

# SO WHAT?

POLICY BRIEF N° 7 • SEPTEMBER 2018  
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World Food  
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The UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems breaks down the barriers of knowledge on food. The **So What?** collection translates the results of research into readable conclusions for action.

## How Chinese urban families symbolically perceive and consume commercial drinks

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### KEY POINTS

- Commercial beverage consumption patterns highlight a divisive generational gap in the livelihoods of Chinese families.
- Commercial beverage consumption practices vary according to the time of day (morning, day and evening), mobility level (sedentary and active) and the type of occasion (ordinary or exceptional).
- Commercial beverages have imaginary dimensions related to health and symbolism.

China has been veering towards a consumer society since the 1980s. This ongoing trend markedly accelerated from 1995 to present, although there have been some signs of a moderate slowdown and levelling off since 2008 (Desjeux, 2012). Major concomitant investments have paved the way for infrastructure development to facilitate the mobility of goods, people and information, the proliferation of sales outlets and supermarkets, and urban development. This urban growth, combined with rural out-migration, has been pivotal in promoting building construction and industrial development. Finally, all of these transformations have fostered the emergence of a consumer middle class aspiring to an urban lifestyle while breaking away from the rural lifestyle and associated representations of the body, wellness and health.

A food transition is largely under way in China (Yang, 2006) and reshaping Chinese attitudes towards protein foods (pork consumption has sharply increased since 2000) and beverages. Competition has emerged between traditionally consumed tea and boiled water and commercial beverages, bottled water and soft drinks. The introduction of commercial drinks on the Chinese market is a prime indicator for analysing culture and social relationships in China, which in turn influence the development of this market and the health balance of

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Chinese people. We sought to gain insight into the status of commercial beverages in contemporary Chinese society via this study.

### Generational and life cycle effects

Generational differences account for the divisions observed within families (Ma, 2017). Three generations stand out: the generation of scarcity, born before 1980, that of economic reform and the single-child family, which began in 1980 (*Bāilíng Hòu* 八零后), and that of abundance, born during the 1995-2000 period. Parents of children of this latter generation have a greater purchasing power, which coincides with the significant development of the commercial beverage market.

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was conducted between November 2014 and June 2015 among 76 people in four cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Chengdu.<sup>1</sup> Semi-structured interviews of 39 middle and upper middle class male and 37 female respondents (age range: 7 to 58) were carried out (Desjeux and Ma, 2018). The qualitative study reliability was based on five principles:

- **induction**, as a way of exploring real situations based solely on methodological hypotheses. We assume that material, social and symbolic constraints may influence the actors' behaviour, as well as the impacts of life cycles or gendered divisions of labour. Decision-making is also seen as a temporal process and the result of social interactions, at least at our microsocal observation level;
- **ambivalence**, which implies that all real situations have positive and negative sides that are inseparable;
- **generalization of the range of uses** according to their occurrence, while avoiding frequency-based interpretations, which would be meaningless with such a small sample;
- **a comprehensive approach**, without value judgments or accusations. The actors' viewpoint is the stepping stone for understanding their practices and the meanings they give them, for revealing underlying social rationales, issues beyond their own perceptions or experiences;
- **a principle of symmetry** with regard to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of an initiative—the success of an initiative will always depend on the constraints of the prevailing social setting.
- We speculate that a quantitative frequency is not any more valid than the variety of occurrences, whereas it may reveal something else. (Desjeux, 2018).

1. The data presented in this article are based on a collaborative research programme on food styles in Chinese cities, jointly involving Paris Descartes-Sorbonne Paris Cité University (France), Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou, China), the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD), Agropolis Fondation, Danone Waters China and Danone Nutricia Research.

These divisions are also related to life cycle differences in China, involving (but not systematically) four main stages:

1) young non-adults from 7 to 18 years old (*未成年人* *Wèi chéng nián rén*: 'people who are not finished'): commercial drinks are generally prohibited as they are considered to be associated with leisure activities that interfere with school time. However, they are allowed—or even promoted—after sports, prior to exams or when socializing;

2) young adults from 18 years old to the birth of the first child, between 25 and 35 years old (*青年人* *Qīng nián rén*: 'green, immature person'): here there is much more flexibility in terms of social norms and bans. It is likely that this life cycle effect overlaps the generation effect, i.e. for the generation born after 1995-2000 and already accustomed to consuming commercial drinks during childhood;

3) older adults of over 35-40 years old, most of whom were born before 1980 (*中老年人* *Zhōng lǎonián rén*), are starting to care for their health, while setting a good example for their children by limiting their commercial beverage consumption. Some people in this group consider commercial drinks off limits;

4) seniors, or venerable retired people (*老年人* *Lǎonián rén*) are very concerned about avoiding health problems, while some are focused on care associated with traditional Chinese medicine. They may prefer hot drinks, such as soups, over commercial beverages, which symbolically are more associated with cold.

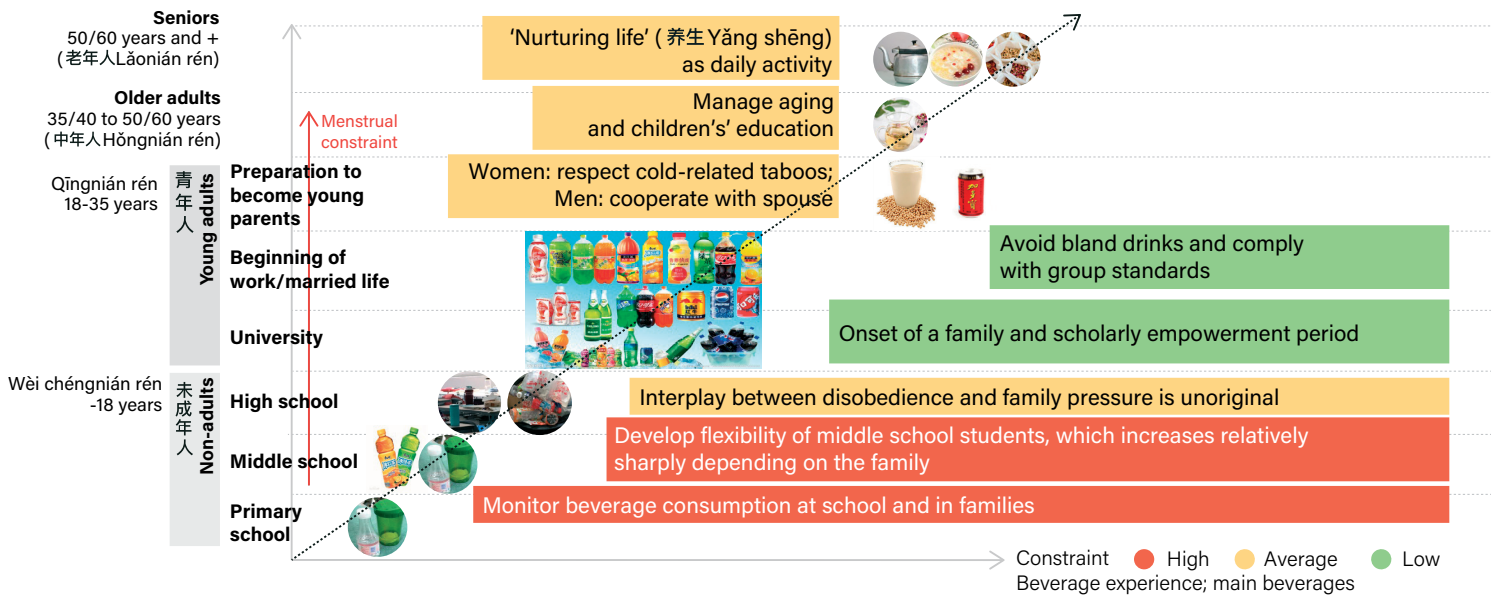
Commercial beverage consumption within families is also jointly oriented in relation to:

- changing family norms that pit traditional Confucian authority proponents—who are generally averse to sweet commercial drinks—against those who have a more flexible view of parental authority and of the conventional school system, which they prefer to be less focused on memory while fostering creativity. So negotiations between parents and children are now much more common than 20 years ago, and hence there is some flexibility in relation to commercial beverage consumption;
- objectives that families set for themselves, which are threefold: academic success, good health and socialization for children of single-child families.

### Role of social norms in the integration of commercial beverages

Beverages authorized in households must be healthy and nourishing while helping to purify the body. Traditional drinks in this domestic sphere include boiled water, homemade cereal-based soups and soy

Non-alcoholic beverage consumption patterns according to life cycle/generation of Chinese consumers



juice. Sweet commercial drinks are generally shunned. Beverage consumption varies according to the time of day (morning, day or evening), mobility level (sedentary or active) and type of occasion (ordinary or exceptional).

Commercial drink consumption norms are flexible at the workplace during the day. These places are often equipped with a kettle and/or water cooler combined with the use of thermos bottles. The evening—especially when returning from work and after dinner—is also a more flexible time when non-traditional beverages may be consumed. When commuting, many Chinese people drink traditional and/or modern beverages they have brought from home in thermos bottles, or have bought in vending machines or shops during their commute—commercial drinks are thus allowed in these circumstances.

Young people have ready access to clean drinking water at school. Commercial drinks are strictly prohibited in primary school, whereas in middle and high schools, commercial drinks may be bought in small shops next to the schools and they often drink these beverages in secret.

Beverage consumption also varies according to the occasions during which the three major social norms regarding what is prescribed, permitted or prohibited apply. Water is prescribed throughout the day on ordinary family occasions, contrary to commercial drinks, which are prohibited or just tolerated. Meanwhile, water is not recommended on collective social occasions outside the home, instead commercial drinks or alcohol are beverages of choice. They participate in Chinese face-saving strategies (*Miàn zi* 面子)—providing a way to gain face against

others. The French/English expressions ‘*perdre la face*’ and ‘losing face’, which mean the opposite, are directly derived from the Chinese (Zheng, 1994). Meanwhile, the notion of bland taste is the product of analogical reasoning (very prevalent in traditional Chinese culture), whereby a bland taste is associated with an insipid social relationship (Zheng, 1994). Serving bland water comes with a risk of losing face, of discrediting the person who invites.

Depending on the social norms of different generations and their application over the course of life cycles, industrial drinks may be integrated in family life on occasions when they are allowed, or they may compete with the norms of individual family members, particularly in terms of health and the symbolic hot/cold balance (illustration).

**Imaginary aspects, health and symbolism**

For some Chinese, representations integrated into traditional health culture revolve around two key concepts of ‘cold’ (冷 *lěng*) and ‘hot’ (热 *rè*). The basic principle is that the body is healthy when energy, or Qi (气), circulates properly, therefore when there is a hot/cold balance in the body.

Women are considered to have colder bodies due to their menstrual cycle. Hence they must ingest more symbolically hot food and beverages to rebalance the body. They must also avoid cold products and therefore commercial drinks which may be neutral, but also may be classified as cold. However, for some Chinese, commercial beverages do not fall under the hot/cold categorization system but have both positive/negative associations.

Cold drinks can threaten the efficient functioning of organs that symbolically contribute to the proper circulation of Qi, the ability to have children and the aesthetic capital that the body represents.

Boiled lukewarm water is a way of dealing with the problem of cold drinks and optimizing the Qi balance for women. This beverage has a high positive symbolic significance, so commercial drinks can, conversely, have a negative symbolic value. Some Chinese attribute great importance to this hot/cold symbolism, others consider it as a superstition, while others hover between the two positions.

Thus, depending on daily livelihoods, commercial drinks are gradually being mainstreamed into the body management system regarding hot/cold

regulation. The meaning attributed to commercial beverages parallels the evolution and cleavage dynamics of Chinese society and revolves around an axis:

- which starts with the most conventional drinks such as boiled lukewarm water, tea, herbal teas and soups—considered as the healthiest drinks according to traditional Chinese medicine;
- which follows on with mixed, modern and traditional drinks based on cow's milk, coconut milk, soya milk or cereal-based soups sold in cans;
- to finally arrive at modern drinks served cold or at room temperature, which are often considered less healthy, but more tasty and have greater social appeal. ■

## TO CONCLUDE

Ultimately, the choice of beverage appears to involve a complex trade-off that is embedded in Chinese social structures.

At the microsocial level, concerning interactions between family members, the beverage choice is constrained by fairly strict social norms that dictate what is prescribed, authorized or prohibited. It varies depending on the tensions pervading members of different generations, between those who prioritize traditional Chinese tea and hot water beverages and those who prefer modern commercial drinks.

On a more individual level, the choice is also a trade-off between good health and pleasure objectives, between healthy but bland drinks, such as boiled water, and commercial drinks that are tasty but sometimes unhealthy. Sometimes the least unwholesome commercial drink is chosen, thus striking a good balance between pleasant taste and healthiness.

This trade-off takes into account the price (especially when the consumers are young), the brand (an indicator of the sought-after quality and taste), and the hot/cold symbolism, which contributes to shaping the Chinese imagination regarding body and health.

Finally, such beverage choices vary according to the three main educational goals of Chinese parents: academic success, health and good socialization. These goals are crucial because single-child Chinese families have prevailed since 1980, and these children are the focus of all of the parents' and four grandparents' affection. The socialization issue is thus essential—even decisive—in the commercial beverage consumption context.

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