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# Learning to Drink Sorghum Liquor: Taste and Consumption in Military Front-Line Jinmen, Taiwan

Chang-hui CHI

**Abstract:** This article asks why sorghum liquor, once a drink choice representing the taste of a dominant class, became a token of Jinmen identity among the islands' dominated local population. Being a Cold War battlefield, war-stricken Jinmen became a symbol of the Kuo-mintang government's determination to recover mainland China. Military authoritarianism transformed Jinmen's society in countless ways, including consumer fashions. The mass production of sorghum liquor began in 1953, with the military promoting its taste and establishing consumption of the liquor as part of a masculine ethos. This inspired mimicry among local consumers. Sorghum liquor became a local "traditional drink," and a signifier for an identity that revolved around its consumption. This development arose from local consumers seizing on their limited freedom by making this consumption choice and making it their own under military authoritarian rule. Consumption and taste thus gave new meanings to local identity and community subjectivity.

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**Keywords:** Taiwan, Jinmen, sorghum liquor, consumption, identity, authoritarianism

**Dr. Chang-hui Chi** is Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Center of General Education at National Quemoy University, Taiwan. Her long-term research interests concentrate on Chinese overseas in Southeast Asia, state and local society, and folk religion of Taiwan. In recent years she has conducted multi-sited research into religious change in Jinmen and in Singapore. Her latest research project concerns the construction of spatial and religious networks through pilgrimages to several major Goddess Mazu temples in Taiwan, in an attempt to understand the impact of globalisation on folk religion in the island nation.

E-mail: <changhui.camellia@gmail.com>

## Introduction

The Jinmen Islands are a group of 12 islands in the Taiwan Strait at the mouth of Xiamen, including Greater Jinmen, Lieyu, and several other islets. In the Republic of China's (ROC) administrative hierarchy, the Jinmen Islands are a county under Fujian's provincial jurisdiction. The total area of Jinmen County under the ROC is 150 square kilometres (58.9 square miles) (Li 2009).

The Kuomintang (KMT, Guomindang) regime was an authoritarian party state. The state apparatus had highly centralised power, and civil society was either quiescent or withered (Winckler 1984). In 1949, the KMT government declared martial law in Taiwan, the Penghu Islands, and other offshore islands. The situation grew dire in Jinmen when the People's Republic of China (PRC) sent troops to invade the islands in October 1949. KMT regiments in Jinmen managed to defeat the invading People's Liberation Army in the Guningtou area, a northwest corner of the island, in less than three days (Szonyi 2008). Once the KMT government claimed victory at Guningtou, it had the military stationed there take over the local government and they officially declared Jinmen to be under military administration (军事管理, *junsbi guanli*) in November 1949 (Jinmen xianzhi bianxiu weiyuanhui 1992: 594). As a result, Jinmen was at once subject to both martial law and military rule from 1949 to 1992.

The military authorities practiced authoritarianism and transformed these marginal islands in countless ways, including even consumer fashions. When they began to mass produce sorghum liquor in 1953, they promoted their own judgment of taste – and established consumption of the liquor as part of a masculine ethos. This masculine culture evolved into a local drinking one that branded the imbibing of sorghum liquor as proof of good taste among local civilian residents. This article examines how local drinking culture in Jinmen grew through the adoption of ruling class tastes in spirits, and how that resulted in the linkage of the social practice of drinking to a specific local identity. In Jinmen, this collective consumption created the field for a shared identification and an imagined community.

This is my entry point to exploring the role of consumption in relation to local identity. The article focuses on the martial law era, from 1949 to 1992. The emergence of Jinmen residents' taste for strong spirits and its articulation in conjunction with local identity took shape during this period.

In 2008, I conducted a project on the history of sorghum liquor with special reference to the phases of improving production technology. While interviewing retired workers of Kinmen Distillery (now Kinmen Kaolong Liquor Inc.), I randomly inserted questions regarding their first contact with sorghum liquor – as they had had chances to taste what it was like when most local residents still had no idea about it in the 1950s. Their responses corroborated each other; that is, they never had liquor as strong as its sorghum variety prior to 1949. In 2016, I completed follow-up interviews with four local residents and the owner of a local eatery. All these interviews were informal, with a variety of questions asked. I also utilised primary sources from government publications, such as different editions of the *Jinmen Gazette* (金門縣志, *Jinmen xianzhi*) and statistical yearbooks in order to trace the trajectory of consumption choices.

This article first explores the intricate relationship between consumption, taste, and drinking. Then I outline the historical background, namely the rise of military authoritarian rule in Jinmen – which shaped the islands into a “bastion of freedom” vis-à-vis communist China. Following on, I discuss the inception and expansion of the sorghum liquor market and the later development of etiquette – specifically how the process of taste mimicry shifted, and where the formation of identity took place. The article concludes by arguing that consumption and taste can give new meanings to local identity and community subjectivity.

## Consumption, Taste, Drinking

Ever since humans discovered the magic of fermentation in prehistoric times, drinking wine and beer has always played an important part of social life. In *Constructive Drinking* (1987), Mary Douglas considers drinking a productive activity as well as a way of life. Marion Demossier (2010) has demonstrated the intricate relationship between wine consumption and French national identity. She points out that the association of drinking wine with cultural values in France is a recent phenomenon, suggesting that although imbibing alcohol had deep roots among the earliest humans, its cultural manifestations could be quite modern. Daniel Miller (1995, 1998) also provides new perspectives on the relationship between alcoholic consumption and

identity formation. His work focuses on the reproduction of meaning through such acts of consumption.

One important value in a drinking culture hinges on taste – differentiating good from bad alcoholic beverages. Taste can be a personal preference or a cultural choice. At the same time, taste is usually developed in tandem with consumption – which can also be personally or culturally determined. Georg Simmel (Frisby and Featherstone 1997), in his discussion of fashion, argues that taste is associated with differentiations in social strata. Simmel conceives fashion as a popular form of style hinging on how people from the lower strata follow the upper ones' judgments of taste. However, as soon as fashion style is appropriated by the lower class, the upper class discards it and adopts a new standard in order to sustain a demarcation that symbolises the difference between the two social groups. In this way, consumption and decisions about taste are individualistic developments and yet also form a collective identity across social groups (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 196).

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) did not reject Simmel's theory that taste is mimicry of the upper echelons of a given culture. Yet he went slightly further, arguing that legitimate taste lies in the preferences chosen by the dominant class in opposition to those of the working class. He stated:

It must never be forgotten that the working-class “aesthetic” is a dominated “aesthetic,” which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics. (Bourdieu 1984: 41)

The subtitle to his 1984 book – *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* – suggests that for Bourdieu there is no pure judgment of taste. He located the realm of consumption within the field of power relations, where the distinction of taste becomes the basis for social status. The dominant class refers to people who have access to and possession of cultural capital and can define what constitutes taste. The acceptance of dominant tastes is seen as a form of symbolic violence, a means of naturalising and perpetuating the distinctions that taste marks off (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Taste leads also to consumption choices. Karl Marx's (1990) notion of commodity fetishism, when relations between people are disguised as relations between things, marks the consumption of goods as the appropriation of commodities and transforms the subjective into the objective. Consumption can also be a way in which

we imagine relationships with others (Graeber 2011), with social setting providing the framework for consumption choices.

In Jinmen, consumption options were determined by the military authorities whose apparatus scrutinised import and export commodities between Jinmen and Taiwan in the name of military security and preparation for war. Despite these circumstances, by being accepted by the dominated locals this commodity provided an overarching sense of belonging that incorporated the consuming subjects into a “We” group against the “Other”: the dominant military. I will now elaborate on the process by which the consumption of sorghum liquor marked this turn towards becoming a signifier for local identity.

## Military Authoritarian Rule

In 1949 the Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) government proclaimed that the nation was now under martial law. In addition the people of Jinmen also entered an era of militarisation, with military rule imposed throughout their society and culture. As part of this militarisation, social space in Jinmen was turned into an anti-communist fortress so as to demonstrate military supremacy. A labyrinth of tunnels and fields spiked with anti-parachute stakes and pillboxes became prominent features on the islands. Anti-communist slogans came to be seen on the walls of private homes and on public buildings across Jinmen.

When the military authorities declared Jinmen under their administration in November 1950, the three military administration districts of Jindong, Jinxi, and Lieyu were set up in place of a county government (Jinmen xianzhi bianxiu weiyuanhui 1992: 540). However by 1953 the military had decided to restructure local government. Then in 1956, the KMT government implemented its “Experimental Scheme of War Zone Administration in Jinmen and Mazu” (金門馬祖地區戰地政務實驗辦法, *Jinmen Mazu diqu zhandi zhengwu shiyan banfa*) to legitimise this ad hoc militarisation. The objective in providing this legal basis for war zone administration was to make Jinmen a symbolic fortress against communist China, and therefore a bastion of freedom (Szonyi 2008: 26). According to the Experimental Scheme, governing authority was given to the War Zone Administration Committee in Jinmen (金門戰地政務委員會, *Jinmen zhandi zhengwu weiyuanhui*, WZAC), composed of high-ranking military officers

from the Jinmen Defense Headquarters (金門防卫司令部, Jinmen fangwei silingbu, JDH). The commander of the JDH concurrently chaired the WZAC. As a result, the military became the state's agent in the governing of Jinmen.

Under this scheme, the WZAC – while being relegated by the government residing in Taipei – ruled Jinmen in a markedly authoritarian manner. All the central government's branch offices in Jinmen were subject to the WZAC, not to mention the county government and the KMT county branch. The WZAC was the superior of county government in all domains. It appointed military officers whose ranks were equivalent to those in the civilian bureaucratic hierarchy to top positions in all offices of the county bureaucracy and in institutes under its direct jurisdiction. For civilians, the JDH and the WZAC were two sides of the same coin.

The military authorities kept a firm grip on civilian society. Individuals were kept under perpetual surveillance and forced to serve in militia. The authorities set up a mutual surveillance scheme (五户联保, *wuhu lianbao*) in which every set of five households formed a unit within a given village. This mutual policing unit was the basic administrative operation through which the military kept civilians under close watch. Constant household registration checks were another means employed to track individuals' movements and to seek out saboteurs (Chi 2000). The militarisation of front-line Jinmen thus placed its society under the most rigid possible implementation of martial law. An idiosyncratic war economy consequently developed under this military rule.

## The Birth of Jinmen Sorghum Liquor

The Chinese Civil War had pushed the nation's economy to the verge of collapse. Taiwan also suffered extremely high inflation and a shortage of material goods after the KMT government retreated there. Although the number of troops in Jinmen increased, the military there received little logistic support from Taiwan (Hu 1976). The first commander of the JDH, General Hu Lian, tried to limit Jinmen's reliance on Taiwan. To support local military expenditure, he ordered – among other measures – the production of sorghum liquor in an effort to make the Jinmen Islands financially self-sufficient. Sorghum liquor was a direct product of the process of militarisation, and its

success was far beyond Hu's expectations. According to a newspaper report, sales of Jinmen sorghum liquor accounted for 80 per cent of the Taiwanese market for this type of spirit in 2016 (Wu 2016). This popularity fundamentally shaped Jinmen people's daily life culturally, economically, and politically. Growing sorghum more or less improved household incomes, and consumption of sorghum liquor created a new drinking culture. Finally, by accepting this liquor the people of Jinmen – in addition to being subjected to political coercion – submitted to the symbolic violence of the imposed taste of the military apparatus.

Sorghum liquor, a strong spirit, was long popular in central and northern China, but was not widely consumed in the south. Prior to 1949, residents of Jinmen grew sorghum as a supplement to their diet. There were 18 wineries in Jinmen when military rule was established, but their major products were rice wine and yam liquor. Tang Xinbang, a winery owner in Jincheng, may have been the first person to begin producing sorghum liquor in Jinmen. He acquired the fermentation techniques from a distillery in Xiamen. According to an interview with Tang, that production site – known as Jinyuan Distillery – made sorghum liquor in Xiamen in the Republican period. The Xiamen distillery produced sorghum liquor because it was a branch of Jinyuan Distillery in Tianjin, Hebei Province, whose major products were sorghum liquor and rice wine. Tang went to Xiamen to learn the techniques of making sorghum liquor in 1945, and started making it at his own winery in Jinmen as early as 1948 (Yang and Lin 2001: 32). His version of it did not, however, trigger the liquor's mass production.

Ye Huacheng, the owner of Jincheng Winery, may not have been the first Jinmen resident to manufacture sorghum liquor but it was his product that Hu later used as the foundation for launching the broader making of the spirit. Ye decided to try a new product for his new winery around 1950, when he hired two soldiers to begin making sorghum liquor (Chi and Lin 2009). Ye's product impressed Hu. It inspired the latter to set up a distillery in September 1952, which started producing exclusively sorghum liquor in January 1953 (Hu 1976; *Zhengqi Zhonghuabao* 1953). Hu then appointed Ye to be the director of the technological division of the distillery, whose name was Jiulongjiang Distillery until 1956 – when it changed to Kinmen Distillery.



This production site originally came under the supervision of Fujian Province, which transferred authority to the WZAC in 1956 after the name change. When martial law was abolished in 1992, the JDH then transferred Kinmen Distillery to the Jinmen County government. It is now, as noted earlier, called Kinmen Kaoliang Liquor Inc. and operates under the county government's supervision. It is entirely a local government enterprise. All the net operating profits go to the local government. As a result, Jinmen County is one of the richest local governments in Taiwan. No one, not even Hu, could have foreseen in the 1950s such a glorious achievement coming about.

In a related development, in July 1953 the Taiwan provincial government issued the "Temporary Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Regulations" (台湾省内烟酒专卖暂行条例, *Taiwan shengnei yanjiu zhuannmai zhanxing tiaoli*) to restrict the sale and production of tobacco and spirits to the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau (台湾省烟酒公卖局, *Taiwansheng yanjiu gongmai ju*). Technically, the monopoly law did not apply to Jinmen, which fell under the jurisdiction of Fujian Province of the Republic of China. However, the monopoly regulations provided the legal foundation for Jinmen's military authorities to shut down private wineries in that same year. Hence, the "Temporary Regulations for the Administration of Tobacco and Wine of Fujian Province" (福建省政府管理金门烟酒暂行办法, *Fujian shengzhengfu guanli Jinmen yanjiu zhanxing banfa*) were adopted on 1 December 1953. For reasons that are not clear, Hu – the chairman of Fujian Province and, as noted, commander of the JDH – revoked the monopoly regulations the following year (Li 2009).

In a Gramscian sense, hegemony is the making and remaking of a dominant conception of reality. This seems to be applicable to the Jinmen wine producers too. Those subjugated owners of wineries did what they were told, and never dared to resume business even after the monopoly regulations seemed to have been lifted. Among these producers, spontaneous compliance was a tactic for coping with the hegemonic military authorities.

Traditional yam spirits soon disappeared from the market thanks to the closure of local private wineries, leaving the door open for the development of new tastes. When the production of sorghum liquor first kicked off, its alcohol content ranged from 30 to 70 per cent; yam liquor in comparison never went higher than 35 per cent alcohol content. During the era of military rule, Jinmen men learned to drink

the stronger liquor, and the military thus unintentionally created a new local drinking culture. In 1996, when I first went to Jinmen, people I met there told me that sorghum liquor was their “traditional drink.” Yushan sorghum liquor made in Jiayi County, Taiwan, as well as a version made in the Mazu Islands – another military outpost of Taiwan in the Cold War – have proved no match in terms of price and quality.

## Official Taste and the Consumption of Sorghum Liquor

Once Kinmen Distillery had succeeded in mass-producing sorghum liquor, it ran an advertisement – in the form of an article – in the military’s official newspaper the *Chinese Righteousness Daily* (*Zhengqi Zhonghuabao*) on 1 February 1953. Advertising is at heart geared towards enticing individuals to participate in the consumption of certain commodities, and so the article in the *Chinese Righteousness Daily* made a number of pitches aimed at attracting consumers to this emerging product. It stated that each bottle (0.5 litres) sold for just TWD 5.4, claiming that this was a real bargain. The article apparently established the military’s endorsement of sorghum liquor as a “legitimate taste,” by declaring a preference for it over yam liquor and other alcoholic products from Taiwan (*Zhengqi Zhonghuabao* 1953).

This narrative was reinforced at official events. Sorghum liquor appeared at the functions entertaining then-president Chiang Kai-shek, domestic high-ranking officers and officials, as well as foreign guests whenever the ruling government invited them to visit Jinmen (Jinmen xianzhi bianxiu weiyuanhui 1992). Sorghum liquor was the one and only spirit served at banquets that the military hosted. As mentioned above, sorghum liquor products came with different alcohol content levels. When the military authorities hosted banquets, they always served strong sorghum liquor, not the low-alcohol versions. This emphasis on quality was especially true when the “White Golden Dragon” (58 per cent alcohol), also known as “White Label,” hit the market in the 1960s. Civilians knew very well that high-ranking officers’ favourite spirit was White Golden Dragon. However, it was expensive. Civilians reserved use of the best liquor for weddings.

## Learning to Drink Sorghum Liquor

### Consumers' Drink Choices

Kinmen Distillery's first sorghum liquor product was priced, as noted, at TWD 5.4 per bottle. This initial product's name is not available to ascertain, but the distillery did make versions that had various levels of alcohol content. High alcohol products included the Red Label *daqu* (大曲) (68 per cent) and Yellow Label (60 per cent) liquors. Lower alcohol content products included a *maisui* (麦穗, "wheat stalks") label at 45 per cent, *baigan* (白干, "white liquor") at 30 per cent, and the Yellow Dragon at 35 per cent.

The price of these liquors rose along with the alcohol content. *Daqu* was priced at TWD 12, becoming the most expensive Jinmen liquor product manufactured in the year 1953. The higher pricing has to do with the distilling techniques. The first round of liquid liquor coming out of the distilling process contains 60 to 70 per cent alcohol. One hundred kilograms of sorghum produce less than 50 litres of liquor. Low-alcohol liquor is blended with water or lower-alcohol liquids collected in different phases of the distilling process. Hence, its price is cheaper because it is diluted. High-alcohol liquor contains a richer aroma and its colour is crystal clear; the low-alcohol version's aroma, meanwhile, is less appealing and its color not as brilliantly clear (Interview 1 2018).

However, having the highest alcohol content did not guarantee selling well on the market. *Daqu* lost its first-place position in the Jinmen sorghum liquor bestseller list to White Golden Dragon, which contains, as noted earlier, 58 per cent alcohol. Jinmen Distillery discovered that sorghum liquor with 58 per cent alcohol content is particularly smooth, and presents a unique aroma that consumers enjoyed. Later, the market proved that Jinmen Distillery's judgment of taste was sound.

These local liquor commodities were not the only drink choice, since local spirits continued to compete with alcohol products imported from Taiwan. Maintaining sufficient supplies of rice, salt, cooking oil, and other necessary commodities with key logistical importance was the military authorities' ultimate concern. The "Jinmen Defense Committee Resource Supply Depot" (金门防卫司令部政务委员会物资供应处, Jinmen fangwei silingbu zhengwu wei yuanhui wuzi gongyingchu; hereafter, the Supply Depot) came into existence

to regulate the import and export of supplies to and from Taiwan. The JDH originally named the organisation the “Canton Military Depot” (粵華官兵合作社, Yuehua guanbing hezuo zongshe). The institute then revised its name a number of times, as its assigned functions also changed. The final official name – “Kinmen Defense Committee Resource Supply Depot” – was adopted in 1964 and lasted until 1992 (Xu 2002: 49), when martial law was finally lifted and the regulations on logistical supplies vanished.

If consumption serves the function of satisfying personal desires and fulfilling pleasures, under martial law locals’ choices were limited. The Supply Depot decided on what the “politically correct” commodities for soldiers and residents to purchase were, as will be discussed later. The Supply Depot’s second objective was to profit from trading. Taiwan-made alcoholic drinks tended to be low-fermentation wines with low alcohol content compared to distilled liquor. The only strong spirit product was the sorghum liquor made by the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau’s Chiayi Distillery. The latter began to produce sorghum liquor one year ahead of Jinmen, in 1952. Taiwan-made sorghum liquor was of course excluded from the import list. Jinmen’s sorghum liquor was largely export-oriented, with Taiwan its biggest market. The total number of civilians and stationed infantry living in Jinmen, even at the height of the Cold War, never topped 150,000 (Szonyi 2008). Such a small population could contribute little to the sale of sorghum liquor, particularly before the 1970s when the average household income was low and soldiers’ salaries were meagre. Imported Taiwanese wines were cheaper than Jinmen-made sorghum liquor products of varying alcohol levels (see Tables 1 and 2 below), and sales of the former were far stronger in the local market (Jinmen xianzhengfu zhujishi 1968, 1972). The Supply Depot, then, could profit from importing, among other things, wine, liquor, and tobacco from Taiwan. Its earnings from the sale of sorghum liquor in Taiwan financed the local government’s annual expenditure (Guo 1979: 113). It goes without saying that Jinmen civilians drank more Taiwanese wines than local sorghum liquor before the 1980s. But if sorghum liquor was not the major consumption choice, then how did it become a key signifier for local identity?

Table 1. Prices of Popular Wines from Taiwan between 1949 and 1971, in TWD

Beverage (alcohol content)	Beer (4%) per bottle	Rice wine (22%) per bottle	Red rice wine (17%) per bottle	<i>Wujiapi</i> (20–25%) per bottle
1949	2.20	NA	1.70	0.80
1950	7.00	2.00	4.00	3.50
1951	7.00	2.60	6.00	3.50
1952	10.00	2.60	7.00	3.50
1953	10.00	4.00	7.00	4.00
1955	10.00	4.00	10.00	4.00
1956	14.00	6.00	10.00	6.00
1959	14.00	7.00	10.00	6.00
1960	17.00	8.00	14.00	6.00
1962	19.00	9.50	16.00	7.50
1963	16.00	9.50	14.00	7.50
1965	17.50	9.50	14.00	7.50
1966	17.00	9.50	14.00	7.50
1967	17.00	9.50	14.00	7.50
1968	16.00	9.50	14.00	7.50
1969	16.00	9.50	14.00	7.50
1970	16.00	9.50	14.00	7.50
1971	16.00	9.50	14.00	7.50

Source: Taiwansheng yanjiu gongmai ju 1954, 1960, 1971.

In the 1950s, Yu Seyao was the head of Jinmencheng Village – where the distillery remains located to this day. He recalled how *baigan* and Yellow Dragon liquor were more popular than the *daqu* and Yellow Label products. He thought that it was because family incomes were low in the 1950s. Village heads had no monthly salary in the early period of military rule. A fellow villager of Yu, named Chen, worked at the Kinmen Distillery and recounted his experience of drinking sorghum liquor. He started with *maisui* (45 per cent alcohol) and shifted to stronger spirits when it was eventually dropped from the market in the 1960s. Chen added that *maisui* was welcome because it was cheaper than high-alcohol products on the one hand, and because its alcohol content was not too strong for local people on the other. In addition, it had a hint of sweetness that made it easier for

novices to drink. The *Jinmen Statistical Yearbook* (Jinmen xianzhengfu zhujishi 1968) records the sales of *baigan* and *maisui* sorghum liquor commodities as higher than those for the Yellow Label version in 1959. The recorded sales are consistent with Yu’s personal account. Chen Duquan, who was also a village head of Yangzhai Village during the martial law period, stated that sorghum liquor was expensive, and that it was consumed only on important occasions – such as weddings. From his point of view, people usually drank rice wine, medicinal *wujiapi* (五加皮), and plum wine – all of which were imported from Taiwan. Such wines were classified under routine drinks, while local sorghum liquor was an expression of taste since it was saved for special occasions.

Table 2. Prices of Jinmen Sorghum Liquor between 1953 and 1974, in TWD

Beverage (alcohol content)	<i>Baigan</i> (30%) per bottle	<i>Maisui</i> (45%) per bottle	Yellow Dragon label (35%) per bottle	Yellow Label (60%) per bottle	<i>Daqu</i> (70%) per bottle	White Golden Dragon (58%) per bottle
1953	6.00		5.40	8.50	12.00	
1953	6.00	12.50	NA	20.00	25.00	
1953	5.50	12.50	NA	19.00		
1956		15.00	NA	24.00 13.00 (half bottle)		
1959		22.00		26.00		
1962		22.00		35.00		
1963					70.00	
1965						45.00
1974						60.00

Source: Li 2009: 235–269.

When the aforementioned White Golden Dragon sorghum liquor went on the market in 1965, the distillery gradually stopped making

the “softer” alcoholic beverages. *Baigan*, *maisui*, and Yellow Dragon all disappeared from the shelves. Locals born after 1970 barely knew that there had once been low-alcohol sorghum liquor products. Since that decade, the White Golden Dragon, Red Label *daqu*, and Yellow Label products have continued to be the most popular in Jinmen and Taiwan. Among these three major commodities, White Golden Dragon has been the bestseller in both Jinmen and Taiwan. All these products contain a high alcohol content, ranging from 58 to 68 per cent. Jinmen sorghum liquor’s reputation as a strong spirit has become essential to its popularity. Nevertheless, local consumers are also keen on drinking the less potent Yellow Label. In the distilling process, the latter – like the old *maisui* liquor – goes through an extra wet fermentation procedure that adds a touch of sweetness to and reduces the sharpness of a strong spirit. In addition, it is cheaper than both White Golden Dragon and *daqu* (see Table 2 above).

Although the distillery no longer produces lower alcohol content beverages, local consumers have found *wujiapi* medicinal wine to be a great substitute. According to the Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Law, Taiwan Province controls the production and sale of tobacco and of spirits of any form. Under this law, Taiwanese spirits can be sold in Jinmen, but not vice versa. Jinmen was then a tiny market in terms of sales and consumption, and exporting to Taiwan would accommodate the expanding demand for Jinmen-produced liquor. So the military-supervised local government signed a contract with the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau in 1954. The Monopoly Bureau ordered 20,000 *jin* (斤, one Taiwanese *jin* is equivalent to 0.6 litres) of liquor monthly. The Taipei Distillery used it as the basis for *wujiapi* medicinal wine (Li 2009), with an alcohol content of 23 to 25 per cent, similar to that of *baigan* and Yellow Dragon (30–35 per cent). *Wujiapi* was one of Taipei Distillery’s bestsellers during Japanese rule (Fan 2002: 88). The retail price of it was TWD 4 in 1954 and then rose to TWD 7.5 between 1956 and 1972 (Taiwansheng yanjiu gongmai ju 1997), which was cheaper than beer at that time. In other words, it was less expensive than any sorghum liquor products produced in Jinmen until the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau halted production in 1972 (see Table 3 below). When Jinmen residents drank *wujiapi* liquor, they were in fact simply drinking diluted Jinmen sorghum liquor infused with Chinese herbs. Drinking *wujiapi* helped Jinmen residents, especially women, become acquaint-

ed with and come to appreciate the distinct flavour of sorghum liquor. *Wujiapi* and other early low-alcohol sorghum liquor products helped Jinmen consumers learn to accept the unique taste of this spirit.

When White Golden Dragon entered, as noted, the market in 1965 it soon became the military's favourite variety. But local consumers and soldiers from the lower ranks preferred Yellow Label over White Golden Dragon because of price. Cai Shimin of Qionglin Village recalled that his wedding table liquor was Yellow Label in 1978. The latter's retail price was then about TWD 50 per bottle, while White Golden Dragon ran to TWD 115 per bottle. It was probably not until the late 1980s and into the 1990s that people would feel White Golden Dragon liquor had become affordable, whereafter it reached mass popularity. Emulating the military's taste for strong drink became fashionable once people's household incomes had increased.

## Of Taiwan Beer and Jinmen Sorghum Liquor

I have described the meanings that Jinmen consumers vested in Taiwan wines and local sorghum liquor. The symbolic properties of commodities change in different historical contexts. As a token of taste, Jinmen sorghum liquor competed fiercely with Taiwan Beer in the 1980s.

As Table 3 below shows, it defeated *wujiapi* to become the most popular Taiwan-made alcoholic beverage in 1970. Beer has been the bestselling Taiwanese-made alcoholic beverage in Jinmen since then. Competition between Taiwan Beer and Jinmen sorghum liquor peaked in the late 1970s and 1980s as household incomes improved overall. For the islanders, there was a great relief to move from living under the shadow of war and the risk of being hit by a leaflet shell fired from China (Chi 2000). This period also coincided with Taiwan's own economic take-off. The Jinmen Islands, meanwhile, began to prosper during the second half of the 1970s. In 1973, the average household monthly income was TWD 4,753. By 1976, that had soared to TWD 8,374.50. Five years later (1981), it climbed further to TWD 18,913 (Jinmen xianzhengfu zhujichu 1995). Sales of Taiwan Beer reached three million kgs in Jinmen in 1983.

A major setting for the alcohol consumption war between beer and sorghum liquor was wedding banquets. In the 1980s the well-to-



do family of a groom would have been inclined to serve beer to express social status: serving beer for a table of 10 guests (who usually consumed at least two dozen bottles of beer between them) cost TWD 384 (USD 9.6), while such a table drank at most one bottle of White Golden Dragon – with a retail price itself of TWD 160 (USD 4). In a close-knit community, a wedding banquet typically has no fewer than 50 tables for more than 500 guests. Taiwan Beer, then, became the means to show off a family’s wealth and generosity through consumption choices.

Table 3. Top-Five Bestselling Alcoholic Beverages Imported from Taiwan between 1968 and 1982, in Kgs

Year \ Item	Beer (4%)	Rice wine (22%)	Red rice wine (17%)	Shaoxing wine (14%)	Wujiapi (23%)
1968	330,430	388,366	351,675	15,033	670,597
1969	376,496	536,809	368,472	27,515	672,918
1970	558,727	630,145	315,612	16,396	413,291
1971	721,122	647,723	313,842	22,608	317,468
1972	834,505	895,741	302,977	21,929	187,344
Year \ Item	Beer (4%)	Rice wine (22%)	Red rice wine (17%)	Shaoxing wine (14%)	Double Deer Wujiapi (23%)
1973	1,084,502	1,276,214	189,703	21,029	21,074
1974	1,294,564	1,543,955	150,580	33,742	36,581
1975	864,004	2,090,787	121,860	24,999	62,974
1976	1,222,373	1,811,483	99,157	32,747	54,165
1977	1,352,444	1,564,529	104,889	50,495	58,698
Year \ Item	Beer (4%)	Rice wine (22%)	Red rice wine (17%)	Shaoxing wine (14%)	Plum wine (16%)
1978	2,027,864	1,579,067	216,361	86,049	15,021
1979	2,821,595	1,188,414	165,105	60,609	357,046
1980	3,052,505	1,174,664	178,130	135,303	261,784
1981	2,490,502	477,195	141,918	43,508	137,912
1982	2,319,568	563,303	148,253	82,452	140,960

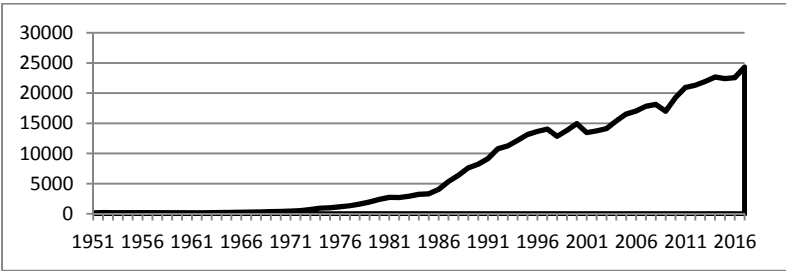
Sources: Jinmen xianzhengfu zhujishi 1968: 146–50, 1972: 184; Li 2009: 92–93.

The battle between Jinmen sorghum liquor and Taiwan Beer continued into the 1990s, when the price of a bottle of White Golden Dragon was eventually adjusted to TWD 350 in 1995 – more than a two-fold increase. This immediately made it the most expensive sorghum liquor on the market. At this higher price, White Golden Dragon soon replaced Taiwan Beer as the symbol of generosity as well as taste at weddings.

While the competition between Taiwan Beer and Jinmen sorghum liquor for the wedding drink of choice was at play in Jinmen, it was a completely different scenario in Taiwan during the 1980s and 1990s. Taiwanese drinkers never doubted the supreme quality of Jinmen sorghum liquor over its Taiwan-made counterpart. White Golden Dragon and aged sorghum liquor were hot commodities all year round, and were particularly desired during Chinese New Year. My friend Liu Xufeng told me once that his father would try everything within his power to obtain at least one bottle of White Golden Dragon as the drink of choice for Chinese New Year prior to 1990. Jinmen sorghum liquor's supply to Taiwan could not meet market demand due to the aforementioned monopoly law limiting the amount imported there; the island nation's economic take-off was another reason for this.

Taiwan's economy was, as noted, on the rise in the 1980s. When martial law was lifted there in 1987, gross domestic product (GDP) per capita was over USD 5,000. In 1992 it reached USD 10,778 (Figure 1 below). Economic growth stimulated greater individual expenditure on luxury goods, such as on the most expensive Jinmen sorghum liquor on the market. In 1986, a newspaper article reported that Jinmen sorghum liquor was out of stock in Taiwan, leading to consumer complaints to the Taiwan Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Bureau (*Lianhebao* 1986) via retailers. This fight among Taiwanese consumers over Jinmen sorghum liquor, especially around the Chinese New Year holiday, continued until the regulations on the permitted quantity that could be imported were lifted as a result of the ending of martial law in Jinmen in 1992. The sale of Jinmen sorghum liquor has run under market demand ever since then (Wei 1992). Taiwanese consumers' loyalty in drinking Jinmen sorghum liquor has been phenomenal, and has made it the most popular such commodity in Taiwan until today.

Figure 1. Taiwan’s GDP per Capita, in USD



Source: Adapted from Zhonghua minguo zhuji zongchu 2018.

## Drinking Etiquette

Drinking is a cultural performance integral to social life. At banquets in Jinmen, men cannot choose soft drinks over alcohol without risking being isolated at these important occasions, where they consequently would not be able to engage in the social relationships of drinking. Drinking cements men’s social relations because it is something they do not normally do alone and because banquets are occasions where men toast one another, expressing and building relationships. Drinking is a two-sided activity, because toasting is reciprocal. The host usually makes the first toast to all the guests. The person proposing the toast then announces how much should be drunk, either a sip or “bottoms up” (Harrell 1980; Smart 2005). It is considered impolite if one does not toast in response. Toasting rituals diminish social hierarchy, contribute to communal solidarity, and enhance men’s bonds with other men.

One particular drinking custom is unique to Jinmen. When a dish of fish is served, the tail is usually positioned pointing towards an important guest. That person then toasts everyone at the table before cutting the tail with chopsticks. Then all the other guests may start eating the fish. This is a way for the host to express his or her respect to the guest of honour.

During the period of military rule, civilians rarely drank with officers. This normally occurred only as part of a religious ritual, when local elites would invite military leaders to banquets. Mr. Lu from Xi Village on the east side of the island stated that village elites would invite officers of the nearby unit to celebrate the village patron deity’s birthday. Sorghum liquor, as noted the military’s favourite drink, was

of course served to please village elites and the officers. Village elites were always happy to have the military officers present at their banquets, since it gave them “face” (honour). At such moments, toasting between villagers and military officers seemingly enhanced the social bonding between them. Villagers had misconceptions about being equal to the dominant class. With respect to the officers, toasting helped prove that they maintained harmonious relationships with civilians.

When sorghum liquor entered the market in Jinmen, most poor families could not afford appropriate wine cups. People drank yam liquor from rice bowls because it was low in alcohol content. But a full bowl was too much to take for strong spirits like sorghum liquor. Traditional porcelain wine cups are called *jiuzhen* (酒斟, Minnan: *tsiu tsin-a*), and their volume is slightly larger than that of a teacup – about 30 to 40 cubic centimetres. An old fashion wine container (Minnan: *tsiu pan*) is made of tin (see Figure 2 below). In the early decades of drinking sorghum liquor, rich families did so from porcelain wine cups, while the poor drank from porcelain spoons. Cai Shimin (70 years old), for instance, stated that his family could not afford porcelain cups. He described how people sipped sorghum liquor from spoons. Men would sit around a round or a square table. Four rice bowls were placed in the four quadrants, with a spoon in each bowl. When toasting, one held out a spoonful of liquor from a bowl near him. Drinking sorghum liquor from spoons was a local custom that continued for many years. Some young men between 30 and 40 years old corroborated Cai’s account; they remember toasting with spoons instead of wine cups or glasses as their earliest impression of adults drinking sorghum liquor. Cai mentioned that plastic wine cups and wine glasses came later. Ye Qingxin, the owner of a restaurant that opened in 1958 in Jincheng, shared Cai’s memory. It was common for people to drink sorghum liquor using bowls and spoons, said Ye. When his father ran the restaurant, he managed to use porcelain wine cups for guests (usually soldiers). Later, water glasses replaced porcelain cups. The volume of a glass cup is 150 cc; this is equal to four *liang* (兩) in the Taiwanese weight system. Therefore, this type of glass cup is also called *siliang bei* (四兩杯, “a cup of four *liang*”). The *siliang bei* is widely used for both water and beer in Taiwan.

Today Kinmen Distillery produces its own set of glasses that includes a decanter with several shot glasses, locally known as *yi kou bei*

(一口杯, see Figure 3 below). The host first pours the liquor into the decanter of about 180 cc to 200 cc in size, and then pours again into each shot glass for his guests. The size of a shot glass is about 10 cc. Jinmen consumers adopted this manner of drinking as soon as the new set became available. Consuming sorghum liquor according to this drinking etiquette has become part of a distinctly Jinmen lifestyle in the wake of military authoritarian domination.

Figure 2. Traditional Wine Container and Wine Cup Imported from Mainland China Prior to 1949



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Figure 3. Kinmen Distillery Designed this Set of Decanter and Shot Glasses



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## Sorghum Liquor as the “Traditional Drink”

The meaning of sorghum liquor has shifted from an expression of the military’s drinking taste to a local Jinmenese “traditional drink.” The military created drinking culture that grew around the liquor advanced local civilians’ cultural capital. We can see this in another development that took place in 1979, a watershed year in the militarisation of Jinmen. The normalisation of diplomatic relations between the PRC and the United States had a dramatic impact on Taiwan. Facing the loss of international status while domestic dissidents drummed up support for democratic reform, the military was forced to upgrade Jinmen’s military infrastructure and strengthen the regimentation of local militia training (Chi 2000; Szonyi 2008).

Under these testing circumstances, Kinmen Distillery personnel decided to start producing yam liquor in an effort to reintroduce a bygone taste to the local market. Distillery staff claimed that they had adopted the traditional techniques and processes to create a true and authentic replica of the traditional flavour. Chen Duquan of Yangzhai Village said that his friends who had drunk yam liquor before its

gradual disappearance from the market told him that its flavour had a scorched note. Even though the distillery eventually succeeded in duplicating the old flavour, sales flagged and these efforts to bring back “tradition” were ultimately a surprising failure. Why did a once familiar and popular taste meet with such a cold reception?

Informants explained why they rejected the “new” yam liquor. First, consumers complained that it was too weak in terms of alcohol content. Second, it had a subtle scorched flavour that was not pleasant to drink, though the not-so-pleasant aroma was original and authentic. This revival of yam liquor was an effort by the dominant culture to institutionalise and codify what it imagined the dominated culture to be (Anderson 2006: chapter 10). This manufactured nostalgia, seeking to remind Jinmen residents of their “true” traditional drink, did not achieve its goal. The dominant Other did not realise that civilians’ drink choices and tastes had taken on some of the preferences of the dominant class. Their rejection of replica yam liquor confirmed the connoisseurship that Jinmen civilians had developed through their consumption of sorghum liquor. In their understanding, what they drank was not just any sorghum liquor but Jinmen sorghum liquor – their “traditional” spirit.

## Conclusion

The military authorities that dominated Jinmen welcomed local residents’ embracing of sorghum liquor and the military’s taste in drink. The Tobacco and Wine Monopoly Law accelerated the closure of local private wineries. The measures taken to produce sorghum liquor to the exclusion of traditional yam liquor made manifest the military authorities’ rejection of Jinmen people’s traditional tastes. The authorities produced their preferred drink, while “shaping” the taste of the islanders. The local population was drawn into a system that gave them little choice but to participate in the military’s sorghum liquor economy, both as producers of the raw materials for distilling – sorghum and wheat – and as consumers.

This imposition of taste succeeded through the eventual naturalisation and misrecognition of power relations imposed on locals; it was, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued, a form of symbolic violence. The Xi Village case demonstrates, to a certain extent, that in drinking sorghum liquor with the military officers, villagers were un-

knowingly subjugated to this symbolic violence imposed by the dominant ruling class. However, military officers were not aware that the meaning of sorghum liquor would gradually transform from representing the dominant class's taste into a local traditional drink.

This rejection of yam liquor also reveals that local society had gained some cultural capital in the process of learning to drink sorghum liquor, since through that adaptation they were able to define their own lifestyle. Their possession of cultural capital in turn empowered the people of Jinmen to redefine their islands' sorghum liquor. Drinking Jinmen sorghum liquor became an expression of being cultured and having taste.

Consumption serves as a mechanism through which individuals can construct their identity via the object consumed (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The practice of consumption is not just a private act by consumers. It is also one of producing and reproducing meanings, social codes, and relationships (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Jean Comaroff (1985) terms such symbolic gestures as a "signifying practice." It is "the process through which persons acting upon an external environment construct themselves as social beings" (Comaroff 1985: 6). Consumption of drink thus serves as a form of symbolic mediation to link the individual to the social collective. When drinking Jinmen sorghum liquor came to be identified as "uniquely Jinmen," locals had consequently turned that liquor into a signifier representing their identity and an integral part of their shared subjectivity. By the end of martial law the consumption of Jinmen sorghum liquor became part of the local lifestyle because, from the Jinmenese vantage point, it had evolved into being their traditional drink.

Taiwan was officially admitted to the World Trade Organization in 2002. The subsequent influx of wines and spirits from all over the world did not have a great impact on the sale of Jinmen sorghum liquor products in Taiwan. In 1998, Jinmen's county government started to allocate to local welfare agencies part of the annual net profit (about an extra USD 130 million) from the sale of Jinmen sorghum liquor, so that all residents benefitted from these profits. The residents of Jinmen hence remain profoundly bonded with Jinmen sorghum liquor in the post-Cold War years. Jinmen sorghum liquor is, indeed, a *terroir* product.



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