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Alcohol and Young People: Promoting Benefits and Reducing Risks

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Abstract

For young people, alcohol used in ways prescribed by tradition and indigenous practices are suggested to be of lower risk than those encouraged by modern marketing and western images. Data from the USA and China are presented and discussed to support this hypothesis. Limited data suggest Chinese adolescents may be adopting higher-risk Western-style drinking practices and moving away from traditional drinking styles. It is suggested that policies which promote traditional and indigenous alcohol use should be encouraged and high-risk Western-style drinking practices discouraged.

Keywords:

alcohol, adolescents, tradition, indigenous practices, low-risk drinking

Alcohol use in China has been entwined with daily life and the yearly cycle of special festivals since earliest times. From the discovery of alcohol by Li Di and Du Kang, China's history has celebrated alcohol's pleasures and from time to time acknowledged its problems. The use of alcohol is celebrated in China's literature, poetry, hospitality, festivals, medicine, material culture, religions, and traditions.

With China's transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy, if experience in the West is any guide, we can expect to see an unfortunate rise in social problems associated with alcohol misuse. The evidence is beginning to accumulate. In 1995 half of all traffic crashes involved drivers who had been drinking (China Daily, Feb. 14, 1996). In 1996 38 percent of mild and serious crimes committed by adolescents were carried out under the influence of alcohol (Chinese Broadcasting Weekly, June 17, 1996).

Within the next year, China will pass the USA and become the world's leading producer of beer (Kyodo World News Service, Mar. 27, 2000). In 1999 China produced 20.88 million tons of beer. The beer market has an annual growth rate of 25 percent. The production of liquor fell 14 percent last year, suggesting some change in alcohol choices amidst a generally growing enterprise.

With increasing availability of alcohol, lower prices, increasingly available foreign alcohol products, new patterns of advertising, increasing personal disposable income and less family/parental control, it is likely that problems resulting from overuse of alcohol will increase, especially among young people.

If these trends do occur, the increasing number of automobiles will compound the problem. Alcohol, automobiles, and inexperienced drivers in combination could become a major cause of death and disability especially among young people. This will be unfortunate, because it will likely spawn a range of laws and regulations to control the problem, the imposition of taxes to pay for the problem, and a possible continued increase in abuse partly as a reaction to regulation, resulting in even more problems.

Something can be learned from the USA that may be helpful in reducing the negative outcomes of alcohol use, especially by adolescents.

The basic thesis of this paper is that traditional indigenous patterns of alcohol use need to be protected and maintained.

At the same time as we work to maintain traditional Chinese drinking practices, Western-style high-risk drinking practices need to be curtailed. I will describe briefly some details of these situations in the USA and then share with you some of what we have learned about alcohol use by Chinese adolescents. Lastly I will suggest a model to identify drinking behaviors that should be maintained and those that should be discouraged.

The situation in the USA

In the USA most alcohol use, especially among young people, occurs with little or no relationship to cultural or traditional events. Drinking with friends is often an end in itself, as is drunkenness. Some proportion of young people drink to get drunk. Unfortunately the social costs are high.

To talk about alcohol use in the USA it is important to remember that it is illegal for a person to buy alcohol until they are 21 years of age. In some areas it is illegal to possess or consume alcohol before age 21 unless the consumption takes place in the home and the alcohol is supplied by the parent. It is illegal to drive a motor vehicle if the driver's blood alcohol concentration (BAC) is more than .08 or .10 grams of alcohol per deciliter of blood. (BAC laws vary, depending on which state a person is in.)

Under the US system of law-making, restrictive laws such as these usually represent the will of the majority of the people. So it is not surprising that surveys show that the majority of US adults did not drink alcohol in the past year. Survey research suggests that 56 percent of adults aged 18 and older had not drunk alcohol in the past year. Among those who did drink, almost half reported having been intoxicated in the past year. Intoxication was not clearly defined. Four percent of drinkers reported intoxication weekly—these people are clearly dependent drinkers.

An unusual standard in the USA is the definition of excessive drinking called binge drinking. Binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks in a single drinking occasion for a male and four or more drinks in a single occasion for a female. A standard drink is defined as:

- 12 ounces of beer with 4 to 5 percent alcohol content,
- 1.25 ounce of distilled spirits with 40 percent alcohol content or 1 ounce of distilled spirits with 50 percent alcohol content, or
- 4 ounces of fermented wine with 12 to 14 percent alcohol content.

In the USA, per capita alcohol consumption increased from 1961 to 1981 when it peaked at almost 2.8 gallons of alcohol for each person 14 years old and older (). Between 1981 and 1993, per capita consumption declined and has generally leveled off. Beer is the beverage of choice for most people, followed by spirits (distilled beverages), and wine. The decline in consumption was greatest for spirits.

Automobile crashes are the leading cause of death for people through age 34 years. An average 45,000 people die in traffic crashes each year. Alcohol is involved in about 44 percent of traffic crash deaths.

Among young people aged 16 to 24 years who drink and drive automobiles, the death rate from alcohol-related crashes declined 30 percent between 1977 and 1993. Among the 25 to 44 year age group the death rate increased 45 percent in the same time period. Even with the decline in death rates for the 16 to 24 years olds, it is important to note this age group accounted for 28 percent of all drinking driver deaths in 1993, but this age group constituted only 15 percent of all licensed drivers in the USA (U.S. Federal Highway Administration, 1994).

These data illustrate the special dangers for young people when they drink and drive automobiles.

During the late 1990s there has been increasing evidence that alcohol used at moderate levels has some benefits. The acceptance of this idea is not yet widespread. For example, a recent international conference held in the USA to discuss "Alcohol and Pleasure" generated considerable controversy despite the fact that most people anywhere will admit they use alcohol because it brings pleasure or its use is associated with pleasure.

Is there any evidence that drinking patterns among young people in China are likely to follow the drinking patterns of adolescents in the USA or other Western countries?

We believe there is. If we are correct, then carefully considered policies to encourage and maintain traditional patterns of drinking and discourage the Westernization of drinking should be carefully considered as a way to avoid the problems and resulting legal interventions that have occurred in the West, especially in the USA.

The changing social scene in China is affecting the way alcohol is used, at least in the large urban/coastal areas. It will take longer for these trends to reach rural areas.

Increased contact with the West has allowed the sharing of Western images of alcohol use—images that are not always accurate and which encourage risky drinking.

The increasing availability of Western brands has created a certain appeal to those who wish to present an image that is cosmopolitan and Western. The development of brew pubs, usually as joint-ventures, has created a new appeal to some, especially young people. Joint ventures mean business people both inside and outside this country want to see sales increase. To increase sales, the alcohol industry has a couple of options:

- Persuade current drinkers to drink more and to drink more often;
- Recruit new drinkers. These new drinkers are most likely to be recruited from the least-likely-to-use groups at present, that is, women and young people.

Competition is encouraging the lowering of prices. Young people have increasing amounts of disposable income making the purchase of alcohol easy. The increasing range of brands and new products increases appeal. Wine, alco-pop (wine coolers), and alcohol fruit juices, for example, expand the appeal of alcohol to new segments of the population. Increased mobility means alcohol can be purchased and consumed in any location and no longer is consumed in a home or the place of purchase. Increases in mechanization, such as automobiles, decreases the tolerable level of error, making alcohol use potentially more dangerous. The changing culture challenges concepts like the Confucian ideal of "moral drinking" that emphasizes alcohol's role in strengthening all that is good in a person and which recognizes alcohol's role in contributing to a person's wellbeing. Business competition and increasing tolerance for embarrassment is changing the way "face" is maintained, making it easier for unfortunate behaviors associated with alcohol use.

Whether we like it or not these changes are occurring and they affect alcohol's role within Chinese culture.

Recent findings on alcohol use by Chinese adolescents

What do we know about drinking patterns of young people in China? Very little. I will share with you some results of our work over the last six years.

In 1995 two Chinese physicians working with me in Nebraska organized two small surveys, one in Shanghai and one in Hohhut, Inner Mongolia. Just a year before data had been published about the drinking patterns of young people in the same age group in Beijing (Li, et al., 1996). This allowed for interesting comparisons of drinking rates in these areas. The results are summarized in Table 1 along with data from a similar but much larger group of young people in the USA.

[Table 1 about here]

These data from a sample of China's middle high school students suggest that students in Shanghai were more likely to have used alcohol at least once in their lifetime (89%) than were young people in the USA (80%), Beijing (78%), or Hohhut (69%). This could be a function of sampling error or a reflection of Shanghai's cosmopolitan/Western orientation. What is noteworthy is that in all other locations except Hohhut more than 3/4 of young people have consumed alcohol by grade 8. This alcohol use represents the role alcohol plays as a food and the acceptance of alcohol use by young people as a normal part of growing up. This concept is not shared with the USA.

Most striking in this table is the pattern of recent use. Significantly more young people in the USA (52%) were likely to have used alcohol in the last 30 days, followed by young people in Shanghai (30%), Beijing (20%), and Hohhut (19%). These differences need to be explained. The rate of alcohol use by adolescents in the USA is high despite laws prohibiting drinking by this age group. The Shanghai rate is significantly higher than the other Chinese settings. Is it because Shanghai has traditionally had most contact with the West and is the one of the economic centers of growth? Hohhut, on the other hand, is relatively isolated from Western contact and has not seen the economic growth of coastal areas, yet the rate of recent drinking by adolescents in Hohhut is comparable to the rate reported in the Beijing sample. In the USA there is little difference in alcohol use rates for males and females (50% males and 53% females). In contrast Chinese adolescent males and females show large gender differences in alcohol use: 36% males and 23% females in Shanghai; 30% males and 17% females in Hohhut.

Differences between ethnic and gender groups can be explained if we believe that the traditions of indigenous cultures affect drinking patterns. We examined survey results from 595 students in two schools in Hohhut (Newman, Qu, Shell, Li, & Gao, 1999). One school served mostly Hanzu students, the other served mostly Mongolian students.

Four times as many males (16.6%) consumed alcohol six or more times "in the last year" than females (4.0%), and about three times as many Hanzu students (16.0%) reported using alcohol six or more times in the last year than Mongolian students (5.7%). Almost one of every six students (15.8%) reported drinking in the last month. More males (19.6%) than females (11.9%) reported drinking in the last month. Among "heavy drinkers," defined as students who drank four or more times in the last month, 5.8% were males and 0.6% were females.

In Inner Mongolia, beer (57.6%), fruit wine (29.7%), and liquor (22.4%) were the beverages of choice. Fermented mares' milk, a traditional Mongolian form of alcohol, was used by 18.7% of the Mongolian students and only 5.5% of the Hanzu students. Males reported drinking more than females for each type of alcohol studied. Fewer Mongolian students reported drinking beer, fruit wine, and liquor than Hanzu students. The Mongolian students who did drink consumed more alcohol per drinking occasion than Hanzu students.

Students were asked "Usually when do you drink alcohol?" The students who reported ever drinking alcohol reported drinking mostly at festivals (61.9%) and at parties (53.3%).

Of the students who ever drank alcohol, the majority (74.3%) reported never being drunk. More males (31.9%) reported ever being drunk than females (17.2%). More Mongolian students (31.5%) reported ever being drunk than Hanzu students (20.4%). This result is surprising because more Hanzu students reported drinking six or more times in the last year (Hanzu 16%; Mongolian 5.7%).

Mongolians have a reputation for heavy drinking and for the importance of drinking capacity as a sign of status among males. Even among these young people heavy drinking appeared to be a developing norm, albeit less frequent compared to their Hanzu counterparts. This less frequent heavy drinking suggests for the Mongolian students drinking was associated with important cultural events.

What does this mean?

We believe that indigenous traditional patterns of drinking are lower-risk patterns of drinking. The data presented here do not necessarily support this belief, but do suggest intriguing differences by gender and ethnicity. There is a need to explore this topic further. Even intoxication in the context of traditional culture is lower-risk than intoxication in non-traditional settings. To the extent that alcohol use is defined in cultural traditions associated with hospitality, celebration, religions, and encouraged by taste, relaxation, appreciation of food enhancement and as medicine, frequent high-risk use patterns are unlikely.

Western style advertising and marketing practices will seek to disassociate alcohol from tradition and normalize its use as just another beverage to be used any time or any place. If Western experiences are any indication, this will lead to increased alcohol related problems and new laws and regulations not only for the drinker but also for the manufacturer, distributor, wholesaler, and retailer. This suggests the need for policies that encourage and support low-risk traditional patterns of drinking and discourage high-risk patterns of drinking unrelated to tradition.

This situation can be explained in the diagram presented in Figure 1. If the degree of tradition is presented as the horizontal axis and the degree of risk is presented as the vertical axis, policy options become clear.

[Figure 1 about here]

Drinking patterns associated with hospitality, for example, are traditional. While they may increase risk with some degree of intoxication, the responsibilities associated with hospitality limit the risks. In Figure 1, drinking associated with hospitality falls into Quadrant 1 (very traditional, slightly higher-risk) and probably should be maintained.

Other drinking patterns are associated with varying degrees of tradition and indigenous culture: Drinking for medical reasons, for religious practices, in celebrations, and for food enhancement are all typically very traditional behaviors, and, therefore, their risks are limited. Further along this continuum drinking for sociability and for taste tend to be less traditional. Drinking for mood modification, to pass the time, or to get drunk tends to be less circumscribed by culture and tradition. Drinking to get drunk, at the end of the continuum, is a means of rebelling against tradition. Drunkenness provides the excuse to not conform to cultural constraints.

Drinking and driving automobiles, however, represents a behavior that is unrelated to tradition and is high-risk. In Figure 1, Quadrant 2 represents behaviors like drinking and driving that are non-traditional and higher-risk.

Alcohol's use as medicine is steeped in tradition and typically low risk and would fall into Quadrant 3 (very traditional, low-risk). Alcohol behaviors in Quadrant 3 should be maintained.

Quadrant 4 represents non-traditional alcohol drinking practices (such as women drinking, and drinking imported alcohol beverages) that are, at least for now, low risk. An example of a behavior in Quadrant 4 is women beginning to drink wine in small amounts. The small amounts of wine consumed make this behavior lower-risk, but risk could increase if the amount or frequency of wine drinking by women increases or if the woman continues drinking during pregnancy.

In Western terms, harm control strategies would be applied to behaviors in Quadrant 1. Harm control strategies assess the harm associated with a behavior and then seek to minimize the possible harm. The traditional behaviors in Quadrant 1 are worth maintaining. An example of a harm control strategy is a host preventing his guest from driving an automobile if he has been drinking. The host could ask someone who is sober to drive the automobile, or he could ask his guest to stay for the night and go home in the morning. He would, in other words, keep his guest out of harm's way.

On the other hand, risk reduction strategies clearly aim to prevent the offending behavior and not just minimize any possible harm. An example of a risk reduction strategy is a law that imposes a harsh penalty on the person who supplies alcohol to someone who eventually gets into trouble as a result of alcohol use. Laws prohibiting drinking and driving and placing a harsh penalty on the drinkint driver are aimed at discouraging someone from driving after drinking alcohol, thereby reducing the risk of alcohol-related crash. Given the limited resources for the management of alcohol-related problems, those limited resources should be focused on behaviors in Quadrant 2, because they are not important to preserving traditional cultural practices and at the same time they are high-risk. Because they do not affect traditional behaviors they are more likely to be accepted compared to strategies that challenge traditional culture.

Attention should also be focused on behaviors in Quadrant 3, and efforts made to encourage and maintain them, because they are important culturally and they are lower-risk and can be managed by harm reduction.

Quadrant 4 behaviors do not warrant time and effort for harm reduction efforts because they are lower-risk, but risk reduction strategies could be helpful in maintaining the lower-risk patterns.

In the USA, until very recently, most attention was paid to risk reduction. This led to prohibitions that totally ignored the beneficial effects of alcohol use, the setting of minimum age at which alcohol can be purchase and used and the regulation of the sale of alcohol to specific places and times of sale. The result today is a situation in which alcohol manufacture, sale and use are highly regulated.

Table 1
COMPARATIVE ALCOHOL USE RATES: SHANGHAI, BEIJING, HOHHUT, USA

	Lifetime Use	Current Use
SHANGHAI ¹ Grades 10-12		
Males	90.7%	36.0% (last 30 days)
Females	88.7%	22.7% (last 30 days)
BEIJING ² Grades 8 and 10		
All	78.0%	20.1% (last week)
HOHHUT ¹ Grades 9-11		
All	68.7%	18.9% (last 30 days)
USA ³ Grades 9-12		
Males	79.5%	49.9% (last 30 days)
Females	81.1%	53.2% (last 30 days)

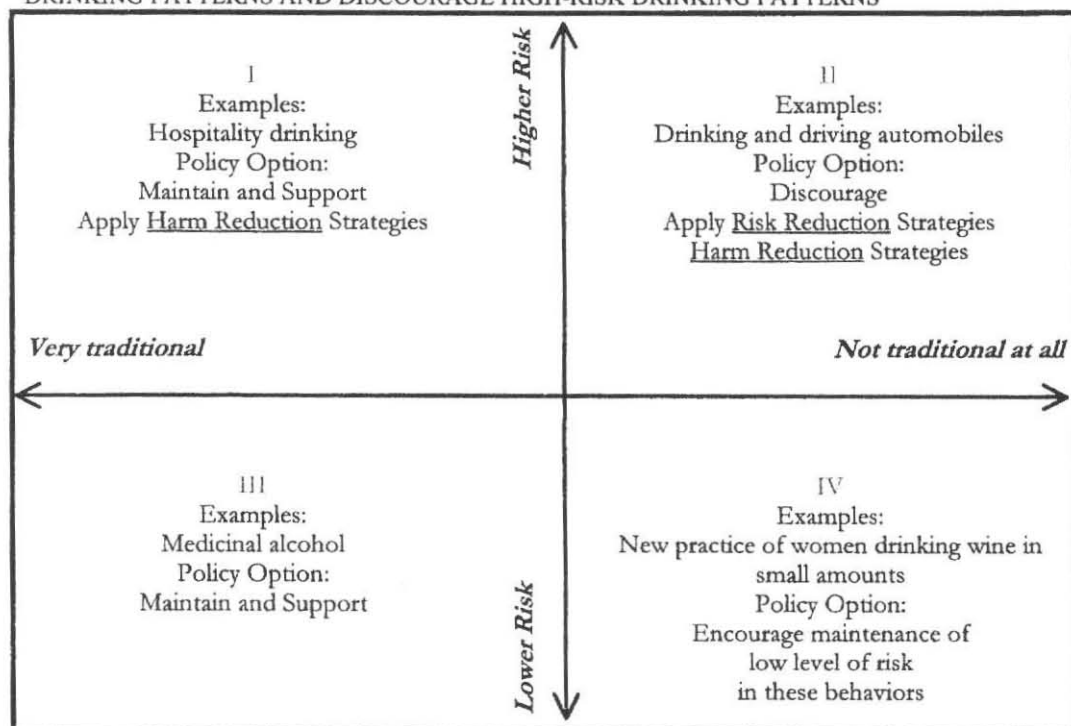
¹Newman IM, Qu M, Zhang WQ, 1998.

²Li X, Fang X, Stanton B, Feigelman S, & Dong Q, 1996.

³Centers for Disease Control, 1996

Figure 1

RISK AND BENEFIT OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERING POLICIES TO SUPPORT INDIGENOUS LOW-RISK DRINKING PATTERNS AND DISCOURAGE HIGH-RISK DRINKING PATTERNS



Conclusion

Describing alcohol use in traditional ways acknowledges alcohol's positive role in Chinese culture and its health benefits. Efforts can be focused on changing or discouraging behaviors that are not grounded in Chinese culture and tradition and are higher-risk. The model presented in Figure 1 suggests priorities for public policies to reduce the risks created by alcohol use, especially among young people, and at the same time promote the benefits of alcohol use.

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饮酒与青年：趋其利，避其弊