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# Contemporary culture of wine consumption in Japan: women's leading role in creating the market in an asia's post-industrial context

*La culture contemporaine de la consommation de vin au Japon : le rôle prépondérant des femmes dans la création du marché dans le contexte postindustriel de l'Asie*

Article publié le 15 décembre 2021.

**Chuanfei Wang**

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Introduction

Wine consumption in Japan from Meiji (1868-1912) to contemporary era

Summary

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## **Introduction**

- 1 The consumption of wine is not simply about consuming a beverage but also appreciating a culture. To Asians, the wine has been regarded as a foreign culture, and wine has experienced different paths to acceptance in different Asian contexts. Japan is one of the earliest Asian countries to accept western wine culture. After the Second World War, it was also the first and biggest western wine consuming country in Asia. It also is said to be the most mature wine market in Asia. Currently, alongside its own wine production and wine tourism, Japan is making itself a wine country<sup>1</sup>.

- 2 Based on fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2018 and historical research, this research focuses on Japan's culture of western wine consumption. First of all, it provides a brief historical overview of wine in Japan from exotic to familiar, a process of how the culture of wine has been accepted and developed in Japan. This process can be understood as the branding or re-making of cultural values associated with wine as a foreign product. The time span covers the period, from the Meiji era, when the Japanese public first encountered wine, to contemporary times. It shows how Japanese actors, including producers, importers, writers, and wine professionals, have constructed and shaped the culture of wine consumption. Secondly, this presentation examines contemporary wine consumption culture with the highlight of women's leading role in constructing and shaping the contemporary culture of wine consumption in Japan.

## **Wine consumption in Japan from Meiji (1868-1912) to contemporary era**

- 3 Western-style wine started to appear to the Japanese public in the late 1870s. By 1880, wine had already been generally seen by the Japanese public as a symbol of civilization, which on the one hand was constructed by the national agenda of learning from the West; on the other, was influenced by royal people who used wine instead of Japanese sake to accompany French cuisine in official banquets at Rikumeikan (1883-1887), the symbol of Japan's modernization in the Meiji era<sup>2</sup>. All of this built wine an image of civilization and to a large extent nobility among the Japanese public in the Meiji era.
- 4 In the meantime, the wine was completely new to the majority of the Japanese public. The wine that the majority of Japanese people consumed was domestically produced. More importantly, it was used as a medical drink. This meaning of wine was mainly constructed by domestic wine producers against the backdrop that epidemics were very common in the Meiji period and Japanese public relied largely on medicines bought at drug stores for curing illness<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, domestically-produced wine was advertised and promoted as a med-

ical beverage, good for health and even effective in curing illness, and sold in the drug stores.

- 5 Wine's medical function was supported by health philosophy and medical science at the time. Alcohol, in general, was treated by the Japanese doctors as good if drinking moderately. The wine was identified as a source of nourishment to people who were physically weak or ill. Drinking a small amount of wine in the morning every day as part of breakfast for health consideration was already a habit among some of the intellectuals and middle class in urban Japan in the 1930s<sup>4</sup>.
- 6 By the early 1950s, the meaning attached to the maintenance of a healthy body had changed slightly, from benefiting to personal health to saving the country when the country experienced an earthquake in 1923 and wars in the following decades. All of this, however, remained to be linked to the biggest social theme of the national modernization, under which being able to maintain the health of body was an essential character of modern people's life.
- 7 In short, from the late 1870s when Japanese public encountered wine to the middle 1950s, the wine was constructed as a medical beverage by the Japanese producers and such an image was widely shared among the Japanese public.
- 8 It is worth noting that wine from France, California, and Italy had also been imported to Japan and marketed to the Japanese public since the 1880s. Compared with the Japanese produced wine, they were the minority. However, similar to the domestically produced, all of those imported western wines were also advertised as the medical drink. In other words, wine, whether Japanese or imported, was perceived by most Japanese people at the time as exclusively a medical beverage.
- 9 At the beginning of the 1960s, a new meaning of wine, as a dining beverage, a drink to accompany food, started to be known among the Japanese public. Suntory, one of the major Japanese producers, used the new term "table wine" to market its new product and made a comparison of its difference to previous products, and claimed clearly that the new products were table wine for meals<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, French wine culture was used as the "correct" ways of consuming wine to Japanese readers. Therefore, during this time, the previous

function of wine as a medical drink was started to be replaced by the new meaning of consuming wine as a dining beverage. Wine started to be incorporated as part of Japan's culinary culture. The idea of modern life, reflected in wine consumption, was linked to the enjoyment of western style culinary culture.

- 10 In the 1970s, urban Japanese people started to drink more wine produced in western countries than the ones produced in Japan. By the end of the 1980s, Japanese consumed wine twice more than its previous decade. More importantly, the consumption of imported wine accounted for nearly half of the entire wine market in Japan. Foreign wines provided urban Japanese people the "authentic" flavor of the wine. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Japanese economy performed stably, the wine was not simply a drink but also a means for the aspired and affluent middle class Japanese to show their deep pockets, sophisticated tastes, and cosmopolitan mind, "drinking the world".
- 11 By the early 1990s, western wine came to be more common than in any other time in Japanese history. However, it had remained not yet the drink for the majority of the Japanese public<sup>6</sup>. Most Japanese only knew wine's differences regarding its origin of country. As journalist Takeuchi Saori observed, by the middle of the 1990s, when restaurant staff recommended wine, they asked the customers if they wanted French or Italian wine. This started to change in the second half of the 1990s. Again observed by Takeuchi Saori in 1998, in the restaurant, staff would ask customers if they wanted Cabernet Sauvignon or other grapes<sup>7</sup>.
- 12 This change was attributed by several factors, including the news on red wine's benefit for preventing arteriosclerosis in 1994; Chilean wine started to be imported into Japan in 1996 with a lower price than the wine from Western Europe. In 1997, the importation volume of Chilean wine increased three times than the previous year.
- 13 During this time, the financial crisis in the Southeast Asian countries also turned European wine producers to make efforts to target Japan as an effective market. In 1998, a group of French wine producers came to Japanese major cities, Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka, to promote their products. Bordeaux Wine Association, along with Japanese importers, also published advertisements at Tokyo's subway stations to attract Japanese consumers, especially women, by depicting that a

Japanese woman holding a red wine glass in her hand, while sitting at the French wide stretch of beach and looking at the blue sky<sup>8</sup>. As a result, during the period of the late 1990s, all of this made a wine booming period, during which the Japanese public consumed wine more than before.

- 14 Between the 1970s and 1990s, the wine was associated with new meanings in Japanese society. The consumption of wine was linked to the individualism, including the construction of self-identities with a sense of cosmopolitanism and sophistication; and the pursuit of personal instead of collective interest. Moreover, in the late 1990s, wine enthusiasts had an attitude towards wine in common. They saw wine *kakkoi*, or cool. This image had a much more important meaning than the meaning of a cool style for Japanese people at the time. Since the economic bubble burst in the early 1990s, Japan had fallen into economic stagnancy. The Japanese term "*heisokukan*", meaning "sense of stagnation", described exactly the social sentiment at the time. Under such an atmosphere, the Japanese public felt helpless and hopeless to their life and future. Unlike Japanese sake and *shōchu* alluding "*imaich no jinsei*", meaning "dark and bad life", wine made Japanese people feel a bright and good life<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the wine was linked to the symbolism of hope for life.
- 15 In the 2000s, the wine remained highly popular among the Japanese public. A national survey conducted by the NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute shows wine ranked the second place after beer as the most popular alcoholic beverage among eighteen items<sup>10</sup>. More importantly, it overtook the popularity of sake and *shōchu*. In contemporary Japan, besides department stores and restaurants, those traditional places where people purchase and consume wine, local supermarkets, and convenient stores also provide wines at a cheaper price in general. The young generation regards wine as a daily and oshare (fashionable), but difficult. For them, knowledge is required to consume wine (Fieldwork, 2016).
- 16 This historical review is significant in understanding wine marketing in that it shows that both localization and globalization as facets of expanding wine culture according to specific economic, social, and historical contexts. In the earliest decades, when the entire Japanese society was undergoing modernization and wine was completely new

to the Japanese consumers, the wine was accepted by the Japanese public through localizing its forms of consumption and their associated meanings. Then, after the Second World War, wine culture was further developed in Japan through globalizing the forms of wine consumption and its meanings. Both localization and globalization include two aspects: one is the localization/globalization of the way of consumption and the other is the localization/globalization of the product itself.

- 17 Women in japan's contemporary culture of wine consumption
- 18 In contemporary Japan, women play a leading role in constructing and shaping the culture of wine consumption. Women are a significant group of consumers. In general, women more than men like wine. A national survey conducted in 2007 shows that women are more likely to be interested in wine<sup>11</sup>. Another survey with respondents consisted of 9,592 people living in the east, west, and north Japan conducted in 2014 also confirms the fact that Japanese women like wine<sup>12</sup>. More women than men prefer wine. This is significant to show that women have a more close relationship with wine than men.
- 19 More importantly, women are a group of consumers who are not mass consumers but the consumers know about wine. This is reflected in wine schools where women are the primary students. The Asahi Shimbun from 1995 to 2016 reported that women had been the majority of students at wine schools in major cities<sup>13</sup>. Over the past decade, the participation of wine in wine schools has facilitated to produce a Japanese wine world led by female connoisseur consumers.
- 20 "Wine Expert" is a qualification created by the Japan Sommelier Association (J.S.A.) for those who are pursuing a higher level of wine knowledge without the purpose of working as a sommelier in the foodservice industry. Between 2007 and 2018, the number of female Wine Experts was more than male<sup>14</sup>. Women have been important participants in making Japan's contemporary wine culture.
- 21 Why do Japanese women have been so enthusiastic about wine?
- 22 For many of them, the wine remained directly linked to an image and symbolism of a happy life. However, what has changed is the understanding of a happy life, which does not simply mean being inde-

pendent, but it also means the pursuit of a better quality of life. Besides, the identity of a wine connoisseur facilitates women to establish friendship networks and communities in social drinking-out settings. In particular, for housewives, wine connoisseurship grants them opportunities to participate in a social world and creates a personal domain, social life beyond housework and child-caring.

23 For some women, the significance of wine knowledge goes beyond consumption. Wine connoisseurship also provides them opportunities to work professionally in the wine-related sectors, helping them establish their identities in the social sphere. In a society with limited career options for women<sup>15</sup>, wine connoisseurship has created them alternative job opportunities. Wine-related jobs provide a comparatively flexible schedule in which women can balance work and their private lives and reproductive roles.

24 More importantly, wine connoisseurship also provides a means for women to construct a culture of wine tasting. This is explicitly exemplified by the recently-established annual wine contest, Sakura Japan Women's Wine Award, a competition initiated in 2014 by a female sommelier running an institution of wine education and culture. The uniqueness of this contest is that all of the judges are Japanese female sommeliers and wine professionals. They conduct a blind tasting and judge wines from inside and outside of Japan. In 2016, 380 women wine professionals worked as judges to examine 3,543 wines from 35 countries. The aim is to bring women's lives and wine closer together. Ultimately, this contest aims to promote the consumption of wine at home<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, this contest selects wines preferred by women who consider the balance of the taste, food pairing, and price<sup>17</sup>. Like women's wine classes, this female-exclusive wine contest highlights the feminized tasting culture of wine in Japan.

25 In short, women construct a contemporary Japanese culture of wine consumption with their wine connoisseurship as "professional" consumers, making wine culture of tasting rather than simply consuming. The meanings of wine for Japanese women include the association of wine with self-identity construction and negotiation including the improvement of the quality of life, the pursuit of a happy life; the link of wine connoisseurship to an identity as an independent woman; and, the use of wine knowledge as a way of developing social



ties. These meanings are ascribed by linking some of the images of wine shared globally, such as the cosmopolitan, elegant, romantic, relaxing, slow, soft and environmental-friendly (organic farming and wine). More importantly, these meanings have made Japanese women a leading power in creating a local wine culture, in which they are not only consumers but also cultural agents, as it is shown in the women-only contest, indicating (presumably) female preferences in wine taste and style.

## Summary

- 26 This article has sketched briefly the history of consuming western wine and highlighted women consumers in Japan. Based on this case, it provides some insights into the contemporary culture of wine consumption in Japan and hints of expanding wine culture in Asia. It emphasizes the importance of understanding regional wine history and also the growing role of women in the industry, not only as customers.

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### **English**

This research focuses on Japan's culture of western wine consumption, based on historical research and fieldwork conducted from 2012 to 2018. First of all, it provides a brief overview of wine in Japan from an exotic to a familiar beverage, a process of how the culture of wine has been accepted and developed in Japan. This process is understood as the branding or re-making of cultural values associated with wine as a foreign product. Secondly, it examines contemporary wine consumption culture with the highlight of women's leading role in constructing and shaping the contemporary culture of wine consumption in Japan and shows that women construct a contemporary Japanese culture of wine consumption with their wine connoisseurship as "professional" consumers, making wine culture of tasting rather than simply consuming.

### **Français**

Cette recherche se concentre sur la culture de la consommation de vin occidental au Japon, sur la base de recherches historiques et de travaux de terrain menés de 2012 à 2018. Tout d'abord, elle fournit un bref aperçu du vin au Japon, initialement boisson exotique devenue boisson familière, processus marquant la façon dont la culture du vin a été acceptée et développée au Japon. Ce processus est compris comme le marquage ou la refonte des valeurs culturelles associées au vin en tant que produit étranger. Deuxièmement, l'étude examine la culture contemporaine de la consommation de vin en mettant l'accent sur le rôle prépondérant des femmes dans la construction et le façonnement de la culture contemporaine de la consommation de vin au Japon. Elle montre que les femmes construisent une culture japonaise contemporaine de la consommation de vin grâce à leur connaissance du produit en tant que consommatrices "professionnelles", faisant de la culture du vin une dégustation plutôt qu'une simple consommation.

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### **Mots-clés**

vin japonais, culture de consommation du vin, femmes japonaises, consommateur de vin

### **Keywords**

Japan, wine consumption, wine consumer culture, Japanese women, wine consumer

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**Chuanfei Wang**

Institute of Comparative Culture, Sophia University