

China and Substance Abuse Today

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China will play a major role in the world in the 21st Century. It is a vast country with 22% of the world's population, over 1.3 billion people. Over recent decades alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems have continually grown in China, and, if the current trend continues, alcoholism might have a major impact on this vast, growing nation.

Myths about China and Substance Abuse

We have long known of China's history of opium use and abuse. Generally, though, we think of China as a nation with low alcohol consumption and rates of alcoholism. The following are myths westerners generally hold about China and alcohol use:

- Myth: Chinese and Asians do not use or abuse alcohol. Reality: Several Asian countries have the highest alcohol consumption in the world, specifically Korean, Japan and China. China is known as a country where alcohol is an important aspect of the culture. The Chinese have seen alcohol as a representation of happiness and auspiciousness.
- Myth: Asians have a heightened "flushing phenomenon," an internal warning system to alert them to drunkenness. Reality: At business dinner meetings heavy alcohol consumption occurs, with the purpose of obtaining an edge in negotiations by getting your customer/host intoxicated. Drinking is socially accepted and plays a significant part in major events of daily life such as New Year Festival, weddings, birthday celebrations, etc. Chinese cultural norms encourage social drinking and discourage solitary drinking.
- Myth: Drug abuse does not exist in Asia. Reality: Although many Asian countries have severe policies about drug use and abuse, significant drug abuse does occur. Although there is a lack of epidemiological research on the extent of drug abuse in China (the government has a registry of one million drug abusers), by best guess there are over 10 million drug abusers in China, especially in southern provinces, close to the "Golden Triangle."
- Myth: Addiction treatment is available in China. Reality: There are very few beds for alcoholism treatment nationwide in a country of 1.3 billion people. Most drug abusers are sent to labor camps for extended periods (1-3 years) where few if any treatment services are provided.
- Myth: Medical personnel in China and Nepal have been trained in addiction treatment. Reality: As in most countries, physicians receive little or no training in the treatment of alcohol and drug abuse.
- Myth: Chinese people view addiction as a disease. Reality: As most nations, alcohol and drug abuse is seen as "a bad habit" in China, one that can be overcome by willpower.

Current Rates of Alcohol Consumption

Chinese people consume a wide range of alcoholic beverages from distilled liquor (about 54% ethanol), to less strong liquor (32-44%) wine and yellow rice wine (12-18%) and beer (4-6%). China is now the second largest beer-producing country in the world. Beer accounts for 73.1% of beverage alcohol sales and spirits are 26%. However, spirits still constitute the major alcohol consumption.

A World Health Organization survey in 2001 found that the annual absolute ethanol consumption in China to be 4.5 liters per adult (ages 15 and older). This is an increase from 1.03 liters consumed in 1970. Although China's alcohol consumption rates remain well below European rates (8.6 liters), these statistics may be affected by the numbers of rural poor people in China, whose ability to purchase alcohol may be limited, making home-brewing and illicit alcohol production and sales more appealing. The most frequent type of unreported alcohol beverage production is rice wine.

Another measurement of alcohol consumption in China is to examine trends over time. Consumption (in terms of million tons) has gone from 6.92 tons of beer in 1990 to 22.89 tons in 2001. Spirit and wine consumption has stayed relatively stable during this same timeframe. This is a startling statistic and may reflect the amazing push in China to modernization and urbanization. Another measurement of current rates of alcohol use and abuse in China is drinking-related harm, such as medical complications related to alcohol use and abuse, economic and social indicators, etc. Unfortunately, this has not been systematically studied in China. With rapid social and economic change it is fair to assume there will be a steady increase in alcohol-related health and social problems. Nevertheless, the rise in the prevalence of alcohol dependence will likely parallel the dramatic increases in alcohol production and use.

Twelve Steps and Treatment in China

There are very few centers for treatment of alcohol and drug abuse in China. In a country as vast as China there remain only a few hospitals offering treatment. Most drug abusers are "treated" in reeducation centers, such as labor camps. Doctors seem reluctant to diagnose alcohol and drug abuse, seeing it either as a sign of character defect or bad habit. The social stigma of substance abuse remains a major barrier to recognition of the disease. Hence, hospitals see primarily late-stage alcoholism and almost exclusively males. Females are rarely treated for alcohol dependence and it is often joked that there are no alcoholics in China under the age of 40.

Twelve Step programs have long existed in China in the English-speaking, ex-patriot communities throughout China. In the mid-1990s a Korean-speaking A.A. group began just north of the border of China and North Korea. A major breakthrough occurred in 2000 when the first A.A. meetings were held in Mandarin in Beijing. Since then, A.A. meetings in English and Mandarin are held daily in Beijing and an increasing number of cities in China. Al-Anon meetings have begun also in several cities, although Al-Anon

members have found it difficult to sustain meetings given the rapid turnover of the expatriot community from which sponsors are drawn. N.A. has begun in Shanghai and Beijing, although it is difficult for a drug addict to attend meetings given the oversight of narcotic use.

Light seems to be at the end of the tunnel though. In 2007 nearly 150 addiction professionals will be trained and credentialed by the newly formed China Association of Addiction Professionals. The first program for children of alcohol and drug abuse parents will begin at Beijing Medical University Hospitals. Epidemiological research into the prevalence and incidence of alcohol and drug abuse will begin at the National Institute of Drug Dependence and the China Center for Disease Control.

Conclusion

China will be the major player on the world stage in this century. How it deals with its growing alcohol and drug abuse issues may be a significant factor in China plays out its growing role on the world stage.

Biographies:

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