

Learning to drink: how Chinese adolescents make decisions about the consumption (or not) of alcohol

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Abstract

Background: The aim of the study was to provide in-depth understanding of how Chinese adolescents learn to drink and how they make decisions about the consumption (or not) of alcohol. This study explored the ways in which social and cultural factors shape the drinking trajectories of Chinese underage young people.

Methods: The study used a qualitative design to collect and analyse the data. We recruited adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years from a range of secondary schools in Hong Kong. Focus group interviews were undertaken with 22 groups encompassing 111 participants. A thematic analysis based upon grounded theory was performed using NVivo 10.

Results: The traditional Chinese drinking culture, characterised by the coming together of friends and relatives for celebrations, signifies the Chinese adolescents' first alcohol experiment. The adolescents' motivations for drinking essentially reflect the value placed upon alcohol within the Chinese culture - promoting conviviality, sociability and camaraderie. Whereas a sense of commonality encouraged alcohol use among them, there was little indication that drinkers and non-drinkers separately clustered around friendship networks. A high degree of self-regulation was exercised when drinking and this emerged as an acceptable social norm amongst young drinkers within social and cultural contexts. Most respondents saw underage drinking as an entirely normal and accepted part of social lives provided that it is kept under control.

Conclusions: This study sheds light on the Chinese adolescents' own understandings and interpretations of their drinking. Our findings suggest that interventions aimed to curtail underage drinking need to reflect social and cultural contexts within which alcohol comes into play and importantly, consider social environments that are conducive to underage drinking.

Keywords: alcohol; Chinese adolescents; social context; underage drinking; Chinese drinking culture; Hong Kong

Introduction

Alcohol consumption is responsible for 5.1% of the global burden of disease and injury (World Health Organisation, 2014). Worldwide, 3.3 million deaths in 2012 were estimated to have been caused by alcohol consumption equating to 5.9% of all deaths. Despite much of the chronic burden of alcohol-related disease afflicting adults, the foundations of such damage are often established during adolescence. Evidence indicates that early onset of drinking and consuming larger quantities in adolescence are associated with a wide range of high-risk behaviours (Henry et al, 2005; Hughes & Bellis, 2006). Such patterns of consumption also increase the risks of developing chronic health and other problems in later life.

Unlike many developed countries in the West, where high rates of alcohol consumption and intoxication amongst underage youths are reported (Huckle et al, 2006), alcohol consumption among Chinese adolescents is less common. A study conducted in Mainland China shows that 17.8% of adolescents had an experience of alcohol use during the past month (Hao et al, 2005). Similarly, the underage alcohol use in Hong Kong (where this study took place) is relatively low with 24.2% of the secondary school students reportedly to have consumed alcoholic beverages in the past 30 days (Narcotic Division of Security Bureau, 2009). The corresponding figures in the UK and US are 65% and 39% respectively (Hibell et al, 2012). However, alcohol consumption in Hong Kong has been gaining popularity in recent years, particularly among younger age groups as exemplified by the increase in prevalence of the past-30-day alcohol use among secondary school students from 14.5% in 1992 to 24.2% in 2009 (Narcotic Division of Security Bureau, 1992; Narcotic Division of Security Bureau, 2009).

Studies on risk-taking behaviours among Chinese adolescents suggest that alcohol consumption is associated with the development of other problem behaviours such as psychotropic substance abuse (Lau et al, 2005; Xing et al, 2006), unsafe sex (Adullah et al, 2003; Ong et al, 2013), and suicide attempts (Lee et al, 2009). Although these studies provide an insight into the effects of alcohol use among youth in general, they are almost exclusively problem-focused (i.e. risky behaviours associated with 'out of control' drinking). This emphasis has resulted in a lack of understanding of the actual circumstances under which alcohol use is initiated and the meaning

of alcohol drinking among adolescents. Moreover, past analyses of Chinese adolescents' drinking patterns had primarily relied on quantitative evidence, often of a largely aggregate and summative nature. While quantitative sources are important for identifying the prevalence of alcohol use, they provide much less in-depth evidence when it comes to understanding the context of alcohol drinking initiation and how drinking is conceptualised by adolescents.

A body of past qualitative studies acknowledge that alcohol drinking among adolescents does not occur uniformly and that cultures of alcohol consumption and regulation are socio-culturally differentiated practices (Coleman & Cater, 2005; Griffin et al, 2009; Heimisdottir et al, 2010; Percy et al, 2011). In addition, underage drinking is often embedded in a context of values, attitudes and other norms (Heath, 1987). Building on existing literature, this study aims to investigate the social and cultural contexts that shape the drinking trajectories of Chinese adolescents. Specifically, it explores how underage young people learn to drink, how they perceive their own alcohol use and ultimately what factors influence how they make decisions about the consumption (or not) of alcohol. In so doing, the study sheds light on Chinese adolescents and their own perspectives of alcohol consumption, which have so far received very limited attention from scholars in alcohol research. In the present study, we included both drinkers and non-drinkers to explore both groups' attitudes to and decisions about alcohol use.

Methods

Participants

We recruited adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years from a range of secondary schools in Hong Kong. The principals of the randomly selected schools in three geographical areas of Hong Kong were sent a letter informing them of the study purpose. After one week of the letter being sent, the research team contacted the schools by telephone. Out of the 44 schools contacted, 13 schools agreed to participate. Upon obtaining written consent from parents/guardians, a one-page screening questionnaire on drinking behaviour (e.g. age of one's first drink; use of alcohol in the past 30 days, one year and one's lifetime; age; gender; grade) was distributed to classes by the research staff (student assent was obtained at the time of questionnaire distribution). At the end

of the questionnaire, students were invited to leave their contact details if they were willing to share their views on alcohol through the means of confidential but informal group discussion. Each questionnaire was returned in a sealed envelope. Of the 2,744 questionnaires distributed, 2,271 were returned and 538 students provided their contact details.

Procedure

While the one-page screening questionnaire was used to check the eligibility and interest for interview participation, we purposively selected participants of different age, gender and drinking status (both drinkers and non-drinkers) to garner diverse views and perspectives. A total of 131 students were contacted by our research staff and 111 students agreed to participate in the focus group discussion. Reasons for refusal included being too busy or unavailable, feeling uncomfortable and lost interest in study participation. Those who agreed to participate were told that all responses would be confidential. Consent forms that described the study were sent to parents/guardians, and participants were required to return the signed consent forms in order to participate. In the consent form, parents/guardians were informed that the aim of the study was to understand their child's acceptance of and attitudes towards alcohol drinking irrespective of his/her alcohol use. In this way, we were able to recruit adolescents who drank without disclosing sensitive information to their parents/guardians. Appointments were made with the participants for interviews. Prior to the interview, written consent was sought from participants. Most interviews were conducted in a classroom of participants' schools while two interviews were carried out in a small conference room of a youth community centre.

As underage drinking is a sensitive topic and confidentiality is not possible in group settings, we sought to ensure a degree of commonality among participants in each group to create a permissive and relaxing atmosphere and to avoid feelings of social constraint. Focus groups were therefore composed accounting for the similarity of participants' characteristics and circumstances (i.e. gender, school, and year at school). An interview guideline with open-ended questions was used to solicit participants' perspectives and experience relating to alcohol consumption. Confidentiality of all personal information was emphasized. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes and was conducted by research staff experienced in qualitative

interviews. A total of 22 focus groups each involving three to six participants were undertaken (Table 1). All interviews were conducted in Cantonese and audio-recorded. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Hong Kong/Hospital Authority Hong Kong West Cluster.

Data analysis

The audio-recordings from each group discussion were transcribed verbatim. All identifiable data were anonymised in the transcripts. Interview data and observational field notes were imported into NVivo 10 and a thematic analysis based upon grounded theory was conducted (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Coding categories were developed progressing from open coding to an analytical coding framework in a cyclical process to ensure that the analysis involved continual interaction with the data. Analysis also involved refining and recoding the text until a series of interlinking themes and patterns was elicited. Themes and groupings were then revised several times as the focus group interviews and analysis process progressed. Each interview transcript was coded by the first author. To provide an indication of the validity of the theme generation, a research team member took part in the data coding process and coded 10% of the transcripts. To ensure methodological rigour, the research team had consecutive rounds of iterative discussion and resolution of themes. The original spoken data were Cantonese. Here, we present data based on English translations, confirmed by back-translation to ensure the equivalence of the English and Cantonese versions.

Results

About half of the participants were female and 80% of the participants had tried more than a sip of alcohol on one occasion. The average age for first alcohol use was 13.1 years. More than half of the participants had experience with alcohol use in the past year whereas 34% of them drank alcohol in the past month (Table 2). Several important themes emerged from the focus group discussions.

Experience of first encounter with alcohol

Traditionally, alcohol is an integral part of Chinese culture (Tang et al, 2013) and it is commonly observed that drinking alcoholic beverages is an indispensable element in promoting conviviality in major social events such as the Chinese New Year Festival, wedding ceremonies, and other types of family celebrations or gatherings (Cochrane et al, 2003). In such cultural context, most adolescents appeared to have their first opportunity to drink alcohol at a family social gathering. Many participants reported that their first experience with alcohol occurred during a family celebration where extended family and relatives were present and where drinking was the norm.

“When having family reunion dinner at home, my dad suggested that maybe I should start learning how to drink alcohol, so he gave me a glass of beer and asked me to drink.” (male, 17 years old, past-year-drinker)

“It was at my relative’s wedding and everyone there was drinking. My dad told me to try a glass of red wine so I drank it.” (male, 16 years old, past-30-day-drinker)

The first encounter with alcohol was often considered a supervised introduction where children could learn how to drink alcohol “appropriately” from their parents or other family members. Overt pressure from senior members of the family to try drinking was reportedly not uncommon. Some participants described that they were coerced into drinking.

“My family visited relatives in Mainland China over the Lunar New Year holidays... We went out for dinner. I was not planning to drink but my grandpa asked me to try some. When I tried, he asked me to try more...so I tried and tried...In the end, I drank so much.” (male, 15 years old, past-year-drinker)

“Generally, older relatives will pour the drink into your glass after they order it. Then, it is impossible not to drink...so I drink with them.” (female, 16 years old, past-year-drinker)

One of the key motivations for experimenting with drinking was curiosity, particularly when the alcohol drinking opportunity was regarded to be part of a celebratory experience. Overall, the first exposure to alcoholic beverages was commonly characterised as a negative experience where the taste of alcohol was described as “bitter”, “weird” or “stinky”. For some participants, the effects of the first sip contributed to strong reinforcement to not trying alcohol again and

subsequently were instrumental in establishing themselves as non-drinkers. The majority of non-drinking participants pointed out the taste of alcoholic beverages as one of the main reasons for not drinking.

“I thought that it should taste great but after I drank it, wow, it tasted horrible. I have no idea why people drink. I will not drink again.” (female, 17 years old, non-drinker)

“I think it [alcohol] is really stinky. I don’t know why people are so happy when they drink. I only felt like throwing up.” (male, 15 years old, non-drinker)

This implies that trial drinking does not necessarily develop into occasional or regular drinking behaviour among Chinese youths. Nonetheless, as we will see below, the negative first experiment could be easily reversed by the sociability value of alcohol when drinking is supported by a sense of group belonging.

The shift from supervised to non-supervised drinking

While alcohol is introduced in a family celebration for early experimentation commonly in the presence of parents, there was little evidence from the study that adolescents regularly drink alcohol with family members. Hence, learning to drink alcohol is not usually extended to an act of regular drinking with parents. Drinking with family members on special family occasions was described as a more common activity.

The trajectory from the first sip and experiment through to occasional and established drinking was observed in the accounts of participants’ own experiences. As mentioned above, alcohol has a symbolic importance with its presence indicating the celebrations within the Chinese culture and this was not exceptional for this age group. Across the focus groups, alcohol consumption was seen to be “appropriate” at special occasions for Chinese youths such as friends’ birthdays, school breaks, celebratory events marking educational achievements (exams), Lunar New Year Festivals and Christmas. Although drinking did not occur on a regular basis for the majority of our participants, the most often cited reason for drinking was “increased enjoyment and happiness” that could not possibly be achieved when sober.

“We [friendship group] exchange greetings for Lunar New Year. When we have dinner together, there must be a bottle of red wine or beer around.” (female, 17 years old, past-year-drinker)

Apart from the celebratory function of alcohol, collective consumption of alcohol was viewed as an essential step in bonding with peers. As forging close friendship and consolidating group belonging emerged as an important theme, it is clear that drinking alone (consumption for its own sake) is not commonplace amongst adolescents.

“When hanging out with friends, it would be much more fun if there is an alcoholic drink.” (female, 17 years old, past-30-day-drinker)

“It [alcohol] represents the friendship we all share, that is, the kind of feeling that we are friends.” (male, 15 years old, past-year-drinker)

“Everyone would want to talk with no boundaries.....alcohol makes us more relaxed” (male, 16 years old, past-year-drinker)

This underlines the perceived significance of social settings where adolescents prefer to use alcohol – teenagers like to consume alcohol in the company of peers. The places in which they drink include parks, playgrounds, local food stalls, karaoke, and friends’ homes when parents were out or away. Most notably, all-you-can-eat Chinese hot pot restaurants were consistently cited as a popular hangout venue where adolescents could help themselves to alcoholic drinks without restrictions. What is noteworthy from the findings was that maladaptive motivations for drinking, commonly identified in the past research (i.e. drinking to cope or escape), was not paramount in our study sample (Kuntsche et al, 2005; Anderson et al, 2011). While alcohol was an emotional prop and something to turn to in difficult situations for a small group of participants, the majority of participants reported the positive effects of alcohol on group processes.

Knowing your boundaries

Unlike studies elsewhere that observed consumption of larger amounts of alcohol amongst adolescents (Miller et al, 2007, Degenhardt et al, 2013), there was little indication that Chinese

adolescents use alcohol to pursue intoxication. Overindulgence or unruly excessive drinking did not appear to reflect the reality of Chinese adolescents' drinking behaviour. Chinese adolescents rarely drank until they lost control or passed out although some reported to have experience of intoxication (males were slightly more likely to report episodes of drunkenness).

"You know your own limitations when you drink alcohol, and my friends know their limitations too. When you are aware of your own boundaries, you know when you need to stop." (male, 16 years old, past-30-day-drinker)

Certain factors did seem to be associated with moderate use of alcohol among our participants. At an individual level, many participants reported that they consciously tried to adjust what they drink or pace their consumption because they did not want to "do something you'll regret". Since consumption of alcohol was generally "chilling" with friends away from home, staying out of trouble and avoiding unruly behaviour that may jeopardize the benefits of drinking was paramount. For example, many participants expressed a desire to control their drinking level out of concerns about getting home and the response of parents. The perceived importance of negative aspects of drinking, particularly the physical effects, was also tied to participants' explanation for avoiding intoxication.

"Well, I don't want to be paralytic. I just don't like to go that far. My parents will make life hell for me if I do so [drink to excess]." (male, 16 years old, past-year-drinker)

"I don't want to get drunk. I had a nasty experience. I was sick after I drank too much. I wished I never drank then." (male, 15 years old, past-year-drinker)

Additionally, the consumption of alcohol was primarily seen to facilitate socialising and hence the effects produced by moderate forms of consumption, of creating a sense of peer affiliation and relaxation, were a desired goal by the vast majority of participants. Once the idea of drinking moderately was upheld as a peer group norm, the sense of tact as well as the self-regulation by each member of a drinking group emerged to be of great importance. For example, it was often said that it is preferable to be "in harmony" with friends' drinking and that it is better and more fun to have cheerful conversations with friends rather than "completely losing it." Uncontrolled

drinking was commonly felt to be inappropriate, interfering with the social benefits of alcohol consumption and spoiling the occasion for those involved. Thus, getting “wasted” was never on the cards for most of them because it does not seem to be a culturally valued activity.

“We drink to get happy, have a laugh but not to cause trouble or to get angry.” (female, 17 years old, past-year-drinker)

“People [friends] find it quite annoying if someone carries on drinking and does stupid things to the point that everyone around him feels uncomfortable. He can be ditched afterwards (laughs)” (male, 17 years old, past-30-day-drinker)

At the same time, participants did not always make rational or fully thought out decisions or act in their own best interests. Alcohol itself often inhibited rational reasoning and this further complicated conscious decision making. Some of our participants admitted that they did get drunk on occasions and the immediate effects of intoxication (such as making a fool of themselves, not being able to walk straight) were described as “fun” by some. However, “remaining in control after drinking” was the overriding importance when drinking for the majority of them.

The choice of non-drinking

Although alcohol plays a symbolic role in social activities among Chinese adolescents, this does not mean that a non-drinking member of the group is likely to drink against his/her own will. Drinking does not necessarily represent an emblem of group membership and hence non-drinking peers usually have no problems with blending into a group of drinking friends. Commonly reported reasons for maintaining non-drinking behaviour among abstainers include having low tolerance of alcohol (e.g. Asian flush) and disliking the smell and taste of alcoholic beverages. Across our sample, it was evident that Chinese adolescents value the rights of peers to make individual choices.

“My friends do not ask me to drink because they know that I don’t drink.” (male, 15 years old, non-drinker)

“My friends’ response [to non-drinking] was like, huh, are you joking? But they soon let me order something else.” (male, 16 years old, non-drinker)

“They are my friends. They don’t care [whether I drink or not]. They drink theirs and I drink mine [soft drink]” (female, 16 years old, non-drinker)

Hence, drinking does not appear to define or affect friendship for either drinkers or non-drinkers (Fletcher, 2012, Huang et al, 2013). Some participants mentioned that trying drinking was something that “some friends do but others don’t do.” Therefore, friendship groups do not seem to be defined by drinking behaviours. However, some abstainers noted that being sober within drinking situations was sometimes intolerable, making them feel “odd,” “awkward” and “less sociable”.

“If everybody is drinking and if you are the only one who is not drinking, that would be a bit embarrassing.” (female, 15 years old, non-drinker).

Some reported that they developed strategies which helped them to rationalise not drinking. These include bringing their own soft drinks, circumstantial excuses such as feeling unwell or not being able to consume alcohol concurrent with Chinese medicine intake or just simply stating drinking preferences. However, saying ‘no’ directly seemed generally well accepted by peers as the friendship groups learned over time who drinks and who does not. Also, since the majority of our participants tended to consume alcohol infrequently, drinking alcohol was not always viewed as the main purpose of hanging out. What is notable however is that irrespective of alcohol use, most of our participants saw underage drinking as a normal behaviour provided that one drinks in moderation and knows one’s limit. The idea of ‘reaching the limit’ is widely construed as “doing oneself no physical or social harm” and “not losing control” no matter how much a person drinks.

“I think it is fine to drink with friends, like socially, but you should not drink too much.” (female, 17 years old, non-drinker)

“It must be bad if people [adolescents] drink too much. But if they can stop drinking once they reach their limit, I think it is acceptable” (male, 15 years old, non-drinker)

“People of our age can try as long as they are already in secondary school. It is okay to drink unless they become insane after drinking such as getting into a fight, smashing glass etc.” (male, 17 years old, past-30-day-drinker)

By and large, the perceived normality and acceptance of underage drinking was a key theme running through accounts of both drinkers and non-drinkers. This finding underlines the pervasive notion that underage alcohol use is a normal behaviour among Chinese adolescents.

Discussion

This study used qualitative methods to provide a picture of Chinese adolescents’ alcohol learning process located within cultural norms and values. This study illustrates that drinking is inherently a social act (Douglas, 1987) – it occurs mostly in the context of family and social networks. The traditional Chinese drinking culture, characterised by coming together for celebrations, signifies the Chinese adolescents’ first alcohol experiment. On the whole, the first taste of drinks was experimental, yet such experience seems to signal, albeit inadvertently, that underage drinking is a socially acceptable behaviour. Our findings also reveal that cultural norms and values as much as individual perceptions play a central role in Chinese adolescents’ decision to drink.

Consistent with studies conducted in the West (Bryant, 2006; Jackson, 2012), parental expectations appear to be significant in shaping teenagers’ attitudes to alcohol and their subsequent drinking behaviours. Although Chinese parents attempted to initiate their children into tasting alcohol and/or supported a supervised trial mainly during special family occasions, a strong parental disapproval of intoxication was perceived by many participants. These parental expectations, albeit rarely discussed and often implicit, were suggested to create a cautionary attitude towards alcohol use, in particular managing risks associated with excessive drinking, among underage young people. While more research is needed to explore how parents provide discipline and rulemaking surrounding alcohol use, the fact that parents play a role to a certain extent in the development of adolescents’ alcohol norm underlines the value of family involvement in youth alcohol interventions.

Our study found that Chinese adolescents' motivations for drinking were closely related to the value placed upon alcohol within the Chinese culture - promoting conviviality and sociability. Additionally, the idea of 'drinking to belong' (Seaman & Ikegwonu, 2010) was a central theme and this resonates with earlier research noting the role of peers in the adolescents' drinking behaviour (Bot et al, 2005; Leung et al, 2011). What emerged notable from the present study is that the much-discussed concepts of peer influence (i.e. friends' behaviours become more similar) and peer selection (i.e. adolescents become friends with adolescents who engage in similar behaviours) did not seem to cogently explain Chinese adolescents' drinking behaviours (Mundt et al, 2012; Osgood et al, 2013). Whereas a sense of commonality encouraged alcohol use among young people, we found that peer socialisation did not necessarily require conformity in drinking behaviour. Additionally, there was little indication that drinkers and non-drinkers separately clustered around friendship networks although accounts from some abstainers indicated that it was at times challenging to socialise and handle the uneasiness in drinking environments. These observations point to the considerable complexity in ways that peer relationships interact with drinking behaviour among Chinese adolescents.

Our study did not observe what other researchers saw a putative "culture of intoxication" (i.e. binge drinking becoming part of the repertoire of mainstream youth leisure lifestyle) (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007; Martinic & Measham, 2008; Measham, 2008) in our participants. Rather, sporadic patterns and lower consumption are typical of Chinese adolescent drinkers. Indeed, Chinese adolescents appear to exercise more self-governance than their counterparts in the West, and their views on alcohol consumption are often in line with social relations in the Chinese culture. There is evidence that Chinese culture is characterised by a coexistence of independence and individuals' obligations to social harmony (Bond, 1991). The notion of independence highlights self-expression whereas the concept of social harmony underlines seeking other's approval and adherence to social values. When a greater appreciation of peer interactions emerged as a goal of alcohol consumption amongst the majority of our participants, the pursuit of deliberate drunkenness was construed as a problem that increases risks of non-normative behaviour, a behaviour that is considered undesirable within both peer groups and society at large. The perceived importance of balancing individuality with social harmony seems to further give them a distinct sense of self-regulation which has a significant impact upon the development

of particular drinking patterns (e.g. control drinking levels similar to those of significant others and avoid incidents of loss of control) within their culture. Overall, the picture which emerges from this study is that the Chinese teenage drinking culture is not driven by a desire for determined drunkenness as central to cohesiveness commonly observed in other cultures, but is centred on moderation and self-policing at peer drinking occasions with a focus for enjoyment and intimacy.

It is important to note that there appears to be a growing acceptance of alcohol consumption by the Chinese adolescents. Regardless of one's drinking status, our participants see underage drinking as an entirely normal and accepted part of social lives provided that it is kept under control. More worryingly, the amount of alcohol consumed is not the delineator of 'being out of control'. Rather it is considered as a state where one would suffer severe adverse physical or social consequences from drinking. This is not to say that many participants did not experience the severe effects of intoxication. Arguably, to change the normalisation of underage drinking is one of the most challenging tasks. This requires an approach that values environmental and policy changes but at the same time promotes sustainable behaviour change (Hoek and Jones, 2011). Research into tobacco control suggests that creating a social milieu where smokefree behaviour is normal has fostered changes in youth attitude about tobacco and lowered smoking initiation (Pierce et al, 2012). Admittedly, evidence from tobacco research may not be fully applicable to alcohol given the discrepancies between social receptivity towards underage use of tobacco and alcohol in contemporary Chinese society which can delimit policy response on these two substances in distinctive ways - youth smoking is increasingly seen as an object of intolerance and control whereas underage drinking appears to constitute part of a celebratory practice, something which is culturally endorsed and highly ritualised (Yoon and Lam, 2012). Nevertheless, creating a new social aspiration that undermines alcohol's desirable connotations, challenges the ill-defined notion of moderate drinking and counters the images of cheerfulness underage youth associate with alcohol may serve to discourage rather than reinforce social acceptability of underage drinking (Barbor et al, 2010).

Although this study is primarily concerned with gaining insights into Chinese adolescents' perspectives on their own alcohol use, we wish to conclude with some suggestions about how

such insights might be put into practical use. As shown above, for many Chinese adolescents, moderate alcohol consumption was a common phenomenon. Wider cultural norms may in part explain this but the expectations that Chinese adolescents have established within their friendship groups could also play an important role. Peer groups can offer opportunities to practise moderate drinking styles and encourage attitudes that value self-regulation. Our finding that individual decision-making on abstinence is not necessarily eroded by peers gives further support that encouraging mixed groups of drinkers and non-drinkers can reinforce positive examples and informal controls. This can be accompanied by the provision of programmes that help adolescents avoid risks associated with alcohol and understand the long-term consequences of early initiation of alcohol use.

This study has a few limitations. While focus group interviews enabled us to observe social interactions and group dynamics, peers in the group might have influenced comments and thus some minority participants (i.e. drinkers or non-drinkers depending on the group composition) might have been more reticent to make comments regarding alcohol use (or non-use). Another shortcoming was that participants who were volunteers might have different attitudes to and experiences of alcohol use than those who did not volunteer for the study. Despite these limitations, the present study sheds light on the Chinese adolescents' own understandings and interpretations of their drinking. To conclude, our findings suggest that interventions aimed to curtail underage drinking need to reflect social and cultural contexts within which alcohol comes into play and importantly, consider social environments that are conducive to underage alcohol use.

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