

An Examination of the Attitudes and Behaviours of Ethnic Chinese Wine Consumers: An Exploratory Study

**Simon Somogyi, Elton Li, Trent Johnson, Johan Bruwer, Susan Bastian
University of Adelaide**

Abstract

Qualitative focus group interviews were performed with ethnic Chinese wine consumers residing in Adelaide, South Australia. The purpose of the interviews was to explore wine related attitudes and behaviours unique to Chinese consumers. The major findings of the study revealed a preference for sweet wine styles and cork closed wine bottles. The practise of mixing red wine with lemonade was discussed. Participants believed that wine was good for their health particularly in maintaining a healthy cardiovascular system and a medicinal administration of wine for a positive health effect was observed.

Introduction and Literature Review

The Chinese wine market is in its infancy compared to the markets of other wine producing and consuming countries. Per capita, the Chinese consumed 22 litres of beer, 3.6 litres of spirits and only 0.4 litres of wine in 2005 (Wittwer and Rothfield, 2006). This level of wine consumption is miniscule compared to other countries. By contrast, in 2005, per capita wine consumption in France, Spain, Australia and the USA was 53.7, 33.7, 22.8 and 8.5 litres respectively (Wittwer and Rothfield, 2006).

MCM Wines (2004) and Knott (2004) attributed the low wine consumption to low levels of wine knowledge among Chinese wine consumers and suggested more wine education is required to increase consumption. However, current consumption volumes have doubled over the last ten years, albeit off a low base (Wittwer and Rothfield, 2006). This increase has been attributed to the positive health connotations of wine (Levin, 2004; Vertume International, 2004; Guinand, 2005; Liu and Murphy, 2007), the influence of Western cultural practices (Wine in China, 2000; Foodtechnology.com, 2004) and the rise in average incomes (Wine in China, 2000).

There seems to be acceptance that Chinese wine consumers prefer fruity red wine styles with a degree of sweetness as distinct from dry tannic styles or white styles (Regan, 2000; Dewald, 2003; Guinand, 2005; MCM Wines, 2004). Somogyi *et al* (2007) found a positive relationship between sweetness levels and taste preference score in a panel of Chinese wine consumers. Chinese wine consumption practices may also be different to Western ones. For example, the practice of “downing” a glass of wine in one fell swoop and the practice of mixing red wine with lemonade (Jun, 2003; Guinand, 2005). Famously, in the 1990s former Chinese premier Li Peng used lemonade to make wine sweeter (Regan, 2000; Guinand, 2005). Zhao (2003) related the story of bottles of Chateau Lafite-Rothchild being opened and poured into jugs and subsequently topped up with lemonade. Regan (2000) recounted the story of young, “trendy” Chinese men and women meeting in bars and sipping cocktails made of red wine and lemonade. MCM Wines (2004) attributed the practice to consumers’ tastes and wine knowledge being in a developmental stage. However, much of the information regarding this

phenomenon is anecdotal in nature and it has yet to be investigated why Chinese wine consumers undertake this practice. In a 2007 study, Somogyi *et al* (2007) found that red wine and lemonade cocktail styles of wines are preferred by a panel of ethnic Chinese wine consumers and that higher concentration lemonade mixed wines are preferred over lower concentration lemonade mixed wines.

Wine is perceived in China as socially and culturally sophisticated and is used as a status symbol to aid one's social standing (Zhao, 2003). Higher income young Chinese buy foreign wines to display their "elegance", as foreign wines carry a certain cachet and mystique distinct from Chinese products (Levin, 2002). Wine is also considered more masculine than feminine, and Bretherton and Carswell (2001) suggested targeting male Chinese consumers. Red wine is also considered to be lucky due to the connotation of "good fortune" that is associated with the colour red (Liu and Murphy 2007). Chinese cultural traits such as risk avoidance influence purchasing decisions. Lowe and Corkindale (1998, p.861) suggested that Chinese consumers are less likely to deviate from the "norm" than Australian consumers, and thus are "...less likely than Australian consumers to purchase 'new products' and when purchasing new products those with familiar brands names were more influential in the purchasing decision making process". This may demonstrate that Chinese consumers exhibit higher levels of risk avoidance than Western consumers. While no literature regarding the risk reduction strategies of Chinese wine consumers is available, Johnson and Bruwer (2004) suggested that wine consumers in general employ six generic risk reduction strategies (RRS). These include purchasing a "safe" or familiar brand, trying before buying, seeking information before buying, using price as an indicator of quality, seeking reassurance from friends/colleagues and purchasing a well known brand. Balestrini and Gamble (2006) added to the argument by stating that Chinese consumers are more likely to use extrinsic cues (such as price or brand name) than intrinsic cues (for example grape variety and wine style) when evaluating wine quality. It is reasonable to assume that ethnic Chinese wine consumers would also employ these RRS and cues when purchasing wine products.

The basis of the high levels of risk avoidance exhibited by Chinese can be attributed to the collective nature of Chinese culture. This is highlighted by Zhou, Chenting and Yeqing (2001) who suggested that China is typically collectivistic and people are expected to abide to group norms, with risk taking regarded as a challenge to the groups' interests and existence and therefore often discouraged. Zhang and Neelankavil (1995) noted that in Western cultures individuals prefer independent relationships to one another, whereas in the more collectivistic Asian culture individuals are more likely to have interdependent relationships with one another within a collective. The group sets the tone and style of the members in Chinese culture (Sun, Horn and Merritt, 2004), in contrast to Western individualistic lifestyles and the resentment of conformity.

The discussion above highlighted a number of Chinese consumer behavioural traits, many of which were anecdotally based. The purpose of this study was to explore these traits, in particular the preferences for sweet wine styles and bottle closures, the reasons for mixing red wine with lemonade, health related wine issues and the influence of collectivism and risk reduction on wine related consumer behaviour.

Methodology

This was an exploratory study involving focus groups interviews. A focus group is a semi-structured interview that involves six to 10 participants with a moderator introducing topics that are discussed by the participants (Zikmund and Babin, 2007). The target population was Chinese born wine consumers, over 18 years of age, residing in the Adelaide metropolitan area in South Australia. Some 36 participants were recruited by a marketing research firm using a nonprobability sampling technique. The participants were segmented into four groups based on age and sex: males under 45 years of age (Group A), males over 45 years of age (Group B), females under 45 years of age (Group C) and females over 45 years of age (Group D). The four focus group sessions were audio and video recorded with the audio recordings subsequently transcribed and analysed using the computer program HyperResearch (Version 2.6). HyperResearch is a computer program able to analyse and highlight words, sentences and phrases (from transcription) and categorise them (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis and Kinder, 1991).

Highlights of Results and Discussion

The focus group interviews revealed numerous topics of interest regarding ethnic Chinese wine consumers' behaviours and consumption patterns. Of particular interest was the high frequency of discussion regarding the notions that "wine is good for one's health", "liking for sweet wines" and "mixing red wine with soft drinks". Participants commented that wine was beneficial to one's blood, aiding blood recycling and circulation and helped in making one fall asleep. Participants' comments regarding the technique with which they consume wine were of particular interest. They mentioned that they consumed wine in a measured, medicinal fashion similar to the consumption of medicines and also commented that they believed red wine was particularly good for their health. Participants' representative comments included:

Group A: *"...reason (for drinking) maybe for health...everyday I consume a little cup"; "...wine is good for sleep"; "...Ah...(wine) good for blood recycling"*

Group B: *"...drink a glass of red wine before sleep and it helps the body"; "...I have been indoctrinated that red wine has more antioxidants it can prevent cancer"; "...I think red wine is best with the glycerols... it helps blood circulation"*

Group C: *"...wine drink because (we think), a bottle of wine everyday is good for you body"; "... (wine) helps with blood recycling"; "... makes you feel warm and you have a good sleep"*

Group D: *"... but sometimes I can't sleep and I have to drink wine"; "...I can't sleep and I think ah...I got to drink wine"; "...good for the blood....moving...circulation"*

As previously noted, little information is available regarding the issue of Chinese wine taste preferences, in particular sweet or dry wine style preferences. Participants discussed this issue and some of their representative comments included:

Group A: *"...I like some sweet wine"; "Yeah...(I) prefer sweet wines"*

Group B: *"...I think for Asian people we like sweet wines...that's what I like"; "I like sweet wines but not too sweet"*

Group C: *“...I like the yellow one...I think it is sweet wine”; “When I buy wine I don’t like to buy wine that says dry...so I like the sweeter wine”*

Group D: *“...I just ask the question (of the sales assistant) is it sweet?”*

The literature noted anecdotally that Chinese wine consumers drank a mixture of wine and soft-drinks and it was thus of interest to explore whether participants undertook this practice and their reasons for doing so. Examples of the participants’ comments on this topic included:

Group A: *“...we often mix with Sprite (lemonade) with red wine because (it) can drink easier”; “...because red wine is a little bitter, so put the Sprite to make it feel better”*

Group C: *“...we put Sprite into red wine because we want to make the sweet taste”*

Group D: *“...a lot of them mix lemonade into red wine...as it just tastes sweeter and makes it less alcoholic as well”*

The study participants made a number of comments regarding wine bottle closures. These numerous comments included:

Group B: *“...I don’t know if it is a snobbish view, but I consider screw cap is not really quality wine...high quality, expensive wine must have a cork”; “...I think the cork ones are better as it allows you to store a wine longer”*

Group C: *“...If it’s red wine, cork, if it’s white wine twist (screw cap)”*

Group D: *“... Yes I prefer screw on...it’s easier to open”*

The themes discussed by participants may assist in the development of wine marketing strategies for China. Some 24 comments from study participants were related to the view that wine is good for one’s health. This belief concurs with that of U.S consumers who believe wine to be a healthy drink (Olsen, Thach and Nowak, 2006). Participants from all groups commented that wine was good for their blood, aiding circulation and contained antioxidants that reduce cholesterol. The comments regarding blood circulation are of particular interest and may stem from participants’ experience with Chinese medicine where treatments are given to improve circulation (Shi *et al*, 1989; Lee, 2000). The comments regarding antioxidant effects that reduce cholesterol may originate from their experiences with Western medicine whereby red wine consumption can reduce cholesterol. This phenomenon was first brought to the general public’s notice as the French Paradox (Goldberg *et al.*,2001). Therefore participants’ comments relating to circulation and antioxidant effects exhibit their experience with elements of both Western and Eastern medicine. Participants, except from group B, commented that wine was good for inducing sleep and make one feel warm in winter. The comments regarding wine consumption were noticed to have “measured” tendencies in relation to the method of consumption. Participants discussed that they wished to consume a quantified amount of wine, for example a glass or a bottle of wine for a medicinal effect. It seemed that participants were consuming wine in the same fashion that medicine was consumed, that is in a measured dose, adding weight to the argument that participants believed that wine was medicine.

In relation to taste preferences, participants from all groups commented that they preferred sweet tasting wines. Participants, except group B, also discussed the phenomenon of mixing red wine with soft drink and confirmed that they did partake in this practice. Their reasons for doing this included to make the wine (dry red wine) sweeter and to reduce the wine’s bitterness and alcohol content. The focus group sessions also covered topics regarding wine bottle closures. Group A participants did not comment regarding bottle closures. Participants

in group B generally preferred cork closed wine bottles and commented that cork closed wine bottles could be stored for longer than screw cap closed bottles. These comments go against current wine science convention that screw capped bottles are a better seal for a bottle enabling a wine to be stored for longer with less oxidated (age affected) sensory characters (Godden *et al.*, 2001). Groups C and D, both consisting of females, indicated more of a preference for a screw cap closed bottle due to its ease of opening. Cork closed bottles can require a great deal of physical strength to open which females may not possess. Apart from certain comments in groups C and D, participants generally felt that they did not like screw capped bottles. They perceived that screw capped bottles were inferior and generally contained lower quality wine than cork closed bottles. The comments regarding a preference for cork closures may relate to ideas of prestige and status that are associated with wine in the Chinese culture. The preference may also be related to the phenomena of safe brand buying as a risk reduction strategy as posited by Johnson and Bruwer (2004). The new product innovation (screw caps) is not perceived as familiar or “safe” to Chinese wine consumers and therefore is not adopted. This reticence for adoption of the screw capped bottles may be a manifestation of the collectivistic nature of Chinese culture as noted by Zhou, Chenting and Yeqing (2001), Zhang and Neelankavil (1995), Nicholson and Stepina (1998), and Sun, Horn and Merritt (2004); whereby the collective has stipulated a preference for cork closed bottles and therefore its members are compelled to adhere to group norms.

Differences between the groups in terms of their comments were observed. In addition to groups C and D (the females) indicating higher preference for screw capped bottles than other groups. The comments of Group B (over 45 years males) in certain topics were different from those of other groups. Group B participants did not comment that wine aided in falling asleep nor did they indicate that they partook in the practice of mixing red wine with lemonade. The reason for this may be a result of their time spent residing in Australia, with group B participants having resided in for an average of 30 years, as opposed to three years, eight years and 13 years for groups A, C and D respectively. Their extended residency may have led them to discard these traits and become more westernised. Group B participants also indicated a strong preference for cork closed bottles and a dislike for screw capped bottles. The dislike of this new innovation may be due to age as discussed by Harris and Mills (1981) and Zeithaml and Gilly (1987), who commented that older consumers are more resistant to new technological adoption than younger people. However, this was not observed in group D (over 45 years female) participants’ comments.

Further Research

This study was qualitative in nature and explored a number of concepts regarding Chinese wine consumption, attitudes and behaviours. Further confirmatory research in China is required. Of particular interest would be to confirm through sensory evaluation the preference for sweeter wines and mixed red wine/lemonade wine styles. The effect of differing concentration and carbonation levels of mixed red wine/lemonade styles on wine preference should also be measured. Concepts related to age, status, face, collectivism and prestige and how it relates to the preference for cork closed wine bottles could be further examined. The belief that wine aids one’s health and any relationship between that belief and the red colour of wine due to its connotation with luck could be examined.

Marketing Implications

This study highlighted a number of Chinese wine consumers' attitudes and behaviours that will aid in the formulation of marketing strategies for wine products in China. An example of a product strategy would be a red wine mixed with lemonade closed with a cork with a brand name which connotes sleeping peacefully. A product could be positioned as a medicinal, therapeutic good to be sold in pharmacies or herbal medicine stores (governmental regulatory issues aside). In conclusion, the Australian wine industry needs to take into account bottle closure alternatives, sweetness levels, brand names and place of sale when developing marketing strategies for wine for the Chinese market.

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