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Review Article

The development of alcohol policy in contemporary China



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ABSTRACT

Over recent years, an increase in alcohol-related problems has been noted in China. Taking effective measures against the problem requires clear reviewing and understanding of the evolution of the Chinese alcohol policy. This study is aimed to evaluate the alcohol policy with special focus on reviewing the alcohol production and consumption situation in China and assessing the changes in Chinese alcohol policy along with other related fields. This article finishes with a set of recommended policy changes that could help solve the recent alcohol-related problems and analyze the major impediments.

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1. Introduction

The urgent need for reducing alcohol-related harm through instituting alcohol policies has received worldwide attention and recognition. From 1975 to the 1980s, the World Health Assembly paid much attention to issues concerning alcohol reduction and made numerous resolutions. In 2005, the World Health Assembly spearheaded by the Director-General designed excellent policies and intervention measures for reducing alcohol-related harm and unanimously seconded the implementation and evaluation strategic proposals in all the represented member states [1]. After several rounds of consultations, and discussions, key amendments were made and global strategy was seconded and adopted in the 63rd

session of the World Health Assembly in 2010 [2]. The strategy clearly highlights the proven operational and effective measures to forward the policy as a feasible means of control to all and the relevant areas in context. Thereafter, the alcohol policy has attracted global attention.

Several alcohol-related studies focusing on the alcohol policies of the USA [3], UK [4], Australia [5], New Zealand [6], Russia [7,8], Japan [9], and Africa [10,11] have been undertaken. However, there is little information regarding the same subject in relation to China's alcohol policy. China has a long history of alcohol production and consumption, most notably the excessive drinking of alcoholic beverages on special occasions that has been a custom for thousands of years. In recent decades, China has experienced a rapid increase in alcohol production and consumption compared to other parts

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of the world, which is strongly associated with increased trends of social and alcohol-related problems in China [12]. This clearly indicates that China still lacks a good alcohol policy, which urgently calls for more study and amendment of the alcohol policies in place. Here, we review alcohol production and consumption, and the evolution of the alcohol policy in China. Then we make recommendations regarding the key areas within the current alcohol policy that require amendments with an overall aim of contribution towards the reducing alcohol-related consequences within China.

2. Review of alcohol production and consumption in China

Archaeological discoveries and the literature show that the Chinese alcohol history stretches back 8000 years [13]. As early as 5000 BC, Chinese ancient people had acquired the relevant knowledge of brewing along with drinking etiquette. Over the years, grain has been the main raw material for alcohol production, which presents a threat to the country's food security. Alcohol still plays a very important role in the development of agricultural in China and in other social occasions such as worship, funerals, marriages, and festivals and in the daily lives of Chinese people. The development of the alcohol industry demands more grain; however, this presents a possible threat of food scarcity that may result in famine since China has a large population. Bearing that in mind along with the past experiences, the government considers imposing restrictions on the development of the alcohol industry to avoid a repeat of the past situation. During the thousands of years of Chinese alcohol history, each dynasty has attempted to impose measures on alcohol production, always with the intention of avoiding a possible food crisis. Those measures did not, however, solve the problem of food insecurity in any dynasty. Therefore this presents an ideological basis for government to design a policy to control the alcohol industry. Currently, all the trends of social and political problems have been linked to alcohol. However, the government policy is still unclear on its stand on alcohol production risking the possibility of facing a similar situation and challenges as cited in the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).

According to the statistical data compiled on the development of alcohol industry after the establishment of the Republic of China (1912), the current total output of the Chinese brewing industry is > 9.03 millions of tons [14]. While the magnitude of beer and wine production is almost negligible, Chinese white spirit, accounts for about 94% of the total output, and rice wine, medicinal alcohol, and homemade alcohol take up the remaining percentage [14]. For over 100 years, white spirit has remained the main consumed alcohol in China compared to the current highly produced beer as well as wine. In 1915, the Beijing National Government transformed the alcohol management guidelines into a national policy. A series of laws and regulations were instituted, the tax system was redesigned and aligned with the national financial revenue and the budget expenditure system. At the same time, the government reformed the existing alcohol tax rate and tax system, adopted a sale system similar to the monopoly sale imposed on tobacco and alcohol license tax,

which like other business taxes have strengthened the management alcohol production and distribution. For the first time, an import tax was imposed on imported alcohol [14]. However, for unclear reasons, the production and consumption of Chinese alcohol still remained low and alcohol-related problems were less pronounced and thus did not attract attention at the national level.

Since the establishment of the dominant Mainland China Communist Party in 1949, there has been rapid growth of the alcohol industry and the emergence of alcohol-related problems. Lately, there has been an overall sharp increase of Chinese alcoholic beverage consumption (Fig. 1), irrespective of the source and type, coinciding with the fact that by 2002 China was the world's leading beer producer. In 2001, the percentage beer marketing level was 73.1% compared to the 26% white spirit production of total alcoholic beverage sales in China [15]. By 2011, beer production had reached 48.99 billion L, which accounted for 77%, while white spirit production was 10.26 billion L, which accounted for 16%. From the consumption point of view, a decrease in white spirit consumption was associated with the increase in beer consumption. World Health Organization (WHO) statistics indicate that the per capita alcohol consumption of pure alcohol in China was 1.03 L in 1970, and had risen to 5.17 L by 1996 [16]. According to the 2011 WHO report, China's pure alcohol consumption was 5.91 L per capita with an average drinking rate of 10.60 L/drinker. The consumption rate of pure alcohol derived from beer, wine, white spirit, and other alcoholic beverage was 1.50 L, 0.15 L, 2.51 L, and 0.23 L, respectively [17]; spirit still remains the main source of Chinese pure alcohol intake.

In traditional Chinese culture, drinking is socially embraced and it is considered to be less of a social problem [18]. However, excessive drinking can be regarded as defective to personal moral cultivation and may cause a series of personal alcohol-related problems. Until the late 1980s, there was a significant change in the Chinese society, a rapid development of Chinese alcohol industry, and a sharp rise in alcohol-related problems such as alcoholism, alcohol intoxication, and increased road accidents due to drink-driving, which aroused the concern of researchers [19–22]. Until the late 1970s, alcohol-related problems were neglected due to cultural, economic, and ethnic reasons [23]. Since the early 1980s, patterns of alcohol consumption in China have changed rapidly [24]. The amount of alcoholic beverages produced and consumed in China have steadily increased, with consumption increasing by almost 10-fold from 1978 to 1996 [25]. The modern Chinese society primarily comprises urban and rural subpopulations both with a passion and cultural attitude towards the custom of alcohol drinking. The variations in the rates of drinking may depend on factors such as subpopulations, and geographic location resulting in different behaviors and problems. The rural set-up bears a relatively high proportion of heavy drinkers but the urban population scores the highest overall drinking rates [26]. Although income is not the definitive causative factor of increased alcohol consumption, other factors such as socio-demography, education, employment, marital status, and, most strikingly, differences in regional origin are also suggested to significantly contribute to the subject [27]. Most notably violence, crime, economics, and family are among the numerous short-term alcohol consumption related

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