

Topic and Research Question

For thousands of years alcohol plays a central role in each and every culture around the world. In some cultures alcohol is prohibited, but no culture ignores alcohol. With time, every culture evolved its own norms and regulations which control how society deals with alcohol. Due to the omnipresence of the topic alcohol, the author deals in her master thesis with drinking cultures in East Asia.

Main goal was to find out how the drinking cultures in China, Japan and Vietnam differ from each other or which things they have in common. The research questions are:

- What are the differences and commonalities of the drinking cultures in China, Japan and Vietnam?
 - If there are differences, why are there differences?
 - How did the drinking cultures in East Asia develop and did they influence each other?

State of the Art

Many anthropological studies dealing with the topic alcohol are mostly descriptive studies restricted to exotic drinking cultures using qualitative research, field research, monitoring and interviews. In the last centuries the theoretical interest on this topic increased. Sociological studies intensively deal with theoretical fundamentals that rest upon quantitative and qualitative research materials. Anthropological studies generally tolerate drinking alcohol and investigate why people in society drink what and how. In contrast, sociological studies mainly deal with problems caused by alcohol consumption. Until the 1970's there were many scholars writing about alcohol as a social problem.

The most important scientist in the scope of international anthropological studies about alcohol and culture is Dwight B. Heath (1995, 2012), who sustainably influenced science in this field. Next to him, David G. Mandelbaum (1965) and Mary Douglas (1987) were one of the first scholars dealing with alcohol and culture as independent field of study. Janet Chrzan (2013) research focuses on Social Drinking in Cultural Context. In Thomas Wilson's book (2005) there are articles of different researchers that deal with several drinking cultures around the world – focusing on Alcohol and Identity.

Methodology and Approach

To be able to compare the drinking cultures of the selected countries, the term “drinking culture” had to be defined. The author only deals with the so called “alcohol drinking cultures”. Other drinks as water, coffee, tea or cocoa were disregarded in this thesis.

The analysis criteria, which build the basis for the comparison between the drinking cultures of China, Japan and Vietnam are mainly based on the criteria for comparison in Dwight B. Heath's book “Drinking Occasions: Comparative Perspectives on Alcohol and Culture” from 2012:

- 1) History of Alcohol and Alcohol Consumption
- 2) Who drinks alcohol?
- 3) What kind of alcohol do people drink?
- 4) Drinking behavior (how, where, why etc.)
- 5) Alcohol policy

After explaining the analysis criteria in the theoretical part, the drinking cultures in the selected countries are examined based on these criteria. In the following chapter the results are compared with each other. Finally every drinking culture gets related to one category of “the cultures of alcohol consumption” according to David J. Pittman (1967).

Main Facts

▪ CHINA

The Chinese drinking culture is characterized by the belief of the positive effect of drinking alcohol to one's health. Additionally alcohol consumption is closely related to literature and art forms like dancing, singing or poetry. In Chinese philosophy there is the belief that modest “moral drinking” can bring up the positive characteristics and can generate well being. Also Confucius was convinced of the positive attributes of alcohol – but he warned not to drink too much.

Alcohol consumption in China is a social activity, mainly while eating or celebrating special occasions – solely drinking alcohol, or getting drunk is disgraceful in Chinese society. Many people still do not see any necessity to give medicinal treatment to people who are addicted to alcohol – many are not aware that alcoholism is a serious health problem. That's why the treatment possibilities are very rare – especially at the landscape.

Newest changes on the Chinese alcohol market are due to the anti-corruption-campaign initiated by Xi Jinping in 2012. This is an approach against government officials' luxurious consumption in restaurants and exaggerated gifts (mostly expensive spirits). The Chinese State Council prohibited expensive spirits at official banquets. This has an immense impact on the spirits market in China.

▪ JAPAN

In Japanese culture alcohol is a lot more than just a natural stimulant: alcohol is an integral part of the “world of gods” – many shrines, especially the Matsunoo shrine in Kyoto, have a special relation to sake. There are sake gods that are worshiped to and there are patrons of alcoholic beverages.

In Japan alcohol plays a central role in business. At business dinners people drink a lot of alcohol and sing in karaoke bars – those business relations are called “mizu shobai” – what means “wet relationship”. Informal, company internal activities where a lot of alcohol is drunk to improve social relationships between colleagues and between subordinates and supervisors are called “nomikai”, meaning “drinking society”. This is a ritual in Japanese working environment. A subordinate can hardly deny an invitation to these events from his supervisor. The counterpart to the nomikai in business is the “konpa” for students. The aim is building relationships that could be important in the future.

▪ VIETNAM

In Vietnam many families in the countryside produce alcohol at home – for many of them this is an important source of income. Due to the lack of controls there are often problems with polluted alcohol.

The production of traditional alcohol in Vietnam is an important part of the Vietnamese culture – but it is declining because more and more young Vietnamese (a growing number of young women) get attracted by western alcohol brands and drinking behaviors. They mostly drink beer, although many of them do not even like the taste of beer – this shows how much the young Vietnamese seek socialization and want to be part of a group. Only the rich Vietnamese can afford expensive international brands, which have the function of a status symbol for them.

Results

The analysis shows that alcohol consumption plays a

central role in the cultures of all three countries and is dominated by men. In all three countries women drink far less than men, but due to increasing salaries, western influence and increasing female independence, the number of women drinking alcohol is rising.

In all the analyzed drinking cultures, alcohol consumption is an outlet for suppressed emotions that cannot be shown elsewhere in society.

In Chinese and Japanese the same character is used for the word “alcohol” 酒 (in Chinese: jiu, in Japanese: sake or shu). In Vietnam alcohol is called “ruou”. In all three countries, the word for alcohol is part of the names of alcoholic beverages (Baijiu, Ruou de, Ruou can, Sake etc.)

Main differences occur concerning alcohol policies. In China there exists no legal minimum age for alcohol consumption – in Japan the legal minimum age for buying and consuming alcohol is 20 years, in Vietnam it is 18 years. In contrast to China and Vietnam, it is allowed to sell alcohol in vending machines in Japan. Vietnam is the only one of these three countries that prohibits selling alcohol in the internet – in China the online business with alcohol booms.

The results of the analysis of the drinking cultures in East Asia indicate the following categorization according to Pittman (1967): The Chinese drinking culture is a permissive culture, while the Japanese and the Vietnamese drinking cultures are permissive-dysfunctional cultures. In Japan and Vietnam there is a much higher tolerance concerning drunkenness and accompanied misbehavior, than in China.

References

All references can be found in the full version of the MA thesis available at <http://othes.univie.ac.at>

About the Author

Doris Schmudermaier holds a BA degree in Sinology from the University of Vienna. With a scholarship from the Chinese embassy in Austria she studied half a year at South China Normal University in Guangzhou/China.



Kontakt:

doris.schmudermaier@gmx.at