



# Chinese consumers and European beer: Associations between attribute importance, socio-demographics, and consumption



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## ABSTRACT

The demand for western alcoholic beverages in China has increased tremendously in recent years. However, there is still a lack of understanding with regard to the behaviour of Chinese consumers towards European beer, which is a common western alcoholic beverage. This study explores associations between beer attribute importance scores, socio-demographic factors, general beer consumption frequency and country associations of European beer, and the consumption of imported European beer in China. The data ( $n = 541$ ) were collected in two Chinese cities: Shanghai and Xi'an. Results of ordered logistic regression analyses show that the consumption of imported European beer is positively associated with importance attached to the product attributes *Origin*, *Brand*, *Colour* and *Texture*, and it is negatively associated with importance attached to *Price* and *Alcoholic content*. Furthermore, male gender, living in Shanghai city, a good financial situation, frequent beer consumption and a high-level employment position have a significantly positive influence on European beer consumption in China. In addition, about two thirds of the study participants associate imported European beer with 'Germany'.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research background

China is one of the most important emerging markets and the largest East-Asian country, as it has 20% of the World's population and is experiencing rapid growth in personal income (World Bank, 2014). An enormous number of Chinese study, work or travel in western countries and bring back their experiences of western foods (Netease, 2013; Yan, 2014). The dietary consumption pattern in China is also becoming more inclined towards westernization (Pingali, 2007). Together, these factors have led to the recent dramatic growth in demand for imported Western food products (Curtis, McCluskey, & Wahl, 2007; Gale & Huang, 2007; Hu, Cox, & Edwards, 2007; Liu et al., 2011; Wang, De Steur, Gellynck, & Verbeke, 2015; Wang, Gellynck, & Verbeke, 2015). In particular, there is a huge demand for western alcoholic beverages, especially originating from Europe. China now represents the largest export market for wine from the European Union (EU), and above 70% of its imported beer comes from European countries (Alinna, 2013;

Chen, 2015; Lu, 2014). This new trend brings an increased importance to the research areas in relation to East-Asian (especially Chinese) consumers' attitudes, perceptions and behaviours towards local western alcoholic beverages.

Many empirical studies exploring East-Asian consumer behaviour, attitudes and perceptions towards western alcoholic beverages have used wine as their focus (Balestrini & Gamble, 2006; Bruwer & Buller, 2012; Bruwer, Buller, John Saliba, & Li, 2014; Camillo, 2012; Goodman, 2009; Hu, Li, Xie, & Zhou, 2008; Lee & Chang, 2014; Pan, Fang, & Malaga, 2006; Somogyi, Li, Johnson, Bruwer, & Bastian, 2011; Wen, Tong, & Yao, 2010; Wilson & Huang, 2003; Yoo, Saliba, MacDonald, Prenzler, & Ryan, 2013; Yu, Sun, Goodman, Chen, & Ma, 2009). However, there is still a lack of understanding with regard to East-Asian consumers' (especially Chinese consumers') behaviours, perceptions and attitudes towards another typical western alcoholic beverage – European beer.

European beers have a vast range of tastes, appearances and other sensory characteristics, that are due to the different local ingredients and brewing traditions used (Persyn, Swinnen, & Vanormelingen, 2011; Poelmans & Swinnen, 2011; Swinnen & Vandemoortele, 2011; Tremblay, Tremblay, & Swinnen, 2011). This resulting assortment of beers is very different from China's domestic beers that have a relatively homogeneous range of pale lagers sharing the characteristics of mild taste, pretty meager

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alcohol content, large bottle size and low price (Bai, Huang, Rozelle, Boswell, & Swinnen, 2011; Vernon, 2013).

## 1.2. Research objective

The present study focuses on a previously unexplored area, namely associations between attribute importance, socio-demographics, and European beer consumption in China. Because of their role in shaping consumers' beer choice as shown by previous studies, our study will focus on general beer consumption frequency and the perceived importance of the attributes *Price*, *Brand*, *Origin (local, national or international)*, *Varied assortment*, *Alcohol content*, *Calorie content*, *Appearance (e.g. package and bottle)*, *Colour*, *Taste*, *Availability*, *Smell*, *Hangover effect (hangover in the next morning or not)* and *Texture (the weight of a beer as perceived in the mouth, such as thin or full texture)* (Empen & Hamilton, 2013; Guinard, Uotani, & Schlich, 2001; Makindara, Hella, Erbaugh, & Larson, 2013; McCluskey, Shreay, & Swinnen, 2011; Mejlholm & Martens, 2006; Phau & Suntornnond, 2006; Wright, Bruhn, Heymann, & Bamforth, 2008; Yang et al., 2012). In addition, socio-demographic factors such as *gender*, *age*, *income* and *regional groups* (Colen & Swinnen, 2015; Gabrielyan, McCluskey, Marsh, & Ross, 2014; Guinard et al., 2001; Makindara et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2012; McCluskey et al., 2011; Millwood et al., 2013) will be taken into account. Furthermore, as country image or country-of-origin has a strong effect on purchase intention towards foreign products among Chinese consumers (Wang, Li, Barnes, & Ahn, 2012), our study will also explore the countries linked to European beer in our Chinese study sample.

## 2. Methods and materials

### 2.1. Participants and procedures

A questionnaire was developed in English and translated into Chinese. Two rounds of online pilot tests were undertaken with Chinese participants living in China and working in Belgium to improve the survey design and the language translation. The final version was programmed to a web-based questionnaire and sent to registered members of a consumer panel maintained by a Chinese market research agency, using strict identification verification and a financial incentive. Data collection was performed in December 2013. A quota sampling method was applied by using gender (male and female), age (19–30, 31–40, above 40 years of age) and cities (Xi'an and Shanghai) as dimensions for quota stratification (Fabinyi, Liu, Song, & Li, 2016). The selection of the two cities for this study was based on their different locations, level of personal income, development level and degree of influence by western cultures. Southern and northern regions of China have obvious differences in terms of dietary habits and lifestyle (He, 2013; Sun, 2012). There are differences in consumption behaviour and the degree of influence by western cultures between highly developed regions in China and those that are less developed (Liu et al., 2011; Sun & Collins, 2004). Shanghai is in the southern region of China, and is an international metropolis with the greatest exposure to western cultures and products like imported beers. Shanghai has the highest level of development and personal income compared to other Chinese cities (Liu et al., 2011; National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2013; Zhao, 2003). Conversely Xi'an, which is in the northern region, is a traditional and historic city which is less developed and has much lower levels of personal income (Liu et al., 2011; National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2013; Zhao, 2003). Additionally, there are different beer consumption preferences between southern and northern Chinese cities (Millwood et al., 2013).

A total of 541 valid responses were obtained. Of these 259 participants were from Shanghai and 282 from Xi'an. Table 1 provides details of their socio-demographic characteristics, including age, gender, region, financial situation, occupation and education. Due to the online data collection method, the sample was biased towards highly educated people, with 80.6% of the participants having a bachelor or higher degrees.

### 2.2. Measures

Participants were asked to evaluate the importance of thirteen product attributes for beer choice: *Price*, *Brand*, *Origin*, *Varied assortment*, *Alcohol content*, *Calorie content*, *Appearance*, *Colour*, *Taste*, *Availability*, *Smell*, *Hangover effect* and *Texture*. These product attributes were described in previous studies in relation with beer consumption behaviour (Empen & Hamilton, 2013; Guinard et al., 2001; Makindara et al., 2013; McCluskey et al., 2011; Mejlholm & Martens, 2006; Yang et al., 2012; Phau & Suntornnond, 2006; Wright et al., 2008; Yang et al., 2012). The question stated: "... is important for me to choose a beer." A seven-point Likert agreement scale was employed for the response categories: 1 = disagree strongly, 2 = disagree moderately, 3 = disagree slightly, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = agree slightly, 6 = agree moderately, and 7 = agree strongly.

Participants' past consumption experience with imported European beer was measured using the question: "How would you describe your consumption of imported European beer?" The response categories were: 1 = I have never consumed and will never consume it, 2 = I have never consumed it but I am open to consume it, 3 = I stopped consuming and would never consume it again, 4 = I stopped consuming it but consider to consume it again, 5 = I consume it sometimes (less than once a month), 6 = I consume it often (more than once a month). This measurement scale was employed as imported European beer is not a commonly consumed product for mainland Chinese consumers compared to their domestic beer (Chen, 2015; Lu, 2014). Participants were also

**Table 1**  
Detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the total sample.

Socio-demographic characteristic	Total sample
Sample size (n)	541
Gender (%)	
Male	42.7
Female	57.3
City (%)	
Shanghai	47.8
Xi'an	52.2
Age	
Mean	35.6
Range (years)	19–68
19–30 (%)	32.2
31–40 (%)	31.2
> 40 (%)	36.6
Financial situation (%)	
Difficult- Moderate	10.4
Moderate	24
Moderate-Well off	65.6
Occupation (%)	
Managing employee	31.8
Salaried employee	34.6
Student	17.7
Worker (skilled and unskilled)	6.5
Others (Self-employed, unemployed, retired, housewife/man and others)	9.4
Education (%)	
Junior college and below	19.4
Bachelor degree	61.6
Master degree and above	19

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