

Reviews of Books

Bernsteinglanz und Perlen des Schwarzen Drachen: Die Geschichte der chinesischen Weinkultur. By Peter Kupfer. [4] + ii + 412 pages + CD-ROM. More than 150 illustrations, nearly all in color, including maps. Series: Deutsche Ostasienstudien, 26. Gossenberg: Ostasien Verlag, 2019. ISBN 978-3-946114-28-4 (hardback).

This beautifully printed book in large format, with two columns on each page, contains a preface in English by Patrick McGovern, a second preface by the author, thirteen chapters, a separate section of notes arranged by chapter, a bibliography which includes circa 400 printed and electronic titles, a detailed list of illustrations and a long and very reliable index. Maps and illustrations are dispersed throughout the text, usually with brief explanations; most of the photographs were taken by Kupfer himself. The German Research Council (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft) supported the publication of this voluminous work.

Peter Kupfer, well known among scholars for his many studies on Chinese linguistics and related issues, has been travelling through much of China and the countries along the ancient “Silk Route” system. Undoubtedly, these excursions, combining academic and “practical” experiences, the spiritual and the material, have assisted the author in gradually strengthening his interest in another facet of civilization, namely the cultivation of wine and the enjoyment of exquisite liquors. Although the author does not reveal his personal preferences for specific tastes, he makes it abundantly clear that throughout history humans were not able to accomplish certain things without the assistance of alcoholic products. This applies to both Europe and Asia; in fact it is a global phenomenon. Well, then, perhaps Kupfer’s book will help modern purists reconsider their individual problems by reading the records of the past....

In that context a further fact comes to mind: other species are equally receptive of intoxicating substances. Indeed, we share many things in common with various kinds of quadrupeds, birds and even insects. Chinese texts and stories referring to “monkey wine” (*houjiu* 猴酒 and *yuanyiu* 猿酒), cited more than once in this beautiful book, expose the proximity between us and our zoological relatives. These stories also seem to suggest that one may need to observe certain rules for an efficient “division of labor”. However, let me put aside this very serious subject and turn to the *longue durée* aspects of Kupfer’s study instead.

Most definitely, its intention is neither biological nor ethical; nor is its purpose to examine the zoological anachronism surrounding all those who advocate abstinence from alcohol. Rather, Kupfer draws attention to the very simple fact that producing and drinking alcoholic beverages forms a decisive constituent in the evolutionary progress of mankind – right from the dawn of history through to our own times. Certainly, this is nothing new; there are

countless books and articles which support that view. Here one may think of McGovern's studies, which Kupfer quotes many times in his notes. The so-called *drunken monkey hypothesis*, we also learn from him, may also apply to the *Homo pekinensis*, as indeed to many early "communities" worldwide. In all likelihood, their members already knew quite well how to enjoy alcoholic substances. That leads to a further set of very interesting questions: To what extent did the regular consumption of alcohol predate the cultivation of wheat and other grains rich in carbohydrates? How important was alcohol for the formation of a particular community?

Chemical analysis of ancient pots and vessels suggests that spirits were available in many early societies, and often in great quantities. This was already so before the birth of the first few states and the emergence of other phenomena commonly associated with civilization. Kupfer summarizes some of the recent archaeological literature on these issues. He is particularly interested in works dealing with West and Central Asia, and of course with China; that includes several learned publications in Chinese. Such studies suggest that certain methods of fermentation must have been quite similar in regions geographically separated from each other by thousands of kilometres. The general impression is that in many cases production techniques and features related to the consumption of alcohol were passed on from one place to the next. In that sense, the "culture of alcohol" was one element of material exchange along different branches of the ancient "Silk Route". China, in particular the northern regions, was a key component in this complex system of "East-West" relations.

Apparently, the production of grape wine played a major role in that setting. As the title of his book suggests, Kupfer is mostly concerned with this particular topic, but now and then, especially in the first few chapters of his work, he also looks at other alcoholic drinks, for example, beer. Furthermore, the current archaeological panorama tells us that many early civilizations invented various kinds of "cocktails" on the basis of fruits and other ingredients. Again, China was no exception to the rule. Kupfer mentions many spectacular findings in different locations, and he also refers to Chinese museums that provide the relevant evidence. Indeed, one should perhaps add that he toured some of these places himself. Readers not familiar with their names, or with the names of the ancient burial sites and other archaeological places, can consult diverse maps in Kupfer's book, which are usually of great help in that regard.

The overall structure of the book follows a rough chronological arrangement. The first chapters look at the periods for which there is only archaeological evidence. As the account moves out of that age into the period for which we have textual data, diversification in production methods, storage techniques and new consumption patterns emerge very clearly. Besides that, we can also tell more about the role alcohol assumed in religious and/or secular ceremonies, among members of the ruling elites, and sometimes even in the lower strata of society. This is where Kupfer's study turns truly Sinological. However, he does not close the doors on other fields. On the contrary, throughout his book he suggests that one may detect

various similarities between the cultures of West Asia, especially Iran, and the Far East. Most definitely, I do not wish to put in doubt these very valuable observations, and the cosmopolitan dimensions associated with them, but at times, when reading through his insightful text, I got the impression that he may have overestimated the impact of Iranian culture on China's history, especially in later periods.

Traditional Chinese texts contain a large number of terms related to different kinds of alcoholic drinks and vessels used for the production, storage and consumption of these liquids. One text frequently cited by Kupfer is the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, a famous dictionary of Han times now usually printed together with long comments from the Qing period. Perhaps the most general expression for “alcoholic drinks” in these early works is the term *jiu* 酒. *Jiu* can stand for many things, including wine made of grapes. Yet, very often one cannot tell, what it means in a particular context; therefore, the author took the right decision to simply speak of “*jiu* culture” instead of “wine culture” and to leave the term untranslated in most cases. He is also very right in telling readers that translating *jiu* with “wine”/“vin”/“Wein” often makes little sense, and may be quite misleading in fact.

For one of the early chapters in his book, Kupfer chose the subtitle “Im Anfang war der Wein”. I am sure the author would support the idea that it may not be a major *peccatum* to combine the phrase “in principio erat vinum” with the concomitant “et vinum erat apud deum, et deus erat felix.” One may think of a simple reason for proposing such a “*zheng ming* 正名 operation”, which touches both the conceptual and the practical: Traditional Chinese texts contain all kinds of stories classifiable as mythology; these “narratives” deal with the creation of the universe and the roots of culture more generally; they thus establish an intimate link between the human and the divine spheres; wine – and that must have included the grape variety – functioned as a catalyst in these environments. Here then, Yi Di 儀狄 and Du Kang 杜康 come to mind; Kupfer has much to say on them as well. In sum, there can be no doubt that Heaven and the early emperors cooperated in great harmony with each other when they decided to endow mankind with the pleasures of drinking *jiu* [...].

As has been mentioned, this book combines representative archaeological data with textual evidence, using an interdisciplinary approach that allows the author to take his readers through different academic fields. These range from linguistics, prehistory, literature, religion, sociology and economics to oenology, viticulture and other sciences. There are citations from old accounts usually associated with the “Daoist” and Confucian schools of thought, from old songs and poems, dictionaries and medical sources, to mention just some textual categories. Clearly, now and then, perhaps driven by “inspiration”, Kupfer deviates substantially from the chronological framework he has imposed on his book, typically when he tries to relate stories dealing with the remote past to conventions current in the twentieth century and our own times. Not infrequently, such arrangements concern individual locations and their long history. Xuanhua 宣化 and the region of the Fen River 汾河, known for all kinds of alcoholic traditions, are fine examples of this. Many of these intellectual excursions provide

rich details, but they never get out of control; they are not boring at all. Indeed, uncorking the past seems to be a delightful experience.

China can look back to the longest uninterrupted “culture of alcohol”, on a worldwide scale. Little wonder, then, that written sources also notice the bad sides of heavy drinking. Kupfer mentions several examples. The combination of a femme fatale and too much spirits was a particularly devastating cocktail. Here one could cite the *Lienü zhuan* 列女傳, which is based on earlier material. Another avenue of investigation takes us to the military: soldiers received alcohol to assist them in overcoming fear and frustration. Today we know that all kinds of intoxicants served similar purposes. Slaves, forced to do manual labour, probably had comparable experiences. Kupfer also tells us about a “wine supervisor” (*jiuzheng* 酒正), an important officeholder in Zhou times. Indeed, there were precise rules for sacrifices and divination procedures involving alcoholic beverages. Much of this appears in chapter four.

Chapter four ends by telling us that one can relate the chrysanthemum and its name (*ju* 菊) to the culture of *jiu*, in particular to the characters *ju* 鞠 and *qu* 麴 (the second one stands for a fermentation agent), as well as to the yellow color of the ruler’s robe. It also draws attention to the fact that 久 (sometimes used for “long” life) and 酒 (both read *jiu*) are homophones. Finally, one may establish a link between these *jiu* and the character for “nine”, again *jiu* 九, in the context of the so-called *chongyang* 重陽 festival, celebrated on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month. I may add, this is also the day when Mazu 媽祖, one of China’s leading female deities, is said to have ascended Heaven. Ascension – *immortalitas ex vino*?

However, perhaps we had better stay on safer grounds. It seems highly unlikely that Confucius himself, given that he was certainly not easily excitable, regularly consumed large quantities of *jiu*. Nevertheless, Kong Rong 孔融, a distant descendent of the great sage, claimed the opposite. When Kong Rong, who was one of the Seven Masters of the Jian’an Period (建安七子), ran into conflict with Cao Cao 曹操, he praised the helpful properties of *jiu* and also stated that Confucius would not have attained wisdom without a regular dose of it. Kupfer briefly notes this delightful story in chapter five of his book.

Well then, seen through the eyes of a serious *rujia* 儒家, wisdom implied the strict observation of moral standards and formal rules. That also explains why one finds so many *jiu*-related regulations in the *Zhou li* 周禮 and *Li ji* 禮記. Again, Kupfer made respectable efforts to collect and interpret these guidelines. Generally, however, when dealing with the ancient texts, he usually relies on electronic sources. To quote Confucius: 觚不觚，觚哉觚哉。Old-fashioned brains would probably feel more comfortable with citations from dusty books and selected references to representative translations into “Western” languages.

From the Han period onwards we encounter many travellers on the main branches of the “Silk Route”. Textual sources also list tribute delegations, some of which brought wines to China, along with gems, rare animals and many precious items not or poorly known in the Far East. The term *putao* – written 葡桃, 蒲桃, 蒲陶, 葡萄, etc. (and already used by Sima Xiangru 司馬相如) – begins to appear more often in literary and other works at this

time. This term stands for grapes and is used in association with *jiu* for grape-based wines. Kupfer discusses many poems and other texts that make use of various topoi related to the culture of drinking such wines. Above all, he devotes special attention to the early eccentrics and also exposes that Buddhist monks would not necessarily follow the rule of abstinence from alcohol.

Under the Tang, China absorbed many cultural components from the so-called Xiyu 西域, or “Regions of the West”. Apparently, the further dissemination of *jiu* culture was a logical result of that process. The additional terms and new stories that emerged relating to the pleasures of dining and drinking are colorful indicators of this development. Here we may think of such fervent minds as Li Bai 李白, who takes up quite some space in Kupfer’s book. Wines even promoted female emancipation: Yang Guifei 楊貴妃, it is well known, was the corpulent embodiment of heavy drinking. Calligraphy and painting also profited from mind-expanding input. The *zuimo* 醉墨 artists in particular depended on a steady flow of liquid propellants when using their brushes. Again, Kupfer provides some of the relevant details. However, whether the *jiu* culture of Tang times already included strong distillates – that still seems to be an open point. Kupfer is rather careful in discussing this subject.

The Song period, as we learn from the next chapter, knew such distillates. At the same time, the habit of drinking wines continued to flourish. Yet, many scholars now turned increasingly “rational”; this means they were less outgoing, more moderate, more formal, more “Confucian”. Zhu Xi 朱熹, Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, Su Shi 蘇軾 – none of them said “nay”, while they would never, or rarely, have taken things to the limit. Li Qingchao 李清照, one of the few contemporary ladies who wrote poetry, may have been an exception in that regard. Readers will find the essentials on this subject in Kupfer’s book. Most remarkably, he also offers some useful details on the Xi Xia, Liao and Xi Liao states, whose position as intermediaries in “East-West” relations touches the history of wine as well.

Seen from a Chinese point of view, it may sound awkward when he praises the Mongols for their organisational skills and classifies the Yuan Empire as a cosmopolitan structure. There is no doubt that the Yuan made efficient use of West and Central Asians, Tibetans and other non-Han groups to run their state, and it is also true that some high-ranking Mongol leaders became interested in different creeds and customs; but the period of Mongol rule over China, when discussed within the context of a book on wines, should perhaps have been characterized as an era marked by ethnic and economic exploitation, social barriers, terrible cruelties, and alcoholic excesses. Presumably, there was no second period in China’s past during which the ruling class combined the consumption of *jiu* and large-scale oppression to such a degree. Nevertheless, written sources are full of references to the positive sides of drinking, and it also seems that the consumption of grape wine now gradually spread southward, even if this spread was probably mostly restricted to the upper classes.

With the rise of Ming power, China’s *jiu* culture moved into a different age. One may attribute this change to the bad experiences people had had in the previous period, or to other

factors. By and large, the consumption of *jiu* continued, albeit on a reduced level. Wine made from grapes was still available, but it was no longer as important as it had been. Kupfer digs deeply in historical accounts to find out more about all this, and he does present some good arguments. Nevertheless, there are a few minor details – not necessarily related to *jiu* – where one must be careful. Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋 is a case in point: one can link this emperor, who founded the new dynasty, to Manichaeism, but others have argued that he was close to Islam. Does that matter? A different detail concerns the Portuguese: scholars disagree on the dates when they first reached the Macau Peninsula and when they began settling there. Furthermore, it is unlikely that Wokou 倭寇 activities were among the causes that led to the end of Zheng He's 鄭和 expeditions (for all this, see p. 206).

However, these trivial observations are not so important. What counts more is this: Kupfer discusses many essential texts of the Ming and Qing periods that deal with the production, properties and culture of *jiu*. One such work is the *Shang zheng* 觴政 by Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (on which there is a dissertation by Herbert Butz). Although Yuan Hongdao, who was active during the Wanli reign, suffered from a limited drinking capacity, for him alcohol was a fascinating topic, which he would try to master intellectually, being evidently somewhat detached from reality. In a sense this paradoxical situation mirrors the status of wines and other kinds of *jiu* in his times and, to some measure as well, under the Qing: Alcoholic beverages were still available in sufficient quantities, but the liberal spirit prevalent in previous ages no longer guided the drinking classes. Moreover, the central role of grape wine now belonged to the past.

The last two chapters of Kupfer's book look at the twentieth century and our own times. This is a story of success. We learn much about the revitalisation of wine consumption, the role of important individuals in these events, the history of key production sites, the implementation of new technologies, and the systematic development of oenology more generally. The intimate liaison between *jiu* and politics is another theme on which the author keeps an eye. That concerns such things as the famous Maotaijiu 茅台酒 and the drinking traditions among party members, to mention just two aspects. Some observations are anecdotal: A few glasses of Tonghuajiu 通化酒 offered to Mrs. Thatcher may have accelerated China's recovery of Hong Kong. Here one might add another story: According to one source, a German drunkard hailing from Stuttgart assisted Zheng Chenggong 鄭成功 in liberating Fort Zeelandia from the Dutch. This happened in the early 1660s. Spirits, there can be no doubt, continue to be a determinant factor in the lives of humans and quadrupeds.

To round off my remarks, as mentioned above, Kupfer's account is a balanced survey that combines many things: data drawn from traditional and modern textual sources, from archaeological findings and chemical analyses, from the natural sciences and geography, from agriculture and oenology, and from religious studies, ethnology, sociology, art history, linguistics, literature, and so forth. The focus of the book is on the production, circulation and uses of *jiu*, and especially of grape wines, in ancient and modern China. At the same time this

book links the Far East to the “Far West”. Therefore, we may also call it an important contribution to the history of the “Silk Route”.

Of course, it is always easy to criticize a voluminous account written from the bird’s-eye view by arguing that certain things are wrong, unimportant, imperfectly arranged or poorly presented, but in this particular case one can trust the narration, which seems well researched and quite reliable. Also, its language flows; it makes good reading. Clearly, one could enrich the bibliography in many ways and expand the entire subject by including more information on the “Maritime Silk Route”; however, there are certain limits, and it is better not to move beyond them. In sum, readers ought to congratulate the author and the Ostasien Verlag for having published this exceptional work.

Roderich Ptak
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität