

Refereed article

From Arabian Nights to China's Bordeaux: Wine, Local Identity, and Ningxia's Place within the Chinese Nation

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Abstract

Ningxia, a comparatively small and underdeveloped autonomous region for China's Muslim Hui minority in the country's northwest, has increasingly received attention as the home of Chinese grape wine in both domestic and international media. This image of Ningxia as a home of wine is comparatively recent, and significant in several regards: first, wine fills a void in Ningxia's local image-building strategy for tourism and trade, which had emerged from the abrupt abandoning of an earlier strategy of stressing Ningxia's identity as a Muslim region. Second, wine is an agricultural product that is highly compatible with an urban, modern, and middle-class lifestyle as conceptualized by the dominant party-state discourse. Third, this framing lays claim to a new self-confidence in China's domestic wine market, which is expected to be able to compete internationally in terms of both quantity and quality. Ningxia wines have been winning a number of international awards in recent years, and the region at the eastern foot of the Helan Mountains, belonging to its capital Yinchuan, is aspiring to become an equivalent to France's Bordeaux, while also building up a distinct Chinese wine identity. As such, Ningxia wine is linked to Chinese nationalism: wine serves as both a global marker of taste and prosperity and source of local identity. Building on theories of nationalism and globalization, this paper traces the discourses surrounding Ningxia wine via ethnographic observations and several interviews conducted during a six-month field stay in Yinchuan in 2019, as well as through analysis of academic discussions, news items, and social media posts.

Keywords: Ningxia, wine, food nationalism, agricultural modernization, cultivation and taste, regional image-building, Chinese lower-tier cities

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Introduction

When the People's Republic of China celebrated its 70th anniversary on October 1, 2019, with its traditional parade at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, all provincial-level administrative units were represented by colorful floats ornamented with objects symbolizing the country's different regions. The float of Ningxia, a comparatively small and underdeveloped autonomous region for China's Muslim Hui minority in the country's northwest, was prominently decorated with wine grapes. This framing of Ningxia as a home of wine is comparatively recent (no such grapes were present at the 60th anniversary in 2009) and received symbolic backing from General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party Xi Jinping choosing to visit a vineyard there in June 2020.

The leading role of Ningxia in building China's domestic and international wine reputation has been established at least since 2011, when a wine by Château Helan Qingxue (贺兰晴雪酒庄) won "Best Bordeaux Varietal over £10" at the 2011 Decanter World Wine Awards, the first of several international prizes for a variety of wines from Ningxia châteaux (Howson and Ly 2020, 3). The *World Atlas of Wine*, one of the seminal guides to the field since 1971, included China for the first time in its 7th edition in 2013. Its current 8th edition maps the country on three of its 416 pages, with Yinchuan's Helan Mountain region the only one being depicted as a close-up (Johnson and Robinson 2019, 388–90). In addition to the specialized press, Ningxia as a wine region has featured in various international-media outlets over the last few years: the *New York Times* (Sasseen 2015), the Netflix Series *Rotten* (Harper 2019), the BBC (McDonald 2020), or the German *Zeit Magazin* (Yang 2021), to name just a few examples.

Ningxia wine's recently received domestic emphasis and international attention hint at its significance going beyond the local economy and the interest of sommeliers. Research by Rytönen et al. (2021) in the context of Georgia, one of the oldest wine-producing countries worldwide, has shown that wineries use storytelling to relate their products to national identities. Moreover, as Kjellgren contends, wine might be a product for the elite, but it is produced "not only for those who actually drink it" (2004, 27). In other words, discourses around wine have implications beyond the world of enology. Ichijo and Ranta investigate the relationship between food culture and nationalism, arguing that food is "fundamentally political in many ways" (2016, 1). They maintain that regional and ethnic differences in the culinary world have been incorporated into national identities, and that the latter are constructed in both a bottom-up and top-down manner (2016, 4ff).

Callahan posits that the "China Dream," a concept linked to "national rejuvenation" that was first advocated by Xi in 2013, "is able to encompass both individual dreams of happiness and collective dreams of national strength" (2017, 256). The party-state discourse is thus not only laying claim to the proper form of nationalism but also channels individual aspirations into the directions it considers appropriate. Following the above authors, I argue that Ningxia wine relates to a number of aspects

relevant in the construction of Chinese national identity (secularization, modernization, cultivation, and globalization), ones that are reflected both in the current party-state discourse as well as in the bottom-up practices of producers and consumers.

In this paper I will show that this newly strengthened role of Ningxia wine is significant in several regards: on the local level, first, wine fills a void in Ningxia's image-building strategy for tourism and trade, which had emerged from the abrupt abandoning of an earlier strategy of stressing Ningxia's identity as a Muslim region. With the country's recent drive to Sinicize religions, Islam has been marginalized and no longer plays a part in representing Ningxia to the outside. That it is an alcoholic beverage replacing Islam in Ningxia's image-building can be interpreted as symbolically stressing a Han-centric form of secular modernity. Second, it will be illustrated that wine is an agricultural product that is highly compatible with the urban middle-class lifestyle conceptualized by the party-state discourse, more so than the much more widely consumed *baijiu* (白酒) grain liquors. Agriculture has long lost its once dominant role within China's economy, and the countryside has been largely portrayed as backward and in need of modernization, yet wine manages to frame the rural within an urban logic.

Third, I argue that Ningxia wine lays claim to a new self-confidence in China's domestic wine market, which is expected to be able to compete internationally in terms of both quantity and quality. Wines from Ningxia have been winning a number of international awards in recent years, and the region at the eastern foot of the Helan Mountains, belonging to its capital Yinchuan, is aspiring to become an equivalent to France's Bordeaux, while also stressing a distinct Chinese wine identity. As such, Ningxia wine is linked to Chinese nationalism: wine serves as both a global marker of taste and prosperity and source of local identity. Building on theories of nationalism and globalization, I use an interpretive approach to analyze the multiple layers of meaning in the discourses around Ningxia wine. The aim is to contribute to our understanding of the way food production and consumption practices are linked to idealized class aspirations, as well as of the relationship between local identities and nationalism under the conditions of globalization.

Core data include recorded in-depths interviews with a winemaker (I1), a wine trader (I2), and a person aspiring to become a wine expert (I3). A number of ethnographic observations and informal conversations conducted during a six-month field stay in Yinchuan in 2019 and two shorter stays in the years before also contribute here. In addition, social media posts by the above informants are also drawn on, complementing the recorded interviews and informal conversations. The individuals I select in this paper for their connection to wine constitute a convenience sample within a larger pool of interviews I conducted during my fieldwork on urbanization and social change in Yinchuan. Following Keller (2011, 80f, 92f) and Alpermann and Fröhlich (2020, 124), I use interview data as discourse statements, buttressing them with an analysis of textual resources such as Chinese academic literature, news

items, and wine-related websites. These provide a link to the larger discursive field on these matters, which is structured according to the logic of the party-state (see Alpermann and Fröhlich 2020, 112) and which should be seen as interacting with, rather than isolated from, the situation on the ground.

After a brief overview of the history of wine in China and the development of Ningxia wine, the transition between Ningxia's image-building strategies from flagship Muslim city to China's Bordeaux will be illustrated. Then, the role of wine within China's view of a modernized agriculture and its symbolic role as an aspirational product for the middle class will be discussed. In closing I link these discussions to aspects of globalization and nationalism.

The history of wine in China and Ningxia

Chinese wine history from antiquity to modernity

For many Chinese, even those with an interest in wine tasting, grape wine is still widely perceived as a Western import (Zhang 2020, 638; Kupfer 2021, 34). While the Chinese word *jiu* 酒 often gets (mis)translated into “wine,” it usually refers to alcohol obtained from grain, rice, honey, or milk. Grape wine is usually portrayed as at best marginal to Chinese culture and history, even though China has more than 40 native grape varieties¹ (Kupfer 2021, 31). As Kjellgren (2004, 11 ff) suggests, the history of grape wine (葡萄酒) in China can be told from three starting points: (1) Han dynasty historiography depicting wine as a Eurasian import in the first century BC; (2) the introduction of modern winemaking to China in the late nineteenth century; and, (3) the development of the contemporary wine industry after 1978. While acknowledging that some authors speculate that Chinese winemaking may have existed as far back as three to seven millennia ago, Kjellgren largely dismisses these claims as mere attempts to find native roots of Western phenomena, summed up by the phrase “it was there already in antiquity” (古已有之) (2004, 14).

In contrast, Kupfer (2021, 29) rejects the narrative of wine being an import to China as a “Western cliché,” one that he believes is becoming increasingly cemented by the rejection of Chinese nationalistic tendencies. He argues instead that in China, like elsewhere, the earliest forms of alcohol fermentation did in fact involve grapes. In 2004, archeological evidence for wine production dating back 9000 years was unearthed in Jiahu (贾湖), Henan province, making it the earliest evidence for grape wine in the world so far (Kupfer 2021, 33f). Kupfer compellingly claims that grape-wine culture had been native to certain parts of China far longer than conventionally presented.

Nevertheless, Sima Qian's account in the *Shiji* 史记 (Records of the Historian) of *vitis vinifera* entering Han dynasty China between 138 and 119 BC via Central Asia

1 These grapes are distinct from *vitis vinifera*, the plant from which most wine is produced worldwide.

following an expedition by General Zhang Qian serves as the generally cited starting point in the historiography (Kjellgren 2004, 15; Li 2011, 49). According to Löwenstein (1991, 14ff), it is questionable whether wine in China was produced on any significant scale in Han-Chinese areas before the seventh-century Tang dynasty; he believes that only from AD 640 did wine production spread from what is present-day Xinjiang via Gansu to the capital Chang'an and further to the east. Kupfer sees this trend as having already started earlier, identifying Persian and Sogdian traders as key actors in establishing flourishing viticulture. The latter had its center around Taiyuan in Shanxi province at the time, a region still recognized for its wine by Marco Polo in the thirteenth century (Kupfer 2021, 134, 146).

In any case, the history of wine in China is certainly linked to the country's northwest, where winemaking predates the introduction of Islam in the eleventh century and is frequently associated with non-Han people. While the Tang dynasty saw a peak in Chinese grape-wine popularity throughout the empire — as reflected in, but not confined to, the world of the literati — production in the Han-Chinese heartlands declined during the Song dynasty, when instead tea and distilled liquors (such as *baijiu*) were on the rise (Kupfer 2021, 152, 186). Although some references to grape-wine production and consumption can be found for subsequent dynasties in the historical records (Löwenstein 1991, 18ff), there is little doubt its importance would later pale in comparison to that of grain liquor and other spirits. Grape wine became an almost exotic product during the Ming and Qing dynasties, with it largely restricted to the country's elite and often associated with Western missionaries (Kupfer 2021, 214f). This is quite different from large parts of Europe, where in antiquity and in medieval times wine was seen as a daily necessity by all classes (Lukacs 2012, 34).

The beginning of a new phase in China's viticulture is attributed to “patriotic returned Overseas Chinese” Zhang Bishi (1841–1916), a successful business owner in Southeast Asia who in 1892 founded China's first modern winery, Changyu (张裕), in Yantai, Shandong. Zhang imported various European grape varieties as well as European technology, and his wine won a gold medal at the 1915 Pacific-Panama International Exhibition in San Francisco (Kjellgren 2004, 18). Despite Changyu's early success, the history of wine in China remained sketchy and fragmented during the troubled twentieth century. While attempts were made to expand winemaking after the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the large social and economic upheavals of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution hindered these developments (Löwenstein 1991, 33).

Chinese wine since the reform era

From the 1970s winemaking started to slowly recover, but it was not before China's reform and opening-up era from 1978 onward that the contemporary wine industry was able to emerge (Kjellgren 2004, 22). The early 1980s saw the establishment of large joint ventures with foreign expertise, resulting in industrial wineries such as

Great Wall Wine (长城葡萄酒), Dynasty Wine (王朝葡萄酒), and the aforementioned Changyu — the winery with the longest history in China, and today again the largest in the country. Wine production in the early reform period was very limited, though numbers are not always reliable and differ depending on one's sources (see Löwenstein 1991, 64ff).

According to the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization, wine production in China amounted to just 15,000 tons in 1978, 128 times lower than the 1,922,148 tons that would eventually be produced in 2018 — which now ranks the country as the fifth-largest wine-producing country worldwide after Italy, France, Spain, and the United States. It should be noted that the production numbers of the traditional winemaking European countries (as well as the world's total production) actually decreased over this 40-year period (FAO 2021). Such vast growth to China's wine industry was not linear. Production first started slow and steady in the 1980s, saw a minor slump after 1989, but received a massive boost in 1996 when Premier Li Peng publicly advocated for more grape-wine consumption in order to reduce *baijiu* drinking. He saw the latter not only as unhealthy but also as wasting too much of the country's grain harvest (Kjellgren 2004, 17). Drinking wine thus received the blessing of the state and became connected to its development.

From the late 1990s and throughout the first decade of the new century, China's vineyard area, wine production, and wine imports all increased significantly (Anderson 2018, 471). As China was entering the World Trade Organization in 2001, an article in the *People's Daily* reflected on the steps needed to make Chinese wine compatible with the world wine market. Examples were to integrate it into international rules and regulations but also to abandon large-scale factories in favor of smaller wineries (酒庄) supposed to combine Chinese and Western cultural elements (Feng 2001). The term *jiuzhuang* is often translated to the French *château* ("castle"), which refers to a particular form of winery originating in the Bordeaux region and serves as a model for Chinese wine development, as will be illustrated below.

In subsequent years, many smaller vineyards and châteaux were developed across the main wine regions of the country, which include eastern ones like Shandong, Hebei, and Beijing as well as Western regions like Ningxia and Xinjiang (Li 2011, 57). Ruffle (2015) provides a firsthand account of the difficulties involved with setting up such a château in the middle of the first century of the new millennium, including dealing with competing interests on land usage among various local government actors, quality issues vis-à-vis construction work, finding the right grapes for local climatic conditions, and marketing the finished products — which for most of the population remain luxury items.

Within this luxury-goods sector, China experienced a boom in expensive wine imports in the later part of the first decade of the new century, particularly involving certain prestigious Bordeaux brands such as Château Lafite, which fetched astronomical sums at auction (Maguire and Lim 2015, 231). However, after Xi's

anti-corruption crackdown in 2013, the sale of expensive wines — both domestic (Ruffle 2015, 132) and imported (Howson and Ly 2020, 10) — fell sharply. This disruption is credited with a shift in market behavior away from buying wine as prestige objects and gifts and toward a more taste-driven consumption (Howson and Ly 2020, 10), the implications of which will be discussed in due course. Wine imports subsequently were dominated by cheaper Australian wine, which profited from a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) between the two countries until punitive tariffs of up to 218 percent effectively shut it out again in 2021 (Bagshaw 2021). Meanwhile, the quality of Chinese wine itself had begun to increase and received recognition both within the country and abroad.

Still, more than 90 percent of the alcohol consumed in China consists of *baijiu* and beer, a trend that appears to be continuing (Wang 2021). Since the mid-2010s, Chinese vineyard expansion has slowed, and overall wine production and consumption have been shrinking. In 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, production dropped by 16 percent and consumption by 17.4 percent compared to the year before (OIV 2021, 3ff). It is in this context that the ostensive state backing of Ningxia wine — as indicated by the early-mentioned grape-based decoration of the Ningxia float at the 2019 Tiananmen Square parade as well as by the high-profile visit of Xi to a Ningxia winery in June 2020 — needs to be analyzed.

The development of Ningxia wine

Ningxia, one of China's smallest provincial-level units, offers ideal conditions for viticulture in its northern Yinchuan plain — an oasis receiving shelter from the Helan Mountains against the sands of the nearby Tengger Desert to the west and irrigation via a network of canals linked to the Yellow River to the east. As Zhang et al. (2020) recount, a wine industry slowly emerged in Ningxia from the 1980s — but only when domestic demand for dry wine grew from the mid-1990s did it eventually find a market. However, the few larger companies active here struggled with the cold winters and insufficient growing techniques, and, as late as 2003, Ningxia wine did not seem a sound investment. To improve production quality and craft a more sophisticated image for the wine region, the Ningxia government under Party Secretary Chen Jianguo 陈建国 pushed for a strategy called “Small châteaux, large production region” (小酒庄、大产区), which, in line with the national development goals, no longer relied on large industrial companies but on many individual wineries. Large-scale private investment (mostly from business owners with no connection to wine) and public subsidies were combined to build up a château-based wine region from the midpoint of the twenty-first century's first decade.

The Helan Mountain region became a protected geographical appellation in 2003, officially marking it as what the wine world calls “terroir,” while provincial-level wine regulations followed in 2012 (Zhang et al. 2020). According to my informants (I1, I2), there were 80 to 100 châteaux operational in the region by 2019, though one wine trader (I2) told me only around 30 might in fact be fully so. Zhang et al. (2020)

speak of 86 wineries in 2020. In any case, within a comparatively short space of time Ningxia has become China's most recognized wine region — an unlikely development when one takes into account its demographic setting.

Ningxia wine's relationship to local identities and Chinese nationalism

Secularization: From a Muslim flagship region to a wine mecca

Ningxia is officially designated an autonomous region for the Hui people, a Muslim minority that makes up around one-third of the region's population. Unlike China's nine other recognized Muslim minorities, such as the Turkic Uyghurs in far-western Xinjiang, the Hui are not linguistically distinct from the Han. Instead, the Hui have been categorized as one of China's 55 ethnic minorities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) by the PRC solely on account of their religion, making their *minzu* status de facto an umbrella term that comprises communities of various different Islamic schools, identities, and degrees of piety (Gladney 1996, 262ff).

While Hui can be found across all of China, and many communities in the east are almost indistinguishable from their Han neighbors, Ningxia Hui generally have a strong ethnoreligious identity, while the region itself is one of the main centers of Islamic life in the country. The latter saw strengthened transnational ties to the Muslim world as China's reform and opening-up era gathered pace in the 1980s. As I have described elsewhere (Malzer 2020), Ningxia's capital Yinchuan had in fact been branded and ornamented as China's de facto flagship Muslim city until 2018, when Xi's Sinicization of religions campaign abruptly ended this image-building strategy. A strengthening of ideological control and surveillance can be witnessed in the whole of the country, but nowhere as radical as in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, which since 2017 has witnessed an unprecedented crackdown not only on Muslim religious life but on the ethnic-minority population itself, and on any form of dissent or deviation from the Han-Chinese standard (see Alpermann 2021). The situation in Ningxia has not reached similar levels of state intervention, but the Hui's religious life, local identity, and the branding of the region have all been severely impacted hereby too.

When I first visited Yinchuan in 2017, Arabian-style architectural elements were decorating public space, a China-Arab Axis celebrated the region's relations with the Middle East, street signs and other public texts were bilingual in Chinese and Arabic (most Hui would largely not have been able to read them, unless they studied the language for liturgical or economic purposes), while museum exhibitions and a somewhat Disneyfied "Hui Culture Park" depicted Hui culture and Islam in a largely positive though somewhat orientalist fashion. In 2018, however, all Arabic architectural elements were removed from public space, Arabic signage was replaced or taped over, the China-Arab Axis only kept the Chinese ornamentation, while the museum exhibitions were completely restructured and next to all

references to Islam practically eradicated. The Hui Culture Park was renamed the “Folk Customs Park,” defunded, and became largely derelict. During my stay in Yinchuan through summer 2019 mosques were still left untouched, but the historic Nanguan Mosque has since been “remodeled” into a “nondescript structure covered completely with dark, greyish paint” (Xu 2021). These changes have enormous implications for the religious life and ethnic identity of many Hui, who had seen themselves as a “model minority” acting as “ambassadors to the Islamic world” (Stroup 2021, 6).

This abrupt change in strategy also posed a problem for the local tourism industry. A local guide I interviewed in April 2019 told me that the region faced a dearth of tourists, which she attributed to Ningxia’s perceived lack of uniqueness — for instance it competes with neighboring Inner Mongolia and Gansu for trips to the desert. Wine tourism, she mused, was occasionally of interest for foreigners but only rarely so for domestic tourists. But in terms of culture, she argued, Ningxia can mainly offer the remains of the historical Xixia dynasty (1038–1227) as well as Hui culture — yet the latter was now no longer a factor that could be used to advertise the region. The new, secular image of the region is reflected in a short 70-second video called “Where is Ningxia?” (宁夏在哪里) posted on several video platforms by a tourism channel (See Ningxia 2021), which lightheartedly attempts to help viewers unfamiliar with the region to place it within China. “Ningxia,” it begins in the style of a geography lesson, is neither part of Gansu, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, or Shaanxi nor do its inhabitants ride around on camels (a common stereotype many Ningxia people I know have encountered). Instead, Ningxia is described as lying in the geographical center of the nation and featuring diverse landscapes beyond the stereotypical deserts. Local specialties presented include wolfberries (枸杞), mutton, jujubes, and of course wine — the latter visualized by an impressive wine cellar. The video neither mentions nor depicts the Hui minority or Islam, and even refrains from using the official name “Hui Autonomous Region” despite its otherwise mockingly strict emphasis on correct geographical knowledge. By stressing its central location within the nation, Ningxia is thus conceptually repositioned from the northwestern Muslim periphery to now being a centrally located oasis with high-quality food and wine.

Even the 5th edition of the biannual China-Arab Expo, held in September 2021, lacks any reference to Islam on its website and in digital showrooms (not even in those of Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, the only two foreign countries with exhibitions). Previous editions of the Expo or its predecessor the China-Arab Trade Forum used to fit in with Yinchuan’s image as a Muslim city at the time, and strongly emphasized the development of the halal (*qingzhen* 清真) food industry for the Chinese and international markets (Ho 2013, 216f). The halal aspect is no longer advertised (though some mutton companies with no or almost no reference to *qingzhen* remain). However, multiple wineries prominently promote their products in those digital showrooms (China-Arab Expo 2021).

While the development of the Ningxia wine region had been ongoing well before its Muslim elements were deemphasized, and one therefore should not assume that these strategies were ever intended to be related,² I argue that the current emphasis on Ningxia as a wine region certainly helps fill a certain void left behind by the Sinicization of religions. Even if wine's presence in Ningxia may be coincidental, it fits well regardless with the party-state's narrative of secularization and (Han-Chinese) modernity, as it stands in contrast to Islamic customs. While attitudes toward alcohol are not homogenous across Hui communities, and tolerance of it is certainly higher than for pork (Gillette 2000, 167ff; Stroup 2017, 169), most Hui Muslims in the northwest (including most of my contacts in Yinchuan) do not consume alcohol. In her fieldwork from the mid-1990s, Gillette (2000, 184) found alcohol abstention among Xi'an Hui depicted as "civilized" — thus appropriating and challenging the state discourse of civility. Stroup (2017, 170) describes different approaches to alcohol by restaurant owners: while some refrain from selling it in order to attract more devout Hui, many others are pragmatic so as to cater to Han clients too.

In comparison with the strict Islamic *qingzhen* regulations regarding food, which forbid Hui to even enter Han restaurants, there does seem to be a more flexible attitude toward places of alcohol production and consumption — as seen in the fact that many of the vineyard laborers in Ningxia are Hui from the countryside (Wang 2019, 80). In June 2019, I even was invited by a group of local Hui — together with some Uyghur and Kazakh students from Xinjiang — to celebrate the Feast of Breaking the Fast at the end of Ramadan (开斋节) at a Ningxia wine château, about an hour's drive from the city. The garden of the French-style château, decorated with British telephone booths and other London-themed artefacts that proved popular photo backgrounds for the group, could be rented for picnics. Our group brought barbecue food, nonalcoholic drinks, and Uyghur music, to which the Xinjiang students danced.

The château was chosen for convenience and to provide an aesthetic background for this day trip, with wine playing no part in their considerations — but clearly also not acting as a deterrent for the group either. One can argue that the space was thus unconsciously appropriated in ways that undermined its intended symbolism: the culture (food, abstinence, and Uyghur music) that was practiced was a Muslim one, while the globalized Western elements adapted to a Han-Chinese wine location merely served as a decontextualized background (ironically, on a previous trip I attended with the same group we went to a rural retreat styled like a People's Commune from the 1950s!). In fact, following Kjellgren's (2004, 27) contention that wine is not only produced for those who drink it, one can say that wine is not

2 In a nonrepresentative online survey I conducted among young Yinchuaners in 2017, one respondent even answered a question on which aspects the region should stress more with "*qingzhen* food and wine."

primarily seen as an alcoholic beverage but as a product symbolizing distinction and modernity.

Modernization and cultivation: Transforming agriculture, transforming one's self

Wine as an idea manages to impose an urban, modern, and cultivated veneer on its production and consumption, essentially veiling the fact that it is by nature still an agricultural product. Wang and Liu (2020, 8) stress the wine industry's relation to all three economic sectors (viticulture as the primary one, wine making second, wine tourism third) and thus see it as a means to help solve the "three rural problems" (三农问题) of agriculture, the countryside, and farmers. Zhang L. et al. (2021) argue that the wine industry in Ningxia brings ecological and economic benefits, such as combating desertification and poverty alleviation. In this context, Zhang H. et al. (2021, 5) stress the importance of the wine-tourism industry in Ningxia to poverty alleviation by providing stable employment opportunities for the region's resettled eco-migrants (生态移民) — their surplus labor is supposed to be turned into wine-related expertise by means of education.³

This ties into the findings of Trappel (2021), who links the various national policies on modernization of the countryside — some of which are framed within the Chinese Dream rhetoric and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation — to the emergence of "new agricultural subjects" within the party-state discourse who are supposed to replace traditional smallholders as the primary agricultural actors, helping the latter to eventually bring the whole countryside to modernity (Trappel 2021, 10, 16). The examples Zhang H. et al. (2021, 5) give here are eco-migrants in Minning town (闽宁镇) in Yinchuan's Yongning County, the most famous eco-migrant settlement in Ningxia. It originated in 1997 under a cooperation scheme with Fujian province and following Xi's direct involvement (then the deputy secretary of the Fujian provincial party committee) (Xinhua 2021).

The location would become known nationally through its depiction in a 2021 TV series called *Minning Town* (original title: 山海情) and is generally portrayed as a successful model project for ecological relocation/migration. The town's official Exhibition Hall depicts farming tools used "in the early stages of its development" (开发初期) behind glass showcases, and thus musealizes smallholder-farming technologies as objects assigned to previous lifestyles (field observations, 2018). By evoking Minning town (incidentally a predominantly Hui settlement!) as an example of agricultural transformation through viticulture and wine tourism, Zhang H. et al. (2021) thus relate this to national discourses on the modernization of the countryside.

3 Eco-migrants in the context of Ningxia are former peasants from the southern arid and inhospitable parts of the autonomous region named Xihai (西海固) who have been resettled through various government programs since the 1980s (Shu 2016).

However, while eco-migrants might tend the vineyards, the new “agrarian elite,” to apply Trappel’s (2021) term, are mostly young, urban, and university-educated specialists who work for wine châteaux owned by rich individuals or by shareholders. Unlike their (frequently absent) employers⁴ and rural migrant workers, they are the ones in charge of the technical aspects of viticulture and wine making. One of my informants (I1), having completed a BA in Agriculture from Ningxia University, had been traveling around the country for three years, working for a large international company selling and promoting agricultural pesticides and training local peasants in using them. He then returned to Yinchuan in 2015; now he manages a winery⁵ with five permanent employees and around 30 contracted manual workers at the foot of the Helan Mountains. This château was founded in 2014, a year before he joined, and is collectively owned by seven shareholders from Shenzhen and Jiangsu with “no understanding of wine.”

Personal networks are crucial within the winemaker scene in the region — my informant has visited more than 30 neighboring châteaux and is in close personal contact with many of their personnel. Giving and receiving mutual assistance is common practice. When I visited his location three times in 2019, the slow progress on the château’s construction was apparent (in contrast to many other more prestigious châteaux), but the wine cellar had been operating for two years already, using imported Italian machinery and French oak barrels. Annual production was expected to increase, with approximately 70,000 bottles a year being the final target once output hits full capacity. While my informant described the shareholders as “patient” and not needing an immediate return on their investment, the low production numbers necessarily lead to the comparatively high cost of a bottle of their wine, as sold not via supermarkets but mostly through personal networks (I1, 2019).

Despite the château’s construction taking longer than expected, their wines won several high-profile international awards between 2019 and 2021. Yet, despite the fact that my informant appears to be a prime example of the party-state’s envisioned agrarian elite he himself still expressed uneasiness about his overall understanding of wine. While enthusiastic and clearly competent in his trade, during an informal tasting in their wine cellar he described himself as being more comfortable drinking *baijiu*, whose quality can be easily be assessed by “not having a headache the next day.” In contrast, he sees wine as an “imported good” (舶来品) “not native to China” (不是中国自古以来的), therefore he “doesn’t understand it, does not dare to talk about it” (不懂, 不敢说话), and “wishes to understand it better” (想多理解一点) (I1, 2019).

4 Some château owners are wine experts themselves, such as Emma Gao of Silver Heights (Howson and Ly 2020, 65). They frequently appear in international-media stories and reports.

5 I refrain from using the name of the operation to protect my informant’s identity.

This not only reinforces the enduring narrative of wine being a foreign import; the claim of “not understanding wine” also seems to be surprising out of the mouth of a winemaker who I would otherwise describe as very self-confident. I argue that this statement reflects no personal insecurities, but rather deeply held societal beliefs on the necessity of self-improvement. Despite having ostensibly succeeded in playing his part in the state’s modernization project, my interlocutor still perceives himself to be lacking sufficient cultivation to talk about wine.

A short clip by Ningxia TV (2021) shows three wine makers from different châteaux gathering for the last time before the harvest season. The three young women in elegant dresses are sitting down for drinks and cake in a warmly lit cellar stocked with various wine bottles, as they toast each other with the host’s 2019 Marselan. All of them are expecting a busy harvest ahead. They explain that wine making is their trade and their family, and they will grow old with it. The clip depicts a lifestyle that still hints at a traditional farming cycle, yet instead of appearing rustic or agricultural certain markers of class and distinction are foregrounded. These three wine makers appear to embody notions of worldliness and connoisseurship (or at least they pretend to do so). Wine is a product that not only relies on skills during its production but also its consumption. As my wine-maker informant (I1) proceeded to recount, while ten years earlier the wine craze was still concerned with expensive Bordeaux wines — snubbed as “vulgar consumption” by the Western press, as Maguire and Lim (2015, 234) examine — people had then started to fear “not understanding” (不懂) these matters, leading to the growing popularity of wine education and tastings.

A wine trader in her mid-20s (I2) regularly hosts such wine-tasting sessions in her downtown Yinchuan facilities — part shop, part bar. The shop’s interior and her fashion style display a similar elegance to the women in the aforementioned clip, but her life story is in fact one of struggle and instability. Having grown up in a troubled family in the countryside and various urban villages, she experienced alcohol-induced domestic violence by her father, ran away from home twice, quit high school prematurely, and hopped between low-paid service jobs in different cities until she got into various wine-related businesses and eventually returned to Yinchuan. Her attitude toward alcohol is ambivalent, as she links it to her father’s violence (though he consumed *baijiu*) as well as to unsuccessfully drowning her own sorrows in times of depression. Yet wine is also the business that allowed her to buy her own car and flat, and thus to become a self-employed and independent businesswoman. She founded her company in 2017 with a business partner, first started bottling acquired bulk wine, then turned to regularly hosting wine tours and tastings.

One post on her WeChat moments (2019) that advertised one of these events (to prepare for the London-based Wine & Spirit Education Trust’s [wset] wine exams) read “study well, drink wine every day” (好好学习、天天喝酒). Remarkably, the daily drinking of wine is here (with a slight touch of irony) linked to education and self-improvement by an individual who has first-hand experience of what daily

consumption can lead to. The dual role of alcohol as both a threat to one's civility and an object through which cultivation of the self is signaled has been addressed in both Greco-Roman (Lukacs 2012, 24) and Confucian (Kupfer 2021, 101) traditions of self-restraint.

For my informant, the wine business has given her a way out of her previously precarious existence and a new confidence in her own abilities for the future. Wine thus acts as a transformative aspect in her life, reflecting aspirations of social mobility and personal cultivation rather than affinity to the product. Another informant (I3), who had recently quit his job as an accountant at a local beer company when I met him, spent much of his newly found free time drinking and learning about wine (as well as Fujianese tea, for which similar growing practices exist; see also, Zhang 2020). A few months later, he advertised on his WeChat that he had tasted more than 200 wines that year already and was willing to give out recommendations, since buying wine "if one does not understand it" is not easy — yet good wine, he stressed, does not have to be expensive. While he was not in the wine business at the time (and noted this explicitly), a year later he passed his wset exams and was subsequently preparing to become a wine instructor.

Connections to Bourdieu's (1984) theory on distinction and taste are apparent here: studying wine leads to the acquisition of cultural capital — something that cannot directly be bought by financial means, only indirectly through free time and social recommendations. As an advertising executive living in Paris told him in 1974: "Hardly anyone knows how to choose wine, so as soon as you know a little about it, you look like someone who knows how to live" (Bourdieu 1984, 300). This is a sentiment somewhat similar to what my informant expressed on WeChat. However, as Meinhof (2018, 32) points out, consumption processes in contemporary China revolve around objects that did not yet play a role in the early habitus-forming socialization periods of the actors involved. Indeed, all my informants cited above have a rural or semi-urban background, and none of their parents have any connection to wine or urban middle-class living.

Recognizing this deviation from Bourdieu's theory, Zhang views wine (and tea) tasting less as "class-defined" but more as "class-driven": what is aspired to is "an imagined middle-class prototype existing both beyond China's national boundary as well as beyond the present time," with the place being a "Western other" (in relation to wine) and the time being an "ancient other" (in relation to tea) (Zhang 2020, 644). Maguire and Lim, who also evoke Bourdieu's theory vis-à-vis the case of Bordeaux wine imports to China, suggest that one should speak of "grades of capital, strata of prestige, and logics of discernment that overlay one another and operate in complex ways" (2015, 237). Moreover, these two authors point out that complex forms of cultural taste are interlinked with local, national, and global consumption practices and identities. Thus, they acknowledge that the rise of Chinese high-quality wine might still add another dimension to this emerging picture (Maguire and Lim 2015, 239). Building on these readings, I argue that these individual aspirations toward

wine expertise are linked to social mobility as well as an imagined ideal of personal cultivation, as connected ultimately to a Sinicized version of globalization.

Sinicized globalization: Domestic wine with a worldly touch

As Ichijo and Ranta (2016, 25) posit, the choices that people make in their everyday lives regarding what to cook and eat relate to their national identities, and by adding or removing ingredients they can transform the meanings associated herewith. As shown above, wine is still largely linked to an (imagined) Western lifestyle in China. The wine trader I interviewed also argued that people usually see wine as a “high-end” (高大上) product that is always paired to Western food — a notion she wants to overcome with her company by hosting a new food-and-wine event series tackling the “complex” question of how to pair the beverage with different Chinese cuisines. In other words, the inherent connection between wine and Western food is now being challenged — Chinese wine is supposed, after all, to be incorporated into Chinese identity.

Such a trend does not run counter to globalization. The opposite is the case indeed, as globalization not only increases the availability of products and ideas around the world, leading to the formation of cultural hybrids, but also involves the reemergence of local and national identities as a reaction to these enhanced global connections (see Eriksen 2014, 11f). This kind of integration of wine into Chinese identity can also be seen in the architecture of some of the Yinchuan châteaux. While many of them are built in faux-French style⁶, some adopt Chinese architectural patterns — for instance Château Yuanshi (原石酒庄), the location Xi visited in 2020. Built by a local entrepreneur who made his money in construction material, the stone château is one of the flagships in the region and “a must visit” according to all of my informants. The website of the winery (Yuanshi 2021) explicitly mentions that “there are no continental European sentiments” (欧陆风情) and “no aristocratic manners” (贵族气质) to be found here, only Chinese mores (中国气质). These include “hard farm work” (辛苦耕耘) as well as artisan skills based on the ancient Chinese 24 solar terms (二十四节气). This is the place, the text continues, where Chinese civilization and wine civilization appropriately meet (恰如其分的结合).

Interestingly, even this description — while rejecting alleged European feudalism and stressing idealized Chinese agrarian values — still falls short of claiming wine culture as inherently Chinese, since it only speaks of its appropriate combination with Chinese civilization — the result is a Sinicized château that claims to incorporate Chinese values. However, even in rejecting it, the West still acts as the

6 Incidentally, the Bordeaux originals they are based on are themselves an invented tradition of the mid-nineteenth century built to give their wineries a façade of age and heritage (Lukacs 2012, 142). Therefore, Ningxia wineries set in the Bordeaux château style can be argued to be in keeping with, rather than merely copying, the original.

reference point — or the “clock is set [there]” as Meinhof (2017, 65) describes it in his work on “colonial temporality,” a concept that assumes China to be in the constant process of catching up to an imagined West. In our specific context, France thus remains the place in the West where the clock of the wine world is set. This view seems to have been reinforced, rather than challenged, ever since California wines beat the French benchmarks in a seminal 1976 Paris tasting, as Lukacs (2012, 261f) points out — though he also recounts how Bordeaux wines have throughout history always been intimately linked to the English market, and the London wine scene has set the standards of taste for centuries now (Lukacs 2012, 61, 110). Standardization is a key element of globalization (Erikson 2014, 11), and the leading role of Great Britain in the wine world is still reflected in the fact that London-based wset exams set standards for sommeliers (see also, Howson and Ly 2020, 12f).

Hence, somewhat ironically, the British-style château garden I visited, as noted, with a group of Muslims might be less inappropriate than it appears. One set of standards that did however originate in Bordeaux is their 1855 classification of châteaux into a five-tier ranking, which until now has only seen two changes since it was first published (Lukacs 2012, 143). The classification fossilized Bordeaux wines' relative merits according to prestige and supposed tradition, rather than according to terroir alone — therefore elevating certain châteaux wines into extremely prestigious (and expensive) dimensions. In 2013 the Ningxia Wine Bureau published its initial ranking of wineries, which at first glance appears to be a copy of the Bordeaux tiers. However, unlike its role model, the ranking continues to be reevaluated in two-year intervals according to a set of specific criteria (ones going beyond wine quality alone in also evaluating, for example, tourism facilities). Operations can rise or fall in the rankings. In the beginning, châteaux were only assigned to lower tiers; higher ones were added later in the course of time. As of 2021, no operation had been assigned to the first tier yet (Xie 2017; Wang et al. 2021).

The Ningxia ranking thus draws on the prestige of Bordeaux and combines it with similar evaluation mechanisms already existing in China, such as the “Civilized City” (文明城市) rankings (see Cartier 2020). Nevertheless, the Bordeaux-inspired châteaux model has also been called into question by academics: Li (2017, 193) argues that the foreign (外来) “Small châteaux, large production region” strategy does not suit Ningxia, as the region relies too much on small wineries and would be better off with larger collective operations and following a region-wide branding strategy. Calling the châteaux “‘playthings’ for the rich” (有钱人的‘游戏’), Li (2017, 195f) argues that the sustainable development of wine in Ningxia is hampered by the current approach in advocating for greater investment in quality and increased production.

Li's argument reflects a wider discourse in circulation. My wine-trader informant (I2) also spoke of confusion as to what strategy the government was to follow, as the idea of the region-wide branding instead of the small-wineries strategy had increasingly gained traction in the last few years, though she disapproved of this

“fluctuating” (三年河东、三年河西) approach. My wine-maker informant (I1) agreed, meanwhile, that each *château* making many different wines in modest quantities was causing problems for their marketing without a larger branding framework in place, speaking here of the government’s wish to ultimately develop a more recognizable brand (interviews I1, I2 2019).

As of now, the small-wineries approach still seems to be ongoing, and the fact that it is explicitly presented as a successful model by three Peking University professors (Zhang et al. 2020) might indicate that this is only likely to continue going forward. These professors argue that while the *châteaux* owners indeed do not know much about wine, they are solving the investment problem for the region and furthermore that even under these conditions local wine quality still holds up well internationally. They also stress that in comparison to the Bordeaux ranking, the above-described Ningxia scheme was “stricter” (严格得多) and “more Sinicized” (中国化得多) (Zhang et al. 2020, 4f). Still, Liu et al. (2021), coming from a design background, see problems in the current lack of incorporation of Ningxia wine into Chinese culture. For instance, they argue (Liu et al. 2021, 112) that Ningxia wine bottles use standard Bordeaux styles (ironically, a bottle by *Châteaux Yuanshi*, the place so proud of being Chinese, is depicted as an example) rather than a more “humanized” (人性化) design that is in their view better adapted to people’s needs (an Austrian liquor bottle in the form of a violin is depicted as a positive example here). More interesting than their concrete suggestions is their general tone on what the relationship between wine, society, and nationhood should be. Arguing that wine design should be more localized and reflect the taste of the common people, they call for Ningxia’s identity as a frontier region and Silk Road location to be highlighted more, or to use Zhang Qian — the Han dynasty general who introduced wine from Eurasia — as part of the branding (Liu et al. 2021, 115). In other words, they imagine Ningxia wine as national (Chinese), local (frontier region), and yet global too (Silk Road, wine as import).

In May 2021 the PRC’s State Council established a so-called comprehensive experimental zone for Ningxia wine. An expert roundtable convened two months later discussed the implications of this policy, which included the wording “wine capital of the world” (世界葡萄酒之都) and called for the improvement of quality production, put emphasis on a uniquely Chinese wine culture (让中国葡萄酒具有中国特色), and sought the development of an “intrinsic quality” (品质) helping Ningxia wine to improve its “discursive power” (话语权) both domestically and abroad (Wen 2021). While Chinese wine exports do not yet play a major role internationally, Ningxia wine has recently received significant recognition on the international wine scene. At the same time, one of its largest international competitors on the domestic market has essentially been eliminated: Australian wine — which, as noted, under a bilateral FTA had entered China at scale from 2015 (and even tariff-free from 2019) — was a major rival to its Ningxia counterpart (interview with wine maker I1, 2019). However, as relations between the two countries

deteriorated in 2020 amid Australian calls for an independent investigation of the Covid-19 origins, punitive tariffs on wine imports (officially labeled “anti-dumping duties”) have essentially since shut Australian wine out of the Chinese market (Boyce 2021). Economic and political considerations most likely intersect in this case, but with the rise of high-quality Ningxia wine a compelling narrative of wine patriotism seems to be now in the making. As the motto of a Shenzhen tasting event for Ningxia wine in October 2020 put it: “Chinese people drink domestic wine” (国人喝国酒) (Ningxia News Network 2020).

Conclusion

Ningxia wine is increasingly being recognized both in China and abroad. In this paper, I have shown that the discourses around Ningxia wine relate to certain aspects of local identity as well as to Chinese nationalism. Wine is helping Ningxia as a peripheral Chinese region to be repositioned within the nation and to develop a recognizable image that helps fill the void left by the abandoning of the earlier Islam strategy related to promoting the Muslim Hui minority, whose identity no longer plays a role in this new, secular branding. Wine has taken on an urban, modern, and cultivated veneer, essentially veiling the fact that it is by nature still an agricultural product. It is therefore being framed as a solution to wide-ranging problems, such as the three rural ones, desertification, or the sluggish local tourism industry. Drinking and learning about wine is in line with the country's civilizing mission: wine expertise and taste are aspirational goals that can have a transformative function in fostering both individuals' and the whole population's developmental levels.

Ningxia wine is being promoted also in relation to France's Bordeaux region, a discourse that implicitly accepts the standard for wine is still set in the West. Yet, the wine is also undergoing a process of Sinicization, reflected in the architecture of some of Ningxia's wineries as well as in academic discussions on setting Chinese standards or in attempts to also pair wine with Chinese cuisines. Ningxia wine thus relies on the international, globalized wine discourse, while simultaneously attempting to overcome it. It is as much an object of individual aspiration as it is a projection screen for an imagined secular, modern, and cultivated nation.

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