for hundreds and hundreds of years in these cultures and to clearly and accurately convey and show what this culture is. It's easy to take a tradition and then just immediately interpret it in your own way and act like that's the tradition. That's a way that things can get lost in the shuffle, and I think with our connections with these people that I was able to meet that we have a unique opportunity to pass this information from their mouth to our customers.²⁴

9. Gaiwan

Just like traditional Japanese forms of drinking tea is important to Dobra, so are traditional Chinese forms. A small sized bowl with a lid to fit presented on a little saucer: this is the gaiwan. It is a traditional Chinese tea utensil used when brewing tea. Dobra uses a gaiwan with every Chinese tea on the menu. Gaiwans were created in China during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the peak time of pottery creation in China.³ The gaiwans in China act similarly as the traditional green tea in Japan. The gaiwan is still being used in China, but not as commonly as it used to be. Many prefer the more “handy western-style teapot,” which can be used without a tea tray.²⁵ Because the gaiwan is presumed to not be used day to day in China, it is worthwhile to ask why, then, Dobra uses it with every Chinese tea? What space is Dobra attempting to create?

While the gaiwan might not be representative of contemporary Chinese culture as it is traditionally, Dobra is making meaning through often using it in an American setting. The invention or re-invention of cultural objects and action can be continuous because “cultural action is semiotic, and thus perpetually reinvents the present.”¹⁸ Dobra is attempting to bring more perspectives to the act of drinking tea. Using the gaiwan is a form of making meaning of drinking tea through preserving traditional Chinese tea customs. By preserving the gaiwan, Dobra is reinventing what drinking Chinese tea means in Asheville. Even though it is presumed that the gaiwan is not as popularly used in contemporary China as it used to be, it is commonly used in Dobra.

This portrays Dobra's mission to preserve traditional tea customs as can be seen with the traditional way of drinking Japanese tea. It also exemplifies Dobra being an experience. Not many other shops in Asheville or even in North Carolina include the option to drink Chinese tea from a gaiwan. Being one of the only places in the state that offers this, many customers seek out drinking from a gaiwan, or other traditional forms of drinking tea, because it becomes a unique experience unable to find anywhere else nearby.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, Dobra offers a space unlike anywhere else in Asheville, NC. Part of the reason Dobra feels special to their customers is Dobra's intention to clearly, accurately, and respectfully convey different culture's experience of tea while advertising a “voyage of discovery” and an around the world feel.² This is also evident through traditional tea utensils like the gaiwan, and the trips around the world to understand the tea's origin. However, this becomes complex with the location of the logo on the bell, and the Asian religious deities. I do not attempt to point out the good and bad in Dobra, simply seeking to show a glimpse of Dobra culture and experience. While Dobra attempts to be respectful, the company should follow through completely with this statement. One cannot pick and choose when to be respectful, and should not buy into fads for business when it exoticizes or Others a culture. Dobra states their intention is pure, but there are still echoes of “slight Orientalism” and cultural appropriation within the space.¹

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