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# Flip Cup: Problems Related to Alcohol Consumption in Modern China

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# 烟酒研究

Flip Cup: Problems Related to Alcohol Consumption in Modern China

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## Abstract

The habits and attitudes surrounding the consumption of alcohol, in any culture, are just another lens through which we can look to better understand social life. The hierarchical social systems in China, which dictate common behavior, are unique. Much work has been written on the topic of *guanxi* and face: the defining factors for China's ubiquitous, self-affirming system of relationships. Drinking culture is perhaps more interesting to travel bloggers than academics, but I believe that China's drinking culture is a direct practice in *guanxi* production. The darker side of China's drinking culture is an exercise in preserving face.

The gap in the literature is somewhere between editorial pieces aimed at businessmen, advising them to develop an iron liver before opening up shop in the Middle Kingdom, and broader studies in health, where authors are frustrated by a lack of reliable information. My procedures included active participant observation in alcohol-infused social settings, guided and unguided interviews of people of many age, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds, and the analysis of several books and studies about the purpose of drinking alcohol in modern China.

My results are that the extravagance and extremity of Chinese drinking culture both come from and are reinforced by the cultural practice of preserving face and *guanxi*. This project became a critique of systematic inefficiency. I conclude that the system perpetuates willful ignorance over problem solving in areas ranging from mental health to corruption. However, there is hope for change in the younger generations.

## Topic Codes:

Mental Health, Public Health, Cultural Anthropology, Linguistics, Commerce-Business, Political Science, Recreation

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## **Figures**

Figure 1, page 9: List of cited interviewees

## 1: Introduction

### 1A: The Good, the Bad, and the Bubbly

I have been fascinated by China's drinking culture since November of 2015. At the time, the C.V. Starr Middlebury School in Kunming, of which I was a student, had partnered with The Nature Conservancy<sup>i</sup> for a week-long environmental education project in northern Yunnan province, rural southwestern China. The culmination of that week was summiting Laojunshan.

Laojunshan is a remote peak nestled in one of China's biodiverse natural areas. Rife with rhododendron and home of the endangered snub-nose monkey, the place is stunning. Well, the week was successful. Not only did most of us make it up the mountain, we had created deep connections with the environmentalists at TNC. On our final night in the backcountry, lit by stars, fifteen of us squatted around a table. A spread of fatty meats and spicy potatoes had to be readjusted as our hosts broke out the baijiu and beer.

Teacher Kang, director of TNC's Yunnan center, was the first to stand. He raised his cup, and proclaimed his gratitude for the company and the mission. After sitting, he looked expectantly to the person on his right. A classmate of mine, also an American student, blankly stared back. Nudging her, our assistant director for Middlebury, Alex, rose to explain that this was a toasting tradition in China. "Everyone takes turns; we go in a circle. Stand, raise your glass, profess gratitude, throw it back," he said. As he returned to his seat, he muttered to me, "it's *guanxi* in action." Well aware that fifteen shots of baijiu could likely kill us relatively lightweight nerds, we replaced the liquor with beer and proceeded.

At high elevation, the mountain air was thin and cold, but we fifteen around the table were warmer than I could remember feeling. It was what the Danish call *hygge*, a sentiment which according to translator ToveMarenStakkestad “was never meant to be translated - it was meant to be felt” (Parkinson, 2015). As a student of Chinese, untranslatable phenomena are familiar to me. With every encounter, they demand a certain amount of cultural comparison. In that moment, there were politics and practices at play that I knew would be a point of interest.

It is no secret among my family or friends that I love a good drink. I’ve met many of my very best well-intentioned, badly-behaving friends in this way. Those memories I owe to a bit of social lubrication, made possible by a bit of the brew. It is a tradition that has pervaded human history as long as records can tell. In fact, according to archaeological evidence, the world’s oldest known alcohol was found in traces of rice wine on Neolithic pottery unearthed in 1983 in Henan Province (Sandhaus, 2014, loc 59). As I join the generations of homo sapiens who also recognized the warmth and bonding nature of the cup, I cannot help but wonder why.

For my metabolism and otherwise, drinking alcohol is something I have to keep in check. My father’s father was an alcoholic. I never met him, and I find that regrettable. He completed the coursework for PhDs in philosophy and theology; everything but the dissertations. As much as this mystery relative’s mind both terrifies and impresses, so do his vices intrigue.

So, alcohol: it is personal. It is cultural. It is good, bad, and ugly. Furthermore, it plays a special role in the development and detriment of relationships everywhere. This element of relationships, of *guanxi*, brings us back to China, where my official application of a life-long curiosity begins. Originally, I planned on taking the historiographical route: how have people written about drinking through the ages? I was confronted with a significant gap in the literature. Every single oft-cited book on Chinese history and culture might mention alcohol a few times, as

a bit part. Nowhere did it find a leading role. Well, it does a few times in articles in, for example, the *International Business Times*, where Michelle Florcruz (2013) advises businessmen seeking success in China to develop an iron liver before that can happen. Whether they know it or not, Florcruz and others are talking about more than business as usual. They are talking about *guanxi* and face; in China, alcohol is the high speed rail to *guanxi*. In the subsequent section they will be defined together as major players in the great Chinese drinking game.

If I had the time or the money to support the kind of research necessary for the piece I would like to write, this would be a book. The good parts drew me in; the bad parts made me obsessive. I would expand on problems, certainly, but I would also have the space to write stories like the one from the beginning of this introduction. I would write about how drinking culture's shift from the old way to the current way, alcohol's historical role in the arts, drinking traditions of China's ethnic minorities, drinking alcohol as it relates to gender, and probably do a case study on club promoters of China's floating population. 'Drinking culture,' as it is, is just too broad and too deep a topic for an undergraduate research paper to do more than scratch the surface.

A major theme of this paper, which only came out once I began writing (read: arguing with myself) was the question of purpose. I first asked myself why titling the paper after a popular drinking game felt right. "Flip cup" was at first a play on words, referring to the side of the drinking vessel which is only revealed when you play the game.<sup>ii</sup> There was another reason that a game was fitting. The term "drinking game" is almost redundant in China. The entire practice of drinking alcohol is one of intrinsically competitive group engagement. It is, in the words of an interviewee, its own system. Though the sections of this paper are named for broader cultural settings (i.e. 'as a mental health issue,' / 'in business and politics'), there are some main

players that are active throughout. Even as settings vary, those are the threads which tie all these stories together.

In all, this is a compilation of written history, oral accounts, and (active) participant observation: a series of interviews and anecdotes starring Chinese people of all ethnic backgrounds, also including stories of foreigners in China. I hope that it will serve as a glimpse into the darker side of a culture surrounding that deal-making, heart-breaking juice called alcohol.

## **1B: Methods**

My study was conducted in several locations across China, namely Kunming, Beijing, and Shanghai. The beautiful thing about drinking culture is that it is everywhere. Even territories in the Middle East where drinking is prohibited by Sharia law, it happens, albeit under the table. Kunming is the capitol of China's most ethnically diverse province. There, I was looking for varied individual, personal stories. In Beijing, China's political and cultural center, I sought information pertaining to politics, public health, and what can be considered standards of Chinese culture. Shanghai, being the Mainland's gate to West, provided experiences that illuminated a changing culture among the younger generations. I chose to study Chinese people of many backgrounds because I was looking for a comprehensive set of information which might pertain to broad trends. Case studies of smaller populations, i.e. club promoters of the floating population, are in my sights for future research. Perhaps broadness is a shortcoming of my research, but I also think it lays a good foundation for more specific work. My selection techniques were very fluid. Like any worthy night out, this research snowballed. With the permission of interviewees, I recorded their thoughts on whatever I could find. This ranged from

typing notes in my phone to scribbling on a bar napkin. I analyzed my data by comparing information gathered from books to situations expressed by my interviewees, seeking alignment and misalignments therein.

*Figure 1: List of cited interviewees*

| Interviewee                    | Description  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Wang Aiyi                      | Mid-40s, restaurant owner, single mom, divorcee of an Yi man (alcoholic), ethnically Han |
| Qinghua University professor   | Expert on elder suicide, mental health in China, ethnically Han                          |
| Ken Y                          | Mid-30s Japanese-American man working in Shanghai  |
| Sophie                         | Late 20s American woman working as a teacher in Hangzhou                                 |
| Gary                           | Mid-50s American man, entrepreneur, owned alcohol import business for 5 years            |
| Mr. Rush (chosen English name) | Trekking guide, Han Chinese man, middle aged, Xishuangbanna                              |
| Alan (chosen English name)     | Late 20s, Chinese man, works for pharmaceutical company                                  |
| Samuel (chosen English name)   | 30, Chinese bar owner  |
| Anonymous                      | 24, female friend, born and raised in  |

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
|             | Shanghai, ethnically Han                    |
| Yang Huling | 30, female, Chinese teacher, Kunming native |

## 2: Our Main Players

The main actors in the game, playing varying roles in each section of this paper, go as follows:

- BAIJIU: the material, the means, the ball
- THE CHINESE COMMUNIST PARTY (CCP): greatest entity of oversight (think NFL or NBA)
- THE CHINESE PEOPLE: the players
- GUANXI and FACE: *defacto* rules dictating game behavior, like sportsmanship

### 2A: Baijiu, the ball

Gaining an understanding of the surrounding culture necessitates first unpacking the thing itself. The traditional drink of choice for Chinese people from rural to urban areas is baijiu, a distilled hard alcohol which serves as the centerpiece of this research. The famously potent libation has been described by some of my Western friends as “lighter fluid with notes of rotten fruit,”<sup>iii</sup> “sweet petrol,”<sup>iv</sup> and my personal favorite, “devil’s water.”<sup>v</sup> While difficult on the foreign palate, baijiu is both effective and pervasive. Its flavor is complex, methods of production are always changing, and the substance itself is pretty obscure outside of the Middle

Kingdom. It is watered down for many foreigners. In this way, *baijiu* is a metaphor for both modern China and Chinese antiquity: to most, a profound mystery.

## **2B: CCP, entity of oversight**

The Chinese government has an interesting relationship with alcohol which will be expanded on later. By entity of oversight, I mean to compare the government to a top-layer organization that defines and enforces the official, de jure rules of the game.<sup>vi</sup> This organization is made up of more than referees. In fact, the most powerful actors in the group would be administrators and politicians.

## **2C: People, players**

This one is self-explanatory. The people are the direct participants engaging with each other amidst the practice of drinking alcohol.

## **2D: *Guanxi* & face, rules of sportsmanship**

The purpose of drinking baijiu is a complicated question to answer for China. It is aimed at the production of *ganqing*, emotions, which in turn fosters good *guanxi*. The simple act of clinking glasses, where participants compete for the lowest spot on their partners' glasses, is an exercise in giving face. It says, 'I am lower than you. You are higher than me.'

The purpose of giving and preserving face, and of maintaining good *ganqing*, is to develop *guanxi*. These cultural values also serve to reinforce and maintain a Confucian social hierarchy and, in a depressing way, are the crux of the Chinese non-confrontation with drinking problems.

### **3: As a Mental Health Issue**

It is difficult to talk about something as a mental health issue when mental health is not considered an issue worthy of attention in the first place. Semantics, family honor, an indirect approach to problem solving, and bureaucratic stubbornness are the fundamental reasons why alcoholism is a tricky subject in China.

Wang Aiyi is my Chinese host mother. In a humble, well-lit flat in downtown Kunming, I lived with Wang and her nine-year-old daughter, Jika. Born in Lijiang in the late 1970s, she is the second-oldest of ten children. Wang now owns a restaurant with her younger brother, and teaches Yin Yang and health at the trade college down the street. While she did not live in the countryside, per se, she says that her home in Lijiang was not particularly nice. Wang returns there on major holidays, and has weekly suppers with the half of her siblings who also moved to Kunming in part for the financial opportunities. She says that growing up, she dreamt of escaping, of marrying rich, of becoming a beautiful, rich, light-skinned<sup>vii</sup> city girl.

Wang left Lijiang when she was my age, 20 years old, after meeting and marrying her Yi husband, Ni Yehui, who lived in Kunming. They met through friends, and she said that she fell in love quickly. She gave birth to Jika in 2007. When Jika was still quite young, Wang filed for

divorce from the Ni. He was what in America we would call an alcoholic. This experience, of divorce, and of creating a new life, is what she calls the formative one of her life.

“He drank every night,” she said, “and not just to drink. He drank until he was past drunk. He came home and broke things. I remember once, he kicked a little table. There was a lamp on the table. When he kicked it, one of the table’s legs was ripped away, and the lamp came crashing down. It made such a noise. I was afraid.

“Many of the ethnic minority people like to drink, and that’s their culture, but I have to worry about my daughter. She was not safe. He was not responsible. I didn’t want her to continue to watch that, to grow up in that kind of environment. So, I left. It’s just us two now, but my life is so much better without him.”

Alcohol dependence and abuse is common, but, as a study published by the World Health Organization (WHO) on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harm in China acknowledges, alcohol use disorders and alcohol-related harm “ha[ve] not been systematically studied in China because reliable data are not available” (Yi-lang, 2012, 270-276). The only measurable part of the whole problem-drinking equation is not how much booze is produced or how many people suffer from alcohol-related disorders, but how *few* medical resources are available for those who might need them. Even when alcoholic help centers do exist, only in more developed cities, they are not labeled as such. Alcoholics do not fall under the same category as drug addicts; drug addicts live on the outskirts of social life, whereas alcoholics mingle with everyone, generally unacknowledged. If a problem is recognized, it is only in private. In the case of Wang, Ni, and Jika, a family, while eventually beautifully redefined, was first broken by the caustic hands of alcohol abuse. According to Wang, hers is not a unique story: “Chinese people handle something

like that within the family, or simply overlook it.” Wang’s ex-husband lives in a dense minority community in Kunming. He continues to drink.

In standard Mandarin, there is no specific word for an ‘alcoholic.’ Chinese language has an indirectness about it. Radicals of nonconcrete meaning combine to form characters of individual abstract meaning which combine to form words with more nuanced definitions. Meaning is not derived from connotation and denotation, but by context.<sup>viii</sup> One idiom, 不为酒困 *buweijiukun*, can mean all three of the following: “not a slave to the bottle,” “able to enjoy alcohol in moderation,” and “able to hold one’s drink.” They are emphatically not the same thing.

Are concepts, like characters, mostly contextual? Can a definition of alcoholism change according to time, place, and culture? The standard portion size of a drink can (Romm, 2016). Of course there are biological and genetic factors to alcoholism, but there are no universal scientific standards. Might the dynamic of environment be most powerful? If in that environment, there is not such a direct, negative, loaded word for the concept, then what? Some might say an approach which labels a heavier form of drinking in a non-Western cultural environment “alcoholism” as ethnocentric. Americans do have some puritanical judgements about drinking alcohol which lend to an ongoing disordered history around it.<sup>ix</sup>

On a four-day trek through the jungle forests of Xishuangbanna, a friend and I were guided by a Han Chinese man self-named Mr. Rush. By an American standard, the man was an alcoholic. Every night, he drank a water bottle full of baijiu, regardless of the consumption levels of his company. While aims at producing *guanxi* (insistent offers of sweet petrol) were made, whether or not the drinking was a shared experience was irrelevant. Mr. Rush, with his wild eyes

and wilder conspiracies, is a character to whom my friend Helen and I still often allude in conversation. The man was in better shape at fifty+ years old than the two of us at twenty. He sprinted up the sides of mountains where Helen and I gasped for breath and gagged out of exertion at every resting point. Mr. Rush barely broke a sweat. I suppose he is what we in the West call a high-functioning alcoholic. He could hold his liquor, then rise spiffily the next morning for a half marathon jungle trek, straddling the border of muggy Myanmar; no problem.

The physical dependence on alcohol (revealed by withdrawal symptoms during abstinence) is only present in an exceptionally small percentage of people categorized as alcoholics. The working definition of an alcoholic is set on behavioral standards rather than physiological ones. As any anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or seasoned backpacker would know, different cultures have different standards where acceptable behavior is concerned.

In the spring, I attended a seminar at Qinghua University in Beijing led by a journalist-turned-professor of anthropology. The talk was about China's aging population, focusing on the cultural implications of elder suicide. A classmate asked him what kind of infrastructure China has in place for mental healthcare, and if anti-depressants were an option for the lonely elderly. His response was insightful.

“Many Chinese psychiatrists look down on American psychiatry. They (Americans) seek to medicalize social issues that they don't want to deal with. For example, an American psychiatrist might diagnose a kid with ‘internet addiction.’ But what is ‘internet addiction,’ really? The kid is lonely, or there is trouble at home. The diagnosis is surface-level. He needs friends before he needs medicine. In China, the approach is surface level, too, in a different way. If in America, mental health tends to be medicalized, then mental health in China tends to be socialized.”

He went on to say that China as a society underestimates the seriousness of mental health. Many people go undiagnosed with treatable mental issues both because of a general cultural disregard and a lack of psychiatrists. In his words, “we don’t know if people are suffering from social issues or psychosis.”

The monkey wrench is an issue of semantics. In the way Americans understand alcoholism, there is “no such concept” in China.<sup>x</sup> An alcoholic is not an AIDS patient. Blood testing cannot identify a person’s definite ‘alcoholism’ like it can trace a virus the bloodstream. The problem and confusion with addiction is that, somewhere along the continuum of psychological problems, it intersects with physical illness. So, if we consider that Chinese people categorically refuse to give alcoholics a name and the complications in defining alcoholism as whole, then when dealing with psychology across culture, are labels and classifications somewhat arbitrary?

It is important to humbly realize to limitations of Western medicine and the tendency to label unsavory human behavior a psychological issue. However, this is not to say that the Chinese way--- the approach in which if one ignores a thing, the thing does not exist--- is any better. It is definitely **not better**.

The Confucian social hierarchy, with an emphasis on filial piety, is the underlying philosophy of the Chinese social tradition and even traditional Chinese medicine. It underpins the Chinese moral compass as a whole. The concept of face is attached to the extreme value placed on family honor. Face, and the giving or losing of face, is a barometer by which one can quantify honor.

In China, the admittance of a mental health issue is a categorical loss of face. Again, the term ‘mental health’ is untranslatable. I do not think that Chinese people are oblivious to problem drinking. They just do not consider it an issue of mental health, nor do they consider mental health a problem in and of itself. Deeply-rooted myths about drinking, i.e. that drinking is good for you, is a measure of friendship, or increases libido are prevalent (Yi-Lang, 2012, 270-276).

At a Middlebury alumni networking event in Shanghai, some long-time expatriate businesspeople brought up the issue of problem-solving with Chinese coworkers. Ken Yakamura, a 30-something Japanese American who works in advertising at Apple, brought up education. “Any Asian education system is very top-down. Whereas, in the West, we learn how to think critically, in the East, they do the rote memorization. You have your task, and you have in your mind exactly how the teacher told you to carry out that task, and you do a lot of that rapid-fire drill. So, when it comes to problems at work, anything that falls outside of that task-based training will make you uncomfortable.”

Sophie, who is about the same age and works in education, tagged on, “Also, because of that task-based learning, people will assume that if a thing doesn’t fall under their job description, then it can’t be their responsibility. I had a situation where the drama teacher at our school needed a classroom. So, I went to P[sic], a Chinese coworker, for help, and she looked at me and said, ‘I don’t find people classrooms.’ Well, P, nobody finds people classrooms. It’s nobody’s job. But we still need to find her a classroom.”

An older entrepreneur named Gary then added, “Another part of it is raising the issue itself is very embarrassing for Chinese people. Unless they have been conditioned properly on

how to raise questions or express problems, they won't do it. Especially to their boss. They think it's out of line.”

Until the entire approach toward mental health changes, no prohibition will change the alcoholics' situation in China. The WHO study (2012) points out that the greatest obstacle to change is a lack of trustworthy information. If one does not acknowledge a thing as a problem, then of course they lack the purpose to look into it. Furthermore, especially in China, change will be administered from the top down. Otherwise is a violation of the 'rules.' Unfortunately, and in many areas of public health, there is a failure by the greater authority to put the people first. This is where bureaucracy and alcohol meet in a way that creates more ubiquitous harm than damage done to the livers of party officials.

### **3: In Business and Politics**

A few interesting points define the state of drinking and politics in modern China. The first is their inextricability. The second is the recent prohibition-like moves by the government to limit banquet drinking. The third, much like the issue of defining 'alcoholism' cross-linguistically, is defining 'corruption,' and why China is inherently prone to extravagance in business and political deals.

Red and gold rickshaws swim along the cracks in the narrow winding roads at Beijing's Guowang Hutong. *Hutong* in Chinese is translated as "alley." It refers to a neighborhood of one to two story traditional homes connected by chaotic cobblestone streets, untouched by the sleek modernity of developed China. Using different tones, *hutong* can also mean "to interoperate" or "intercommunicate," which says a lot about life in traditional China. A strong sense of

community defines the shared space of a *hutong*. Guowang Hutong is in the process of gentrification, where hipster yuppies have invested in small bars with names like “Good Beer and Damn Good Bread” and splashed its ramparts with colorful, edgy, pop-art-inspired graffiti.

It is late March, and the typically smoggy air has cleared for the day. I have come looking for the Qianding Liquor Museum, armed with an address scribbled on a scrap of paper and a useful willingness to ask for directions. The liquor museum sits on the intersection of Zhaofu road and another nameless alley. Its two perpendicular walls, which make a right angle with the intersection, look like an East-Asian Captain Jack Sparrow’s wet dream. Giant jars of baijiu are cemented into these exterior walls.

Inside, flasks dating back to the early Qing dynasty fill shelves alongside paintings of Chairman Mao. The owner and collector of the Qianding Liquor museum is himself a member of the CCP. Both of these pieces of information I gathered from blogs written a few years ago by visitors to the museum (Karacs, 2013, online). In fact, the museum’s newest outward embellishment is red tape, blocking entry. When I saw this--- frustrated after spending two hours trying to find the place, only to be denied access by said red tape--- I trudged to the little general store across the way to ask what was going on.

In a thick, grumbling Beijing accent, she told me that they had shut down, ostensibly forever.

The presence of Mao’s portrait alongside flasks upon flasks of baijiu is indicative of a greater pattern of the inextricable nature of drinking and politics. Mao himself was a frequent and enthusiastic holder of banquets. In China, the dinner table is where deals are made. A flask of baijiu is the centerpiece. It is notable, too, that there is no business separate from politics and

no politics separate from business. Furthermore, the governmental/business world mirrors the kind of politics present in familial relations (Kipnis, 2014, loc. 345).<sup>xi</sup> One could argue that that statement might be true anywhere. However, the more formal lines which create some distance between feds and entrepreneurs in the States do not exist here. A typical American person would not take the mayor out for cocktails if he wanted to open a coffee shop. Likewise, the mayor would not aim to drink a farmer under the table if he wanted to purchase a track of land. (Mr. Rush)

In 2012, Xi Jinping began his anti-corruption campaign. Its aim was to harshly limit partying among government officials. Banquet drinking was the main target. Many high-level officials were jailed, and businesses were hurt in the process. Gary, the Middlebury alumnus, owned an alcohol import business at the time. He cited that moment while describing the fast-changing nature of the Chinese economy: “One year, we were doing just fine. The next, the government decided drinking at banquets was illegal, and sales went down 80%.” For the CCP to make a move that would cause any economic damage runs contrary to their usual practices of economic protectionism. In fact, this will to grow the GDP at all costs is why they don’t do anything about another public health issue, smoking. Tobacco farms are subsidized by the government.<sup>xii</sup>

So, what trumped in importance even the CCP’s love for GDP growth? **Face**. While traditional Chinese medicine prides itself on diagnosing the root, not merely the symptoms of a problem, the Chinese government does not mirror that. In Chinese social discourse, problems say something about face. The mere existence of a problem is a loss of face for someone. In ancient times, foreign invaders and natural disasters both were signs of the current empire’s loss of the Mandate of Heaven. The Mandate of Heaven was just face on a macro-level. A legitimate part

of this anti-corruption crusade is Xi's argument that corruption was a conspicuous problem and a potential harbinger for the fall of the party.

The campaign's true purpose is questionable. The reason Xi's moves seem more in line with another Hundred Flowers Movement and not a true anti-corruption campaign is that its focus is extravagant gift-giving and "conspicuous power abuse" (Yuen, 2014, 47). He is applying a western definition of "corruption" to the current Chinese political/business setting.

Perhaps, again, semantics may reveal something. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'corruption' as: 1) Dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power, typically involving bribery." There is an automatic assumption there that corruption occurs at a high level. The Chinese word for corruption, 腐败 *fubai*, is composed of two characters, 腐 *fu*, which is also the second character in tofu, meaning fermented<sup>xiii</sup> or decayed, and 败 *bai*, which also has the abstract meaning of to wither or to fail. There is no intrinsic assumption that corruption is beyond the common behavior of the common man. Corruption in China does not merely describe high officials dealing with big money. In standard Mandarin, *corruption* is not conflated with 'the Man,' the evil adversary in some forms of American populism. It reaches in every direction, through every aspect of business, law enforcement, and administration. The same stuff that occurs among Xi's colleagues also occurs in everyday business dealings, and no one blinks. Minor players, such as farmers and mayors drinking over a real estate deal, exemplify at the bottom the targeted extremes at the top. Chinese culture, as one of gift-giving, face-giving, and heavy drinking, is arguably more prone to extravagance in business and political settings. The only thing that would change the culture is a change of the system. As for now, despite nominal efforts from the top to eradicate corruption from the party, the system is self-reinforcing, from the ground up.

So, what is the actual purpose for the system? Why is face-giving an essential part? Why drink alcohol as a means to that end? At a pub in Kunming, I met Alan, a twenty-nine-year-old Chinese man working his way up the ranks of pharmaceutical company. When asked why Chinese people drink so heavily in business and political environments, he responded, “It’s very... important. There’s a system. It is China’s system of screening people. If you are a man, you drink.”<sup>xiv</sup> It is the act of making oneself vulnerable to show just how far one would go for their drinking partner.

A word Alan used in this interview to describe this system was *yingchou* 应酬, which means ‘to have social intercourse or to treat with courtesy’. Not entirely surprisingly, the radical which represents a wine vessel, 酉 *you*, is present in the second character, 酬 *chou*.

China, in government, business, and culture as a whole, must develop a way of screening people that does not involve intoxicants or extravagance. Such systems do exist, i.e. checks and balances. However, the theory of checks and balances comes from an Enlightenment era, non-hierarchical mindset. In China, face and *guanxi* systematize the social hierarchy and the hierarchy in turn reinforces some of the worst parts of the culture. For the purpose of meaningful change, Xi cannot only hate the players; he must hate the game. For the purpose of consolidating power and making temporary prohibitory changes that will eventually carry on the status quo, his administration is doing everything right.

## 6: The Younger Generation: Wine, *waiguo* 外国<sup>xv</sup>, *weilai* 未来<sup>xvi</sup>

When introducing the forms of alcohol around which Chinese drinking culture develops, I failed to mention the new kids on the block: wine and beer. While they share a certain role with baijiu as centerpieces to a general culture, it must be noted that separate traditions and ideas revolve around each. In many ways, the separation is along lines of old and new. The growing popularity of both beer and wine, and moves toward a new culture surrounding these new means of social lubrication, are exemplary of a changing and West-obsessed China.<sup>xvii</sup>

Beer and wine are strictly a Western import. Elements of Western bar culture are attached to the import of beer and wine.<sup>xviii</sup> Bars and clubs have sprouted up all around China, and not just classic expatriate pubs in trade-heavy big cities. Yang Huiling, a Chinese woman of thirty living in Kunming, told me, “We don’t drink *baijiu* in bars. That would be very weird.”

So, what do Chinese people do in bars? If the main function of *baijiu* means sitting around a circular table, developing *guanxi* and giving face, then what is the function of foreign alcohol? The question of purpose here is a complicated one, because everything from the origin of the drink to the shape of the table to the direction in which people sit is strikingly new.

In traditional baijiu toasts, one must tap their rim at a lower level of their partner’s glass, an exercise in giving face. A friend from Shanghai once told me of her friends and herself, “We don’t do that. That’s an old person thing. The whole baijiu culture, it’s not really our generation.” The image of China’s changing drinking culture is usefully emblematic of a greater cultural evolution. In traditional baijiu culture, places are set with special intentional considerations for age and sex at a circular table. Food is never omitted. It is a celebration of abundance in every sense, where everyone’s reverent attention is brought to the same central image of profusion. It is

an image of people facing towards each other, celebrating sustenance and longevity, while monitoring each other's facial expressions and behavior.

In a Western bar, a long, thin rectangular table is situated so that bar goers all face the same direction. The space accommodates intimate conversation for people sitting beside each other, but not for everyone at the table. It does not matter where you put your glass when you raise it for a toast. Dancing is common. In America, there is a strongly sexual theme to 'going out.' Bar goers are gazing longingly in that same direction towards the hope of meeting a partner.

In China, the removal of the circular table signals an extraction of traditional moral values and new forms of acceptable behavior among young people, especially in big cities. I visited more than a few bars and clubs in a popular district of Beijing where scantily clad dancers were presented as a titillating, strikingly un-conservative showcase.

It feels a bit unnatural and makes me wonder what the import of foreign alcohol has tangentially imported ideologically. China is far from a sexually liberated culture. The sight was avant-garde at best, culturally nihilistic at worst. It would not be the first time China radically adopted a foreign idea without the cultural understanding of its roots or reasons. Every time that happens, it seems to have some non-ignorable consequences.<sup>xixxx</sup>

Despite its slightly unsettling nature, there is hope for change in that this generation is so radically different from their parents'. If attitudes toward sex and gender can evolve in a generation, then surely the CCP and the social hierarchy is not totally unmovable.

## 8: Conclusions

Perhaps, as a topic, the consumption of alcohol might seem ordinary. It is not. I attest that cross-culturally, small and subtle differences about drinking alcohol demand analysis. Drinking culture is a lens through which we can look to understand Chinese social behavior.

The more I write, the more I realize the Chinese government's (and people's) tendency to avoid tough issues by not addressing them for what they are. China is still a developing country, and it seems they are still finding an equilibrium between public health, individual rights, and development. In the case of intellectual property, a Chinese person who was receiving her PhD in Economics proudly announced in a lecture, "We are moving toward an innovation-based economy." This is an utter impossibility without the implementation of meaningful intellectual property laws. Once at a question-and-answer session in a rural elementary-through-middle school, a friend asked if the kids are educated about sex. Answers came indirectly and awkwardly. "The children are taught about natural biological and psychological differences between males and females." There was never a clear "no" on what was obviously a "no." China is flirting with a serious AIDS epidemic. Those children deserve knowledge. Because solving problems for the Chinese is about the loss/gain of face, measures are taken to 'solve' that problem only to the extent that they repair face. It seems these issues stemming from drinking habits—mental health awareness and corruption—could be addressed using more comprehensive strategies by the CCP.

A cultural shift in the way China approaches problem-solving is necessary for the country to compete and contribute meaningfully as a world power. China, now holding more influence on the global stage than ever, already has a lot of power. Power comes with both attention and

responsibility. Actual good *guanxi* with other powerhouse countries will require them to do more than apply metaphorical band-aids to social issues. China, as a world power, has the responsibility to its people to advocate for public health and promote fairness in business and politics. In a highly connected world, without any change, China will continue to receive negative attention on these issues. Perhaps an international loss of face will be the catalyst for real change. A party that cannot adapt cannot survive. The government should be wary of their own staleness.

Alternatively, perhaps the Chinese youth will redefine what it means to be Chinese, and begin to approach problems uniquely like they approach drinking uniquely. There is hope in that.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY TOPICS

1. Case study on club promoters of the 流动人口
2. Alcohol consumption and gender expectations
3. Traditional Chinese Medicine and its uses for alcohol
4. Alcohol's historic role in the arts: brothel culture (Li Bai)
5. Drinking culture of ethnic minorities: perception and reality

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> TNC is an environmental NGO based in Yunnan.

<sup>ii</sup> A chatty footnote about a college drinking game is an academic dream come true.

<sup>iii</sup> Evan Nece, Bates College, 22 years old.

<sup>iv</sup> Graham Link, Yale in Singapore, 21 years old.

<sup>v</sup> Benjamin Eisenberg, Bowdoin College, 21 years old.

<sup>vi</sup> Sort of like the NFL. Similarly, economic protectionism at the expense of the players is a factor.

<sup>vii</sup> *Baifumei*, is a phrase commonly used in China which is literally translated as “white, rich, beautiful.” It is the ideal form of attractive femininity.

<sup>viii</sup> Similarly, the Chinese person's identity is determined contextually.

<sup>ix</sup> Think prohibition and D.ACh.R.E.

<sup>x</sup> Lu Yuan. 4/26/16

<sup>xi</sup> Kipnis, citing Sangren, notes that ‘analysis of Chinese lineage corporations is best framed in the wider context of all formally constituted groups’ (eBook location 345 of 4474). Therefore, when writing about *guanxi*, “though lineage relationships per se did not occupy a central place” in the town in which he conducted research, he still chose to ball family and extrafamily relationships together.

<sup>xii</sup> Lung cancer and smoking is not the only public health issue that the government fails to do much of anything about. Prostitution especially in the southwest is common, fairly obvious, and a contributor to China's AIDS epidemic. Still, there is no sex education in schools, and AIDS patients are socially out casted and treated as scum.

<sup>xiii</sup> Interesting... because, alcohol.

<sup>xiv</sup> For girls, it's different. He was a bit embarrassed and could not exactly come up with an answer when I asked him why. “It's just.... culture. If a girl drinks like the man, she is seen as a problem.”

<sup>xv</sup> Foreigners.

<sup>xvi</sup> Future.

<sup>xvii</sup> At BeerFest (May 2016 in Shanghai), I talked to a brewer (English name Samuel) who dubbed this upsurge in interest China's “craft beer revolution.” The initial move-in involved adjusting products to Chinese tastes. The competition, now, is in developing brand loyalty and, in an about-face, adjusting Chinese tastes to heavier, more varied brews.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Interestingly, the exchange is somewhat mutual. In Brooklyn, hipster center of the world, bars devoted to the edgiest booze of all have appropriated Chinese baijiu into making mixed drinks. I find this funny because that's not how Chinese people drink baijiu, ever. A Chinese friend, Heping, once told me that "only pussies need chasers."

<sup>xx</sup> Example 1: communism without the full understanding of Marxist ideology, that capitalism must come first in order to produce enough good to provide for everyone. Example 2: a free market without the basic understanding that innovation comes from creative competition and lawful protection of that creativity

## **Appendix B: Personal experience**

Being in China while conducting research has not only enhanced my experience; my physical presence here is defining it. I cannot imagine sipping baijiu from a gasoline container while watching anti-Japanese soap operas with Chinese farmers in America. There are too many stories like that--- weird ones--- which have informed my understanding of my topic but that I did not include.

However, moments like that are relevant because my research has been a lived experience. There is a level of understanding beyond the pages of a book that I am achieving while living in China. The *guanxi* that sinologists write about has become central to my life. It paints everything I see, read, and write a new color.

In all, my international experience has made my academic experience more than one of strictly consumption. Simply put, I have something to say. Even the act of reading has become an interaction. I feel more present. Communication in languages other than my native tongue have forced me think harder, listen better, and ultimately, find my voice.

I hope that in discovering my place in the Middle Kingdom, I have carved my space for future research in social science.