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Alcohol Use Among A Sample Of Thai Adolescents

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Introduction

Beverage alcohol use is common in almost all societies and has been for thousands of years. Societies that use alcohol have rituals and traditions that tend to regulate alcohol's negative effects and enhance its pleasurable effects. Modern alcohol production and marketing methods have tended to break down these traditional controls and encourage irresponsible use. In many western countries, irresponsible use of alcohol is associated with crime, violence, and disease. In particular, for adolescents, alcohol use is linked to automobile crashes, injuries, and deaths. Alcohol use is associated with so many deaths and injuries that most western countries now consider alcohol use a major public health problem.

Evidence from China suggests alcohol use was common in Asia at least 4,000 years ago. In Thailand, alcohol beverages were used on spirit offerings as early as 16 BC. Buddhism discouraged alcohol use through the commandment forbidding the drinking of alcoholic beverages, and prior to the Ratanagosin Period, drinkers were considered "bad" people. This value was evident in Thai literature such as Tri-poom-pra-roung and Su-pa-sit-sorn-ying. During the Ratanagosin Period, attitudes changed and during the reign of King Rama I, the first alcohol-producing company was founded: Rong-yan-su-ra-Bang-yee-khan. This change in attitude was related to exposure
to western influences. Even so, until the reign of Rama IV, alcohol use was limited by law to one’s home. By the reign of Rama IV, taxes generated from alcohol production had increased significantly, and during Rama IV’s reign, tax revenues almost doubled (Patcharanulak, 1998). Written accounts from that time report alcohol-related public health problems (Wisalo, 1994). Today alcohol use is common in business and in the celebration of special holidays and events.

Alcohol use in Thailand is not yet considered a major cause of public health problems other than automobile crashes. Little has been done to describe drinking by Thai people or to develop alcohol education programs.

This paper describes alcohol use among high school students in grades 10–12 in three schools in Chonburi Province. The three schools represent three different types of communities. The selection was purposeful and designed to explore the dimensions of adolescent alcohol use in different communities. One school was on a military base and served the community surrounding the base, the second school was in a major tourist town, and the third served a more rural area.

No claim is made that these schools are representative of Chonburi Province or Thai students in general. This study is probably one of the only studies of alcohol use by Thai adolescents and
represents a first exploration of a new topic. Based on this work, studies involving more representative samples are recommended.

The influence of modern alcohol marketing encouraging use and associating alcohol with pleasure, and the accompanying social pressure tends to most affect young people who live and work in settings that emphasize close social ties and mutual support. Accordingly, we hypothesized that alcohol use would be highest among students attending the military base school and lowest among the students attending the rural school. Also, military school students were more likely to be exposed to westerners and western-style marketing and advertising.

Method

The sample of 2,227 students were surveyed in May 1998 with an instrument that combined questions from similar surveys developed in the USA and questions based on one month of interviews and group discussions with Thai students in grades 10-12 in Chonburi Province. The instrument had two objectives: 1) to describe alcohol use among Thai adolescents, and 2) to describe the outcomes (expectations) of alcohol use. Only the descriptive data are reported here.
Aggregated Results

Alcohol Use

For this study students were asked if they ever drank alcohol at any time in their lifetime, drank alcohol in the last year, or drank alcohol in the last 30 days. Of the males, 52.4% drank at least once in their lifetime, as had 29.3% of the females. For this paper, anyone who reported using alcohol in the last year was classified as a user of alcohol: 46.2% of the males and 23.3% of the females were users. Of those who consumed alcohol in the last year, 56.2% of the males and 35.9% of the females drank alcohol in the past 30 days.

Taken together, the alcohol use rate of these students was lower than comparable samples in the USA and in Shanghai (Table 1). The Chonburi sample was slightly younger than the Shanghai sample, but comparable to the USA sample. Shanghai is one of the most westernized Chinese cities and the high rate of use is suggested to be the result of this western orientation. Data from China do suggest lower rates of alcohol use in other parts of China.

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Dangerous drinking in the USA is defined as five or more drinks in a row on a single drinking occasion. Frequent, heavy drinking (five or more drinks in a row in the last 30 days) is considered a sign of significant personal risk and an indication of a public health
problem. Among this sample of young people who drank in the last year, 84.3% of the males and 79.5% of the females reported drinking at this level. This rate of drinking is much higher than reported among a national sample of students in the USA. What we cannot be sure of is the quantity of alcohol being consumed on these drinking occasions. US students were most likely to consume beer from cans; the cans are a standard measure (12 ounces). Thai students consumed a variety of types of alcoholic beverages, including spirits, poured from larger bottles.

Age of First Drink

Males and females reported their age of first drink to be similar. Five percent of the males reported their first drink at age 8 or younger, as did 3.3% of the females. Twenty percent of both males and females reported their first drink between age 9 and 12, and 74.7% of the males and 76.2% of the females had their first drink at age 13 or older.

Beverage Choice

Among the males who used alcohol, beer (36.9%) and spirits (35.2%) were the drinks of choice, followed by wine coolers (17.0%). Among females, the alcohol of choice was wine coolers (50.0%), followed by beer (23.3%), spirits (12.8%), and wine (11.1%).
Social Company and Location of Drinking

As expected, most young people drank with their friends (80.6% of the males and 60.3% of the females). While fewer than 14.4% of the males said they drank with their parents or other relatives, 33.8% of the females said they drank with family members.

Another question asked young people where they drank their alcohol. The majority reported drinking at parties (25.6% males, 29.4% females), bars or pubs (16.9% males, 15.7% females), or at friends’ homes (20.1% males, 11.5% females). Twice as many females (31.1%) said they drank at their home compared to males (14.9%). Many fewer females than males drank alcohol, but among those who did, when they did, they tended to do so in their homes, most likely as a part of a family celebration or a special occasion.

Time of Drinking

Most drinking took place on weekends and holidays (66.5% males and 68.4% females). Females were much more likely to report holiday drinking (49.1%) than males (34.7%). Again, we believe this was related to females drinking at home on special holiday occasions.

Religion

Buddhism was the religion of 96.6% of these students. Among those who said they were strict or regular practitioners of their faith there were significantly fewer alcohol users, both among males (34.3%)
and females (29.9%) as compared to the others: 65.7% males and 70.1% females.

Parental Drinking Patterns

Male and female students judged the drinking patterns of their parents in a similar fashion (Table 2). Mothers were much less likely to use alcohol and much less likely to use it weekly than were fathers, a gender pattern reflected in their children’s use. Very few of these students judged their parents’ alcohol use to be excessive or problematic.

Because three different schools were sampled with the possibility that drinking patterns would differ, these same questions were examined by school.

Insert Table 2 about here

Results By School

Alcohol Use By School

Significantly more males attending the military base school drank alcohol in the last year (57.0%) than those attending the school in the tourist town (39.5%) or the rural school (24.0%). Among the females, significantly more students drank alcohol in the last year at the tourist town school (33.6%) than the military base school (25.7%). Female students attending the rural school were the least likely to use alcohol (12.0%).
For males who reported drinking in the last year there were significantly more rural students who said they consumed five or more drinks in a row on three or more occasions (<.05). For females, the proportion who consumed five or more drinks in a row on three or more occasions did not differ significantly among schools. While fewer rural males reported alcohol use, those who did use alcohol were more likely to drink excessively.

**Age of First Drink By School**

The age at first drink did not differ for either gender among the three schools.

**Beverage Choice By School**

Choice of alcohol beverage differed significantly among the three schools (<.001) for males, but not for females. The military base school males were more likely to drink spirits (39.4%) and beer (36.0%); the tourist town males drank beer (43.9%) and spirits (30.3%); the rural town males drank wine coolers (41.3%) and beer (32.6%). The other choices, wine and yar-dong, were used by less than 12% of students at any school.

**Time of Drinking By School**

Military base school male students were more likely to drink on weekends (31.7%) and holidays (31.7%) than any other time. Tourist town male students were more likely to drink on holidays (38.8% and
weekends (31.3%). Rural male students were more likely to drink on holidays (47.8%) than on weekends (19.6%).

Among the females, the differences in drinking times were not significant. Most females indicated they drank on holidays (49.1%) and "any time" (24.9%).

Social Company and Location of Drinking By School

Students were asked to indicate with whom they drank when they drank. As reported earlier, most drank with their friends. There were no differences among the three schools for either gender.

Males and females differed significantly at each school in their places of drinking (<.001). Military base male students drank at parties (23.3%), friends’ homes (22.0%), and at the beach (19.2%). Tourist town males reported drinking at bars/pubs (29.0%), parties (27.5%), and friends’ homes (15.9%). For rural males, the choice of drinking sites were parties (37.0%), home (32.6%), and friends’ homes (15.2%).

Female students at the military base school were most likely to drink at parties (30.1%), home (29.4%) or at bars/pubs (15.4%). Females at the tourist town school drank at home (30.3%), at parties (28.3%), and at bars/pubs (22.2%). Female students at the rural school were most likely to drink at home (38.6%) and at the houses of friends (27.3%).
Religion By School

Students attending the tourist town school were more likely to judge their religious practice to be strict than at the other two schools. This difference was significant (<.05) only for males, however. Differences among drinking practices and religion were not significant.

Parental Drinking Patterns By School

Parental drinking patterns also differed by school (Table 3). Students attending the rural school were more likely to report their parents were nondrinkers than were students from the other two schools. There were no significant differences (<.001) between the proportion of parents who drank and the proportion of students who drank at any of these schools.

Discussion

The data reported here represent one of the first attempts to estimate alcohol use by young people anywhere in Thailand. The Chonburi sample is not representative of the country, or necessarily of Chonburi Province. The three schools were chosen to represent three typical communities in Chonburi.

The proportion of young people using alcohol is significantly lower than rates found in similar samples in Shanghai and the USA. There were significantly different alcohol use rates among the three
schools sampled. None, however, approached the use rates reported for Shanghai and the USA. The rural school reported the lowest use rates and the military base school the highest. Alcohol use, especially for females, was limited to special occasions. For females, a large proportion of these occasions occurred in the home or with relatives. In short, it would appear that adolescent drinking in Thailand is still influenced by social and cultural values and patterns.

Unfortunately, if experiences in other parts of the world are any guide, these traditional patterns, like fewer females drinking, will tend to disappear as exposure to western values and western marketing practices for alcohol expand. In Thailand alcohol is now recognized as a major contributor to automobile crashes and their associated injuries and death. Not yet recognized is the relationship between alcohol use and poor school performance, family violence and neglect, fetal alcohol syndrome, crime, and poor workplace performance. If alcohol use increases, this relationship will become clearer.

More description of the nature and extent of alcohol use by young people is needed, as well as a careful assessment of traditional cultural and social values and practices that minimize the negative effects of alcohol. Such knowledge will be essential to the development of alcohol education programs designed to prevent the worst consequences of alcohol use.
References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lifetime Use—</th>
<th>Shanghai¹</th>
<th>Chonburi²</th>
<th>United States³</th>
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<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
<td>79.5%</td>
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<td>Females</td>
<td>88.7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>81.1</td>
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<td>Use in last 30 days—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>49.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>22.7</td>
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Notes:

¹Shanghai sample included students in grades 10-12 (Newman, Qu & Zhang, 1998).
²Chonburi sample included students in grades 10-12.
³US sample included students in grades 9-12 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1996).
Table 2

Student Perceptions of Parental Drinking Patterns

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male students % of responses</th>
<th>Female students % of responses</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Father</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-drinker</td>
<td>18.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occasional drinker</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>47.1</td>
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<td>Weekly drinker</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>32.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem drinker</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mother</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-drinker</td>
<td>54.9</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasional drinker</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>42.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly drinker</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem drinker</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.6</td>
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Table 3

Parental Drinking Patterns By School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Military Base School % of responses</th>
<th>Tourist Town School % of responses</th>
<th>Rural School % of responses</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-drinker</td>
<td>44.2</td>
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<td>Occasional drinker</td>
<td>48.6</td>
<td>44.4</td>
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<td>Weekly drinker</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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<td>Problem drinker</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>Non-drinker</td>
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<td>47.7</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.0</td>
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