

Wine Symbolism and New Social Contexts in Taiwan

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Wine and wine culture has gained increasing popularity in the global world, yet it has various developments in different areas. Wine production and wine consumption are sometimes considered to be symbols of development and improvement of the economy and lifestyle.

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1. Wine Symbolism

Without a long tradition, wine culture in Taiwan has been constructed and framed with images and imagination connected to symbols, rituals, knowledge, and implications of good health. Wine drinking in Taiwan focuses on bodily sensations related to gestures, colors of wine, and transformation of its meanings.

1.1. Elegant Gesture as New Identity and Distinction

The first wine symbol in the Taiwanese context is elegance and distinction. Georges Vigarello points out that in the past, the beauty of the body tended to focus on the size and ratio of body parts such as the head, body, and feet ^[1]. Esthetic conceptions changed from these “body ratios” to “non-body ratios”, using gestures that make people feel smooth, beautiful, and charming. Vigarello mentions the relationship between body gesture and social value; learning how to express one’s appearance gracefully is of great importance in work, social interaction, and personal self-confidence ^[2]. Many Taiwanese professionals in the wine sector call it “elegant gesture”. For example, the gesture to hold the wine glass base instead of the bowl is considered to be more elegant.

To be “elegant” is most of the time the first lesson emphasized when learning to drink wine in Taiwan. This aspect is sometimes ignored when studying the globalization of wine and its related branding process. Unlike the other popular local alcoholic beverages such as beer and sorghum liquor, drinking wine requires specific behaviors and manners. People prefer “tasting” instead of “drinking” wine; it requires a little more ceremony by using smell, vision, and taste to appreciate wine. I would call this a “ritual of elegance”. The emphasis of this ritual of elegance attracts people who want to be “elegant” to come together. Wine tasting events have initiated a new community with a new identity. This trend is strengthened by courses and lectures of SOPEXA and professional sommeliers from TSA.

Elegance represents one’s ability to live a better life than others, and it is also a representation of oneself in a better social position. Elegance means to eat slowly, master the rhythm, show the ability and power to taste wine slowly. In other words, “elegance” is a symbol of taste and status. Therefore, wine drinkers and wine learners are learning the appropriate gestures and manners in order to increase their cultural capital as well as social capital.

1.2. Wine Color as Belief and Preference

Taiwanese anthropologist Li Yih-yuan mentions that Chinese and Taiwanese people drink alcoholic beverages not only for entertainment but also for its other nutritious and nourishing benefits. He highlights a fundamental conception of local food culture, namely, that “medicine and foods are the same origin” ^{[3][4]}. When experiencing a new food culture, people tend to negotiate and reinterpret it from their old traditions in order to include the new one into old social orders. Wine is one of the new food cultures which shows this process of reframing and reinterpretation.

The color of the wine is very symbolic in the choice of the drinkers. According to Vinexpo statistics, in 2015, Taiwan imported 1,450,000 cases (9 L and 12 bottles per case) of red wine, 180,000 cases of white wine, and 2500 cases of rosé (pink wine). It is obvious that Taiwanese prefer red wine much more than white and rosé. White wine is regarded as “cold”, which hurts the body in the cultural context, and rosé is regarded as not solid and not pure enough. This color symbolism is especially important for females. The red color of food is considered especially beneficial for blood. Red wine is therefore welcome among females in this context. Female drinkers believe red wine keeps blood “full”, gives faces a

healthy complexion, and is good for menstrual blood enrichment. The image of good health of red wine is like “the contagion of ideas” mentioned by anthropologists Dan Sperber ^[5] and “the cultural mimesis” proposed by Maurice Bloch ^[6]. This idea initiates and enhances stronger belief regarding the benefits of red wine, thus encouraging the consumption and appreciation of it ^{[7][8][9]}.

The connection between wine and health, especially regarding the red color, has been widely expressed and shared. I have heard many times from my female Taiwanese friends that they feel “cold” after drinking white wine, but feel “warm” when drinking red wine. This saying implies that red wine is good for the circulation of blood and body. Many professional sommeliers also encourage female students in their lectures or female customers to share their positive experiences focusing on red wine. Thus, from sharing good testimonies, personal interpretations, and constructing mutual trust between acquaintances or friends, this color preference is spreading widely as a cultural value.

Red wine composes the majority of wine consumption in Taiwan. Even though white wine and rosé continue to be imported, they are in a disadvantaged context. The belief that the color of red wine is good for nourishing blood has a major impact on the wine industry. Some local wine producers, state-owned company Taiwan Tobacco & Liquor Corporation for example, add local-produced monascus or locally grown red onions in their red wine products. Wine becomes multifunctional. It not only provides entertainment or company with meals, but also benefits to nourish the body. These kinds of wine are considered to be more than wine, with the benefits of some kinds of medicine. Thus, it becomes very popular among those who did not usually drink wine before or those who live in the countryside.

In sum, as per the fundamental conception of local food culture “medicine and foods are the same origin” mentioned by Li Yih-yuan, Taiwanese wine drinkers do not drink wine purely, but with side effects in various ways. Some learn to drink wine with elegant gestures to gain more social or cultural capital; some drink to gain the benefits for their body ^{[10][11]}.

2. Transformation of Meanings: Wine and Its New Social Contexts

The transformed meaning of wine is not limited to its color or related social status only. The meaning of wine is also transformed in different social events or contexts. Jean-Pierre Poulain examines the social space of food. He emphasizes that the social meaning of food is not rigid or fixed, but flexible and diverse ^[12]. This flexibility and diversity of food are revealed in various social spaces, along with the contexts or ways that we consume food ^{[13][14]}. In other words, the relationships between food and people are changing with different social spaces and social occasions ^[11]. Therefore, we have to examine the social contexts in which we consume wine in order to understand the meaning.

2.1. An Accessible Luxury

Wine in Taiwan belongs to special occasions, not daily life. Alcoholic beverages are sometimes a social lubricant, which makes communication easier among people from different social backgrounds. However, wine is more than a simple social lubricant in Taiwan because of its unusual characteristics. Wine in Taiwan is much more of an accessible luxury than necessity. A common bottle of wine that people can purchase easily from the shops or markets costs about USD 10–15. Yet the basic wage per month is USD 870.

A social event with wine in Taiwan is more like a separate world from everyday life, providing opportunities for social integration and social bonding. Wine provides a “liminal” for drinkers between public and private spheres, between work and home or “time-out” space ^[15]. Wine helps drinkers to construct their ideal world and reverse the weak parts in their real daily life ^[16]. The presence of wine (even a single bottle) can transform the meaning of different social spaces ^[17].

Wine plays an important role in transforming the pattern of consumption and reducing the risk of overdrinking in Taiwan, especially in important social events. Take wedding banquets as an example. It is an important social event and also a social space intended to bring together as many people as possible from various social groups to congratulate the bride and groom. There used to be liquor and beer at wedding banquets in the past. When the liquor is served, it cannot be enjoyed alone, and it is not encouraged to take it home without finishing it. This could sometimes lead to overdrinking and lead to quarrels or fights eventually, and there is a risk of drunk driving as well.

Gradually, wine, with an emphasis of elegance, is put on the menu under such circumstances and replaces beer and liquors. Red wine is considered wine with an appropriate color, as red signifies good luck in Taiwanese culture, while white wine is relatively not-so-welcome in these events. Red wine is provided in the wedding dinner to make this occasion elegant and healthy, even though most of the time the bottle of red wine would not be opened and sometimes be brought home by the guests. It is given as a gift from the bride and groom. In a normal wedding banquet in Taiwan, a 750 mL bottle of red wine is provided to a table for 10 people. Therefore, it is closer to a symbol than a functional feast food. It is

also similar to a year-end dinner for the workplace. Wine has replaced beer and liquor to make these events more under control and prevent drunkenness and chaos.

2.2. Toast and Games

Wine is often used as a mediator in social events to maintain a joyful atmosphere while preventing possible conflicts and chaos caused by drunkenness ^[18]. The negative image of alcohol is very clear: alcoholism is a symbol of low self-control; drinking behavior is considered lacking in etiquette; in the media, the negative images related to alcohol include ones that depict it as bad for health, as well as images of reckless behavior, drunk driving, violence, etc. ^{[19][20]}. In my interviews, as far as drinking is concerned, the interviewees have shown a lot of worries. They are not only worried about the discomfort after drinking, but also about the negative images related to alcohol. One of the major reasons to cause overdrinking and drunkenness is the culture and custom of compulsive toasting in Taiwan. Toasting is usually proposed by seniors to juniors. When people are toasted, first of all, they cannot refuse. In addition, people must pay attention to the posture of the body, facial expression, and manners when toasting, so as to show respect to elders. In the process of toasting, people will usually play games to spice up the party. Most important of all, toasting is usually an endless circle till most people get drunk or at least tipsy.

When wine replaces beer or liquor in social events, it changes the drinking pattern and transforms the drinking game into less compulsive ways to avoid overdrinking. First, wine does not fit into the traditional toasting ritual because of its image related to elegance. It is not so often to see people compulsively toast with wine in any social events. To a certain degree, this has reduced the amount of alcohol consumption. Second, the drinking games change accordingly and become less compulsive.

2.3. Recontextualization of Female Drinking

Perception about drinking in Taiwan is highly gendered. Sociologists Marie-Laure Déroff and Thierry Fillaut said, "Observers can know the difference between women and men in social life, especially the relationship between drinking and gender, such as where or when drinking can be done, whether it must be restrained or excessive can be tolerated, etc" ^[21]. Regarding drinking alcohol, the females whom I interviewed have contradictory feelings toward wine: love and fear at the same time. They believe that they must behave appropriately in female roles through restraint in their drinking behavior, otherwise there will be considerable risks. This social pressure and anxiety to control drinking cannot suppress their feelings and desires to drink. On the other hand, traditional ways of drinking, which include varieties of alcoholic beverages and social occasions, are not friendly for females who wish to drink freely. In this context, wine seems for women a safer choice. It provides a new social space so that women can discover or invent new drinking rules to release their stress.

There are some major obstacles that hinder women from drinking. Drinking is basically a social action that is not encouraged to be conducted alone. However, in public places in Taiwan, it is more common to see men drinking than women. For example, in a stir-fry shop, which is the major place to drink at night, most consumers are men, and it is rare to see women. There are several possible reasons for this.

First of all, it has something to do with Taiwanese culture of "men dominate outside and women dominate inside", which divides the social spaces for men and women. Women have traditionally been discouraged from going out at night, let alone in venues that are considered "fun-seeking". Women are expected to stay at home as much as possible, especially after nightfall. People threaten that women will encounter some risks or dangers when going out at night, so they have to stay at home to be protected. In addition, if women go out too often at night, especially if they go out to drink for "fun", they are more likely to be regarded as unfeminine or dissolute. In addition, the difference in economic ability between men and women is also a possible cause of this phenomenon. Generally speaking, men have more economic resources than women, which also makes women less likely to go out to enjoy social life, especially on occasions that involve drinking, which require more economic power.

Along with the improvement of women's rights and economic status, there are more social spaces for women to drink. According to the Taiwan Ministry of Health and Welfare, more than 30% of Taiwanese women have drinking experiences (the question asked is regarding if someone has ever drunk in the year of the survey) ^[22]. Compared with beer and spirits, women are more likely to accept wine. There are more and more female customers dining in bistros and drinking wine at night. Many wine instructors find that their tasting classes are filled up by disproportionately female attendees. Females are no longer clueless when they look at the wine list, and they also increase their willingness to consume in restaurants and pubs. Wine drinking is no longer dominated by rich elder males; young women drinkers have increased sharply.

For many women, wine is the first and safer choice to avoid being stigmatized when drinking alcoholic beverages. First, wine is a newly imported food culture which enables women to have social spaces to drink. Additionally, they sometimes use the framing that wine is beneficial, especially for women's bodies, to legitimize their wine drinking behaviors (see **Table 1**).

Table 1. Taiwan Alcohol Consumption Population.

Year	Women	Men	Average
2002	23.4%	53.3%	38.6%
2005	20.2%	52%	36.3%
2009	31.8%	60.1%	46.2%
2013	33.6	58%	45.7%
2017	33%	53.4%	43%

From analyzing drinking activities, we can see wine as the norms and ideology, gender structure, and symbols of a society, as mentioned by Roland Barthes ^[23]. This research aims to show how wine has been integrated into new and different social contexts, and how the acquisition of wine knowledge plays a role in the transition of drinking culture, which is not insignificant in terms of sociality in reflection of sustainability. My work highlights various aspects related to wine drinking: elegance as a symbol to gain social and cultural capital, and local drinking culture reframed with a new reinterpretation regarding aesthetics, health, rites, gender, and destigmatization ^[24].

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