

Imperial Hops: How Beer Traveled the World, Especially to Asia

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This is a very preliminary discussion of a book I hope to write on the globalization of beer. The first section outlines the literature and my research plan as sort of a first draft of a grant proposal intended to convince some funding agency to pay for me to travel the world drinking beer. The rest of the paper illustrates some of these ideas with three Asian case studies. I started with Asia in response to an invitation to participate in a recent SSRC Interasia Workshop in Istanbul and because the languages and meager secondary literature make it the hardest part of the project to research. There are mostly questions where the conclusions should be, and I welcome all suggestions.

In June of 2013, Turkish crowds gathered in Istanbul's Taksim Square to protest the growing authoritarianism of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Refusing to surrender their democratic freedoms, they opened bottles of Efes Pilsner and raised mock toasts to the tee-totaling Islamist politician: "Cheers, Tayyip!"¹ The preference for European-style beer, rather than the indigenous, anise-flavored liquor arak, illustrates the complex historical movements that have shaped global consumer culture, and at times, political protests. Turkish entrepreneurs founded the Efes brewery in 1969, less than a decade after guest workers first began traveling to Germany and returning home with a taste for lager beer.² This brief episode illustrates both the networks of migration, trade, and colonialism that carried European beer around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the new drinking cultures that emerged as a result.

Two of the most prominent scholarly approaches to the study of beer – the anthropology of drink and business history -- have increasingly merged within the history of consumption. The anthropological study of drinking begins with the observation that although physiological responses to alcohol are universal, the actual behaviors and meanings attributed to drinking vary widely across cultures. If there is one generalizable conclusion from the literature it is that societies develop elaborate rules to benefit from alcohol's encouragement of sociability while limiting the disruptive potential of excessive drinking.

Nevertheless, historical changes such as those accompanying colonialism and modernity can suspend the limiting rules with damaging consequences for a society.³ Meanwhile, business histories have focused on technological innovation, entrepreneurial strategies, labor histories, and marketing campaigns. A splendid example is Anne Mager's work on South African Breweries, which shows how the company negotiated both the politics of Apartheid and international competition to become a global leader, even as marketing replaced brewing at the heart of the company.⁴ In the case of Japan, Penelope Francks has examined the roots of beer consumption in traditional sake, while Harald Fuess has demonstrated the importance of German technology in the development of firms.⁵

There are also a few works from a science studies perspective using actor network theory to examine the development, particularly the ascendancy of German lager beer within Europe. E. M. Sigsworth has shown that Pasteur's findings had relatively little influence on the English brewing trade because his recommendations were either already being pursued (good hygiene) or largely rejected for cultural reasons (switching from ale to lager). When lager beer did take off in Britain, it was with German technical guidance, by way of engineering firms such as Augsburg's, L. A. Reidinger, which guided the popular brand, Tennant's. Fuess has argued that German technological assistance was crucial to the founding of Japanese brewing. Belgians, too, were seduced by the modern image lager brewing technology in the early twentieth century, and even considered banning lambic as unhygienic in the 1950s!⁶

A final approach that food studies can bring is an emphasis on taste and embodied research. Comprehending taste remains a central yet elusive goal, for it encompasses both physical and social phenomena. Identical sensory stimulants – say pints of beer drawn from the same keg – are perceived differently by the brain of each individual, but to describe those sensations, to ourselves and to others, they have to be translated into shared languages. As a result, taste must be approached from a multidisciplinary perspective, and the intersection of food studies and food science has become one of the field's most exciting frontiers. The most common approach to taste within the social sciences has been to explain collective preferences by way of social structures, most notably, Pierre Bourdieu's formulation of

taste as a means of creating and perpetuating class structures.⁷ Antoine Hennion has sought to rethink the sociology of taste through the reflexive interactions between a person or community and the object of their senses. Following these insights, Steven Shapin has called for studying taste as a form of “intersubjectivity” by way of “ethnographies – contemporary and historical – of how taste judgments come to be formed, discussed, and sometimes shared.”⁸

The introduction of beer to Asia provides a particularly interesting opportunity for such a historical ethnography. A model for this approach comes from the flavor science (and I originally hoped to do this project in collaboration with a researcher in the food science department) comes from the use of tasting panels to map the sensory profiles of foods such as the Wine Aroma Wheel, developed by chemist Ann Noble of the oenology program at the University of California, Davis. Although we cannot hold tasting panels with historical subjects, the methodologies of ethnohistory can offer insights on early encounters with beer. European brewers recorded chemical and taste evaluations of early Asian beers, thus affording a sense of the ways they differed from European models – most often, they were described as extremely bland! Ethnographies and oral histories can also be used, albeit with caution. One informant recalled first consuming beer as a youth in Maoist-era China and thinking at the time that it tasted like “horse piss.” Later, as he and his friends drank beer more frequently, they came to perceive its taste within the category of “grain.”⁹ Such responses can be interpreted in the cultural context of flavor principles, for example, the Chinese quest for a balanced meal in which grains provide a neutral – bland – foundation for more highly flavored relishes.¹⁰ In these ways, we can begin to appreciate how new foods come to fit within established culinary systems.

My goal then is to write a global history of beer over the past two hundred years that considers taste as an agent in the development of a transnational brewing profession and of local drinking cultures. Because fermented grain beverages were widely consumed in societies around the world, encounters with European brewing traditions offer a rich potential laboratory for comparative historical research in cross-cultural exchange. Of course, the problem with cultural history on a global scale is to achieve the local knowledge and linguistic skills for a proper ethnography of drinking cultures. A number of friends have

already volunteered to collaborate on the research, and I intend to exploit them mercilessly. Possible case studies include Mexico, Bolivia, and the United States. South Africa is also a natural choice because of its rich scholarly literature. Japan, China, and India are all very appealing case studies, but whether I can make them work remains to be seen. I would also like to include a Southern European example such as Spain or Italy. The other side of my research plan, taking a cue from George Marcus, is to follow the brewers. I have already begun reading in trade journals on three continents (and I have found a Japanese journal as well). I also hope to examine the development of international markets for malt and hops, the later centered in particular on Nuremberg. I am coming to appreciate that the contemporary, anti-globalization movement of craft beer actually grows out of and depends upon technology developed for mass production, international markets for hops and malts, standardized beer styles, and global exchanges between craft brewers, often facilitated by the internet.

Ale and Empire in India

India may be the only Asian country to have inspired a modern beer style, India Pale Ale, spiked with a heavy dose of hops as a preservative for the long voyage from England, but colonial officials did little to encourage a taste for beer among most Indians. Moreover, Mohandas Gandhi issued strong warnings against alcohol, following in a long tradition of Hindu and Muslim moralism. The Indian Constitution actually enshrines prohibition, at least as a goal, while Pakistan and Bangladesh, partitioned from India at Independence and subsequently divided by civil war, forbid the consumption of alcohol by Muslims.¹¹ In practice, religious injunctions have not stopped drinking, but rather driven it underground as a pathological habit. Beer has become a symbol of western modernity throughout the subcontinent, embraced by those who challenge traditional culture, but for many consumers, the taste for beer seems to focus more on alcohol than either malt or hops.

The historian Alan Pryor has interpreted India pale ale as an attempt to conquer and commodify India, particularly its tropical climate, through the superiority of English manufacturing.¹² Although scholars have noted the contributions of tropical medicine to the imperial project, the importance of beer

has often been overlooked. A survey of British military posts by W. H. Sykes in 1847 found an association between beer consumption and decreased mortality among the troops.¹³ A common saying among the British in India wryly admitted that “were we driven from the country, no trace, no monument, of our rule would exist ten years afterward, beyond the empty beer-bottles we had left behind us.”¹⁴

Although colonial demand benefitted the brewers of Burton-on-Trent, India merchants sought to encourage local brewing in order to save the considerable expense of shipping. The tropical heat posed a significant challenge to colonial brewing, since bacterial contamination could spread quickly through the fermentation tanks. Summer monsoons also hindered attempts to grow hops in India.¹⁵ Colonial brewers initiated their first efforts in the cooler climates of the hill stations, and even established experimental hops plantations in Kashmir, although the yields were poor. By the 1880s, a dozen breweries operated in the northwestern province of Punjab, which was also the leading source of malted barley. Beer was also made successfully on a smaller scale at Bangalore, Bombay, Lucknow, and Madras.¹⁶

Another source of competition for the Burton brewers was Germany, which launched a significant Indian Ocean trade in the early 1880s. The Beck’s brewery had been founded in Bremen a decade earlier, largely for the export trade, and by 1890, according to the historian Hermann Kellenbenz, it was outselling the leading India Pale Ale, Bass, in the Calcutta market. By the eve of World War I, German brewers were selling 43,000,000 liters of beer annually in the British colony.¹⁷ Although there are many possible reasons for the shifting markets, colonial administrator J. E. O’Conor attributed the growing preference for German lagers over British ales to their lighter body, which he considered more accommodated to the tropical environment. He reported that Bass had even begun to brew a lighter beer to compete with the German imports.¹⁸

Evidence is mixed on the native consumption of beer, either ale or lager. In 1908, Sir George Watt observed: “Consumption of country-brewed (English) beer and ale by the Natives of India is not important, though in some provinces it is more extensive than in others.”¹⁹ He cited the Punjab and the hill districts around Madras as areas of growing use. That same year, the colonial government doubled the customs duty on imported beer and other alcohol to discourage Indian subjects from drinking, and

perhaps because Germans had captured so much of the market. That Germans alone were importing by this point twice as much beer as the entire colony had downed three decades earlier suggests a growing native market since the European population of India had not increased at a comparable rate.²⁰

Proximity to British sources was surely a factor in native drinking; for example, martial castes, such as the Rajputs, reportedly acquired a taste for alcohol while serving as *sepoys* in the British Army. Admittedly, an anthropological study of a Rajput community in northern India during the 1970s recorded the consumption of hard liquors ranging from gin to industrial spirits – virtually everything except beer. But this was premised on the desire to get drunk as quickly as possible and reflected the privations of agrarian villages. Soldiers with access to British canteens may have had very different preferences.²¹ Lascar seamen who served in the British navy and often married British women as well as the nearly one million Indian troops who served overseas during World War I would also be possible sources for researching a developing Indian taste for beer.

The decades of the Independence movement, when nationalist sentiment grew among potential beer drinkers of the urban middle classes, would seem to have been fallow ground for colonial brewers. The Indian National Congress vigorously opposed western drink, and the British made little attempt to educate a generation of native brewers prior to 1947. The entrepreneur Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw has described her father's experience as India's first brew master. R. I. Mazumdar graduated from the Brewing School at Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh, in 1946, just in time to take over as general manager of United Breweries. The firm was constituted in 1915 through the merger of small regional breweries catering primarily to British troops stationed in Nilgiris, Madras, and Bangalore. An Anglicized chap, "Mazzy" began each day "mashing-in" the brew, then played a round of golf before breakfast. Mazumdar-Shaw also studied brewing, at Ballarat College, near Melbourne, but discouraged by masculine bias, she left the trade in the late 1970s during a brief experiment with national prohibition and founded India's leading biotechnology firm, Biocon.²²

United Breweries became a lynchpin of the Indian economy under the sway of Jawaharlal Nehru, reckoned by historians as the period from Independence to the assassination of his daughter and

successor, Indira Gandhi, in 1984. The system of state-led industrialization and bureaucratic licensing was exemplified by Vital Mallya, who bought out the British interests in United Breweries in 1947 at the age of just twenty two. Over the following decades, he purchased a number of other regional breweries, establishing Kingfisher Lager as the premier national brand under Mazumdar's careful guidance. Mallya also expanded into a broad range of industries, including pharmaceuticals and agrochemicals. Whether because of a lack of focus or difficult market conditions, foreign rivals such as South African Breweries considered United Breweries to be backward in production capacity.²³

The most significant challenge for Indian brewers was not international competition but rather building domestic markets. In the decades of Nehruvian development, Indian manufacturers created sophisticated distribution networks to penetrate the vast up-country. The "stockist" system, for example, contracted out with wholesalers the tasks of transport, warehousing, and assisting retailers within defined territories. Ethnic groups specialized in particular goods; Parsees apparently dominated the sale of alcohol for United Breweries and its leading competitor, Shaw Wallace.²⁴ Even the most efficient distribution systems could not offset low disposable incomes across rural India. Punjabi officials complained about persistent bootlegging of distilled spirits despite having spent large sums in the early 1970s to subsidize breweries, suggesting that price and potency remained important considerations for consumers.²⁵ Firms touted the great strength of their brands such as Mysore Breweries Limited's "Knock Out/High Punch/Strong Beer," while carefully staying below legal limits, variously 5 and 8 percent alcohol.

Meanwhile in Pakistan, the Murree Brewery faced even greater hurdles than those of India's United Brewery. Founded in 1860 at the Punjabi hill station of Murree, the company prospered during World War II selling beer to Allied soldiers, but then retrenched with the coming of Independence. Pakistan's Muslim majority was forbidden by law from drinking, but they could buy alcohol for medicinal purposes with a doctor's certificate, an exception that kept Murree in business for three decades. In 1977, the populist Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto declared complete prohibition, and although Murree had diversified into soft drinks, the company was closed down. Pakistani courts overturned the closure as an attack on minority rights since the company's owners were Parsees, but they

could sell only to non-Muslims through a network of about seventy licensed shops for the entire country. Bootlegging and illicit drinking became widespread, particularly among the Anglophone elite, including the former president Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, whose father had first declared prohibition. Even Murree's current brewmaster, Fakher Mahmood, is Muslim. Nevertheless, the ongoing Islamification of the Pakistani countryside has exacerbated cultural—and drinking—divisions.²⁶

Post-Nehruvian economic liberalization also reinforced the urban, elite bias of beer consumption in the subcontinent. A recent ethnographic study from the southern state of Kerala noted the aspirational image of beer among impoverished male youth, who associated it with a sense of intense enjoyment (*ash-push* in the local idiom): “You go to a beer parlor and have beer, that is *ash-push*. A Yamaha bike, money in the hand, a line [slang for a relationship with a girl], that's it, in between you go to a beer parlor and you sip two beers, you have plenty of friends, you enjoy life.”²⁷ The greatest potential for expansion may currently lie at the high end of the market. One languishing brand, Sand Pipers, increased consumption tenfold in the mid-1990s by replacing brown bottles with green, wrapping gold foil over the stopper, and changing its slogan to the “champagne of beers.”²⁸

Tastes for beer have also been exchanged through South Asian diasporic communities in the West. One of the fastest growing brands in India, Cobra Beer, was conceived for the overseas restaurant market by Karan Bilimoria while studying law in the United Kingdom in the 1980s. To minimize the initial investment, he began brewing under contract in Bangalore in 1990, and when sales took off, moved production to the U.K. to save on transport. Cobra entered the Indian market in 2004, licensed by Mount Shivalik Group, the country's largest independent brewer, and acquired a premium status based on its sales abroad. Bilimoria's experience illustrates how technological standardization and tight margins have made brand management critical for success within the global brewing industry.²⁹ Murree, hoping for a share of the lucrative overseas market, which was actually run in large part by Pakistani restaurateurs, created a joint venture with a Czech brewery to evade Pakistan's ban on alcohol exports. The company's chief executive, Isphanyar Bhandara, explained: “I would like to get this very famous name – it is, after

all, a British legacy – on to the streets of the UK. My aim would be to put it in the ethnic restaurants and give the Indian beers, which totally suck, a run for their money.”³⁰

The British legacy of imperial nostalgia has also loomed large for beer drinkers of South Asia. Punjabis often drink beer and wine at roadside stalls, perhaps using travel as a way to evade moral restrictions, and these informal pubs are often decorated in an English-style, although whether they represent colonial survivals or more recent invention is unknown.³¹

The geography of consumption is quite striking: southerners drink nearly half of all the beer in India, while easterners largely abstain, and Gujarat, in the west, still maintains legal prohibition. Bangalore, the undisputed beer capital of India, has the highest concentration of industrial breweries and even a craft brewing scene.³² Regional differences offer a promising area for future research. Bangalore is a particularly prosperous, western-oriented city with a thriving technology industry, yet it is far from the only such city in India. Although food historians too readily jump to climatic and moralistic explanations, regional variations of taste may ultimately prove more significant. With annual consumption about half a liter per capita, beer has very limited reach in contemporary India, while drinking in Pakistan and Bangladesh can only be glimpsed through the shroud of prohibition.³³ It is associated with a modern, westernized lifestyle and a rejection of Hindu and Muslim orthodoxy, yet there is surprisingly limited evidence of influence from British colonialism. Although only a cosmopolitan minority has taken to beer in India, the Japanese meanwhile made themselves Asia’s leading brewers.

The Japanese: Brew Masters of Asia

Beer entered Japan during the Meiji Reformation as part of a government-sponsored program of westernization that extended from military technology to food culture. Despite this official encouragement, the new beverage gained wide acceptance only a generation later, after it had been transformed by native brew masters. The consumption of beer finally surpassed that of the indigenous sake during the postwar era of affluence, giving Japan the highest per capita rate of consumption in Asia. The Japanese not only imbued beer with new cultural associations and tastes, they also made important

contributions to the international professionalization of the brewing trade, and worked assiduously to export beer throughout Asia.

The first Japanese encounters with beer were highly unfavorable. When Commodore Matthew Perry opened some bottles to celebrate the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1854, the Japanese described it as “bitter” and compared it to “horse piss.”³⁴ For the first few decades, imports were dominated by British brands such as Allsopp, Bass, and Cooper. In 1870, an American citizen of Norwegian birth, William Copeland opened the Spring Valley Brewery near Yokohama, but it went bankrupt after a decade.³⁵ The historian Harald Fuess has demonstrated the crucial role of German technical skill and beer styles in the founding of the Japanese brewing industry. The Meiji government recruited German experts to run the model brewery at the Hokkaido Agricultural Research Station, and the local managers studied in Germany. The Japan Brewing Company, which took over Copeland’s Spring Valley, specified within its business plan that the company retain a “German brew master,” although the company was financed and managed by English interests. This was not actually unusual, for English investors were eagerly purchasing shares in the growing global brewing industry at the end of the nineteenth century, even though the products were primarily Central European beers. The choice may well reflect an understanding that light, clear, lagers would better suit the local taste preferences. German brewers were already sweeping markets throughout the Americas and also Asia by this point, as the Indian case demonstrates.³⁶

Large business concerns, known as zaibatsu, consolidated the brewing industry in the first decade of the twentieth century. Brewing fit well in the long-term business plans of the zaibatsu, which began as commercial ventures in the nineteenth century, then relied on imported technology to develop progressively heavier industry in the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1907, Mitsubishi acquired the Japan Brewing Company, which in 1899 had renamed its brand “Kirin,” after the mythological beast, half horse and half dragon. Mitsubishi’s investment may well have been spurred by fear of losing out to its great rival Mitsui, which two years earlier had merged the struggling regional independents Sapporo (privatized in 1886) and Asahi (from Osaka) with its Tokyo-based Yebisu brand to form the Dai Nippon Brewing Company.³⁷ Magoshi Kyōhei, founding president of Dai Nippon, was a stalwart of the Mitsui

shipping line, having overseen the Yokohama office for nearly two decades before being transferred to run the firm's brewery in 1892. Heralded as Japan's "Beer King," he gave his hobby as *cha-no-yu* (tea ceremony).³⁸

Japanese scientists and technicians were soon making original contributions to the professionalization of the international brewing trade. In 1910, for example, a biochemist named K. Saïto published the results of his experiments in enzyme production in an international journal. His footnotes reveal a multilingual scientist conversant in the scholarly literatures of three continents. In the mid-1930s, brewing expert Komazawa Toshio was contracted by the Japanese owners of a former Russian brewery in Manchuria to modernize production and to introduce more favored light beers such as pilsner. The report of his work shows a technical mastery of all stages of production, from chemical analysis of the malts from local barley to graphs of foam dissipation on the resulting beers.³⁹

During this same period, hesitantly in the 1890s, and with greater emphasis under the reign of the Taishō Emperor from 1912 to 1926, beer became a marker of middle-class life in Japan. Yebisu opened the first beer hall in the fashionable Ginza district of Tokyo on the eve of the new century, and imitators quickly sprang up.⁴⁰ Drinking beer became popular among the new breed of young salary-men, but it was not an exclusively masculine activity in Taishō Japan; women could likewise indulge the experience of modern life over a bottle. Although men dominated the ritual life of corporate and political drinking, family occasions were also observed with alcohol. Nakano Makiko, a merchant's wife from Kyoto, described in her diary the celebration of her brother's wedding in 1910: "We went 'modern' this time, and entertained them with München beer and bananas."⁴¹ Women also came into contact with beer and other western drinks through their work as café waitresses. Advertisements featuring women in traditional kimonos or flappers with bobbed hair drinking beer were not intended merely as sexual enticements for men. They also sought to introduce newly independent women to this perquisite of modernity.⁴²

Although this first generation of mass market beer drinkers clearly viewed the beverage as a form of western modernity, the taste was already becoming localized to Japanese preferences. Fuess has noted the influence of light, German-style lagers in shaping Japanese tastes, yet one cannot discount the

tendency of local brew masters to adjust the mix to their own preferences. Foreign travelers certainly suspected as much; one journalist complained of being unable to buy his preferred Kirin and having to make do with a Yebisu, which was “manufactured by a Japanese company employing no Europeans.”⁴³ An analysis of Japanese brands by western brewers in 1897 concluded: “The concentration corresponds with that of Bavarian lager beer, and the high attenuation with that of North German beers. In flavor, the Yebisu is vinous, whilst that of the Asahi beer recalls apple must (due to pasteurization).”⁴⁴ The flavor comparisons do not sound complementary, perhaps a result of stale samples, yet this would also be consistent with the emergence of a distinctively Japanese beer profile, which persists to this day.

Beer consumption skyrocketed after World War II, and it soon replaced sake as the national drink. One interesting sign of localization appeared in a television advertisement for Sapporo entitled “Legendary Bīru,” which fantastically depicted each step of the production process using icons of Japanese culture. One continuous panning shot moved from samurai warriors riding past a mountain stream to men carrying waterbuckets over Zen-inspired cliffs and waterfalls, kimono-clad women sifting barley, sumo wrestlers facing off beside a malting floor, dragons flaming a copper kettle, and taiko drummers pounding barrels (surely not ideal conditions for lagering!), before culminating with a rooftop party set against a neon cityscape.⁴⁵

The Sapporo advertisements reflect a long history of combining Japanese and foreign elements in the marketing of beer. Taishō-era posters combined modern scenes of Japanese golfers, flappers, and cabaret dancers with more traditional geisha, thereby rooting cosmopolitan novelties in the lineage of the nation. In a similar fashion, when “Beer King” Magoshi Kyōhei listed his hobby as tea ceremony, it signaled not that he lacked a taste for beer, but rather that his connoisseurship of a traditional Japanese beverage would help to ensure that Dai Nippon beers would meet the approval of his compatriots.

Indeed, beer reflects the blend of traditional and modern culture that has shaped images of Japanese society. Although producers and consumers of beer did not respond immediately to Meiji westernization programs, within a generation they had developed a distinctive taste for beer, one focused more on the sweetness of malt rather than the bitterness of hops, and they began to proselytize throughout

Asia. By the 1980s, they even began to export tastes back to the west with “dry beer,” which was first marketed by Asahi and then widely imitated by mass market brewers in the United States.⁴⁶ Yet however great their predilection, they were eventually surpassed by China as it became the largest market for beer in the world.

Awakening the Chinese Dragon’s Thirst

“Perhaps naïvely, the world outside China, looking in, said of many industries: ‘If every Chinese only buy one . . .’ The beer industry was no different.”⁴⁷ This observation, by the economist Bai Junfei and his co-authors, reflects not only a flood of foreign investment that swept across China during the 1990s, but also a considerable outpouring of management research attempting to explain the failure of those ventures.⁴⁸ Although technical skills have certainly mattered for Chinese brewers, understanding local consumers has been even more important. Bai concluded: “foreign firms, with their expertise honed in other markets, just do not ‘get’ the China beer market.”⁴⁹ These studies, while valuable, focus on the massive growth of consumption beginning in the 1980s and therefore gloss over the origins of those Chinese characteristics. Although introduced by foreign imperialists, beer has been associated, for the better part of a century, with Chinese nationalism.

The “treaty ports” of Hong Kong and Shanghai, established in 1842 after the First Opium War, opened windows for Asians onto western practices of modernity, yet there is relatively little evidence for Chinese consumption of beer in the nineteenth century. Tsingtao has passed into legend as the first beer brewed in Germany’s Shandong colony in 1903, but the Russians had founded a brewery in the city of Harbin a few years earlier.⁵⁰ Beer helped to smooth intercultural relations between Chinese and Germans in Qingdao. The sociologist George Steinmetz has argued that longstanding German intellectual Sinophilia quickly overcame the attitudes of scientific racism, prompting a shift from overt colonial rule to more subtle efforts at inculcating European culture among the Chinese elite. Schools were integrated, intermarriage was allowed, and beer drinking provided a form of cross-cultural commensality, as postcards from the period illustrate. One photograph captures a railway car meeting between German and

Qing officials, the former with Chinese teacups while the latter hold beer glasses. The drinking arrangements were reversed in a domestic scene, drawn by a local artist, of a uniformed German soldier with a beer bottle and his Chinese wife sipping tea.⁵¹

The Germans succeeded, as cultural if not religious missionaries, in spreading the word about beer, but the primary beneficiaries seem to have been Japanese brewers. In 1906, a journalist reported: “In China as in Korea, the local population is turning ever more toward a taste for beer (Biergenuß).”⁵² Nevertheless, an Austrian consul cautioned soon thereafter that German beer in China went mostly to foreigners, while Japanese imports were consumed by the local population and by resident Japanese merchants.⁵³ With the outbreak of World War I, Japan joined the Allies and occupied Qingdao in December 1914, and two years later, Dai Nippon took over the Germania Brauerei as a base for marketing to the commercial ports of China. Not until 1922 did the city finally returned to Chinese authority.⁵⁴

The historian Zhigou Yang has examined the ways that Japanese used Chinese symbolism to market beer to the local population, even while preserving the historical link with German brewers. Dai Nippon emphasized the local source of the water at Mount Laoshan, a renowned Daoist sanctuary. The company also replaced the German brand names with Chinese phrases such as “Fortune and Longevity.” Finally, their advertisements drew on Chinese literature, for example, the classical novel *Romance of Three Kingdoms*.⁵⁵

Shanghai, known as the most westernized of treaty ports, provides an ideal location to explore the Chinese beer drinking cultures emerging within the middling sectors in the early twentieth century. Hanchao Lu’s social history of shantytowns and “alleyway houses” describes *pulou guan* (proletarian restaurants, from a pidgin English term) as centers of non-elite sociability and consumption. These affordable establishments, specializing in porridge, noodles, or “vegetable rice,” attracted a range of clients from rickshaw pullers and coolies to students and white-collar workers. They did not serve alcohol but did permit customers to bring their own bottles from wine shops, which could always be found nearby. In addition to a range of Chinese cooking wines and distilled spirits, these shops also featured

bottled beer. If customers could not afford a full bottle, they had the option of purchasing amounts as small as 50 grams, although they had to provide their own cups.⁵⁶ Beer thus seems to have been considered a foodstuff, although it may also have been used for medicinal purposes. I cannot yet say how it was advertised in Shanghai, much less what it meant to consumers. Beer even seems to have acquired a nationalist element, which may have encouraged the development of local brewing. A boycott of Japanese goods organized in 1920 to protest the continued occupation of Qingdao inspired a group of Shanghai businessmen to attempt to import brewing machinery and expertise from the United States.⁵⁷

The history of beer during the Maoist period, from 1949 to 1976, remains largely unexamined. As Yang observes, the People's Republic of China maintained the Qingdao Brewery as an export-oriented firm, selling to Chinese consumers in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, thereby providing a source of valuable foreign exchange during Cold War isolation.⁵⁸ By the end of the Cultural Revolution, about ninety breweries were reportedly operating in China, so clearly it had been localized enough to have fit with Maoist principles of necessity not luxury.

Just how it fit in to the drinking cultures of Maoist China are equally difficult to reconstruct. Even a single description of beer as tasting like "horse piss" could be open to multiple interpretations. One could see it as an indication of inedibility, or it may simply have referred to the inferior quality of production under the autarchic regime. Even today, most Chinese breweries fall far short of the technical standards of global firms.⁵⁹

The economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 led to a rapid growth in beer production. "Literally hundreds of small breweries emerged from the rice paddies," explained Bai. "Most were state owned at the county level. A county's beer factory frequently was its status symbol."⁶⁰ Growing wealth has given rise to tremendous disparities of class. In some impoverished regions of the countryside, beer has become a symbol of the despotic rule of local party officials. The ethnographer Sally Sargeson recorded the complaints of one Zhejiang villager: "In the past, the countryside was well governed, but the officials we've got now spend all their time smoking expensive cigarettes and drinking beer that costs 2.5 *yuan* a bottle."⁶¹ Even in Beijing, beer was difficult to obtain in the early reform

period, and profiteers would sell bottles surreptitiously from the back of brewery trucks. The lucky few who could purchase beer faced a game of Russian roulette; by some estimates, roughly one inferior glass bottle in every case exploded before it could be consumed. Wary drinkers soon learned to fill plastic bags with beer from the kegs displayed prominently in corner stores across urban China.⁶²

As in India, the diasporic community has been important for the development of Chinese tastes for beer. Already in the early decades of the twentieth century, overseas Chinese merchants were important in the spread—or the boycott—of Tsing Tao beer. During the Communist era, the company provided a valuable source of foreign exchange by selling to Chinese in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. The contemporary craft beer movement has likewise been driven by Chinese who have spent time in North America. Also like India, taste would appear at first sight to be a secondary consideration in China. Breweries source their malt almost entirely based on price and replace barley with heavy percentages of adjunct grains. Bai Junfei concluded that “China’s beer is fairly undifferentiated. We ran a blind-taste test of the top ten beers and found that almost no one could identify what they believed was their favourite beer.”⁶³ The Qingdao International Beer Festival made scarcely any provision for tasting beer, at least in the western sense of a connoisseur sampling different varieties. The smallest amount of beer that could be purchased at most of the tents was a 1.25-liter pitcher, clearly intended for the communal drinking that predominated at the festival. In any event, the beer vied for attention with the food, especially grilled seafood skewers, which were popular in this beach resort town. Yet from a Chinese perspective, a bland taste could actually have been an advantage if beer had filled a neutral position within the meal.

Conclusion

In surveying the advance of western beer across Asia over the span of nearly two centuries, the cultural power of localization becomes clearly evident, which comes as little surprise given the long history of Asian civilizations absorbing foreign conquerors. Japan was the most aggressive nation in seeking out beer as part of a modernizing project and eventually using the beverage as a tool for its own imperial ambitions. The limited available evidence suggests that nationalism also had a prominent role in

the initial adoption of beer by urban sectors of Chinese society in the early twentieth century. India was the most reluctant of the three societies to embrace beer because of a long history of religious temperance, but beer has become a symbol of modernity even on the subcontinent. This comparison therefore reveals imperialism to have been relatively unimportant in dictating the spread of beer to Asia.

Taste may be far more important to understanding the Asian reception of beer. Japanese consumers rejected their initial encounter with British pale ale in favor of lighter German lager, but once Japanese had learned the secrets of the brew master, they took the beer even further to accommodate local preferences. The Chinese evidently share this taste, although it will be important to look for particular differences between the two cultures. South Asia, by contrast, has very different flavor principles, and attention to them is important to understanding local preferences. If the sharply bitter flavors of India Pale Ale have found little appeal, perhaps a spicier Belgian *saison* may prove more marketable in the future. There may also be significant regional differences that help explain the greater appreciation for beer in South India or differences between, say, Qingdao and Hong Kong. The seasonality of beer consumption is another point that may connect traditional ideas about health with drinking cultures. Future research along these lines is essential to the goal of constructing a historical ethnography of beer.

The preliminary evidence also suggests that the scholarly dichotomy between cultural imperialism and localization may not fully explain the social meanings of beer in Asia. The historian Mark Swislocki, writing about food in Shanghai since the late imperial era, demonstrates the active construction of regionalism within Chinese culinary identities in opposition to western influences, even in that most westernized of Chinese cities.⁶⁴ Beer clearly maintained an identity distinct from Chinese or other Asian traditions, but it has been incorporated into nationalist imagery, and not only in advertising campaigns. Indeed, beer has become a subject for nation-building efforts in Asia precisely because of its cosmopolitanism, its distinctiveness from the nation, which could simultaneously grant modern status to nationalist ideologues and support their program of transcending regional rivalries, all in a frothy glass.

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