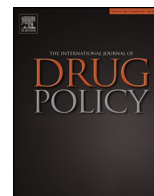




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo



Research paper

Connoisseurship and drunkenness in Tokyo

Paul Christensen*

Department of Anthropology, Union College, 807 Union Street, Lamont House 305, Schenectady, NY 12308, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 7 May 2014

Accepted 12 June 2014

Keywords:

Japan

Alcohol

Connoisseurship

ABSTRACT

Although aggregate alcohol consumption in Japan is declining, national data overlook important anomalies and local trends. One is that young adults are drinking in greater volume and frequency than previously observed in the postwar era, while health concerns pertaining to alcohol consumption struggle for national recognition against largely uncritical views of intoxication. This article focuses on the connoisseurship of alcohol among Tokyo's young adults, particularly knowledge and breadth of sampled varieties, an emergent and growing pursuit that encourages drinking and structures drunkenness. Connoisseurship and drunkenness, the article argues, serve as means to assert expertise, sophistication and global competence – a form of cultural capital among young urbanites who increasingly find themselves on the economic and social margins, disconnected from the official institutions of Japanese society. Most of the data presented here were gathered over 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Tokyo (interviews, online survey and participant observation), supplemented by ongoing participation in online conversations on the popular social media website www.mixi.jp. Ethnographic attention reveals how alcohol consumption is discussed as a culturally meaningful pursuit illustrative of major societal shifts and challenges confronting Japan.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier B.V.

Introduction

National surveys of Japan's per-capita alcohol consumption as pure ethanol show stagnant overall levels of national imbibing, with the adult (20 years and over) population drinking less than observed in previous years (Higuchi, Matsushita, & Osaki, 2006: 1852; Osaki et al., 2009). We might thus conclude that the Japanese are drinking less beer, wine, *sake*, and other alcoholic beverages than in previous years since the end of the Second World War. Declining consumption levels have been largely attributed to Japan's changing demographics, particularly the aging of the population (Borovoy, 2005; Higuchi, Matsushita, Maesato, & Osaki, 2007: 1852; Osaki, Matsushita, Shirasaka, Hisanori, & Higuchi, 2005; Takakura, 2011). Nevertheless, such broad considerations of national data overlook important anomalies and localized trends. One is that young Japanese adults are drinking in greater volume and frequency than previously observed in the postwar era, a sign of Japan's shifting demographics as surely as the declining national consumption rate is indicative of a "greying" population (Lin, 2012; Sugimoto, 2010: 82).

These changes in the social structure and cultural motivations underlying alcohol consumption are best captured by specifically targeted research. Dr. Susumu Higuchi and colleagues at Kurishima National Hospital, Japan's primary center for alcohol-related research, has noted that "the age structure of drinking behavior among Japanese adults seems to be shifting from the traditional Japanese style... to the Western style, with the highest alcohol consumption and the level of related problems occurring during earlier stages of adulthood" (2004: 6). Ethnographic methods are well positioned to examine why and how these changes are taking place, particularly as it pertains to Tokyo's young adults and their shifting individual relationships with the major social institutions organizing daily life (Allison, 2013; Brinton, 2011).

The paper first aims to show how young Japanese drinkers frame drunkenness as an engagement with global cultural others, making it a tool to assert an identity that complies with state juridical norms of socialization while at the same time confronting pervasive feelings of disconnect from the major social institutions of daily life. Second, the paper aims to show how ethnographic methods are ideally positioned to chart the forging of such connections. Despite the bursting of Japan's economic "bubble" in the early 1990s followed by now more than 20 years of economic stagnation, Japan remains a global economic power and home to some of the world's wealthiest and healthiest citizens (Sterling, 2010: 194). Yet since the bubble economy's end, comforts such

* Tel.: +1 5183886389.

E-mail addresses: christep@union.edu, paulc78@gmail.com

as access to advanced medical care and a sophisticated domestic infrastructure have existed in tandem with growing concerns over a “lost generation” (Allison, 2013: 29) of young adults unable to find meaningful work and a growing erosion of popular trust in state institutions (Furlong, 2008; Genda, 2007; Inui, 2005; Leheny, 2006). These national anxieties persist alongside pervasive “cosmopolitanism” and high levels of international exposure, particularly in Tokyo and other major cities (Sugimoto, 2012: 454). Under consideration here is how young Japanese adults confronting an uncertain future, use alcohol to “actively and reflexively interpret their environment” (Lunnay, Ward, & Borlagdan, 2011: 429), and particularly how consumption of a diverse range of alcohol varieties allows for conversations, either in-person or online, that confirm an individual’s internationalism and global competence. Using ethnographic observation to identify the “mechanisms or processes by which structural and/or contextual factors may be shown to mediate” alcohol use among young adults in Tokyo, the article considers larger questions regarding their engagement with social and cultural change (Duff, 2013: 169).

Methodology

I seek to strike a balance between methodological inquiry that demonstrates the utility of ethnography and my own fieldwork highlighting the social structures and prevailing motivations underling alcohol consumption patterns among young adults in contemporary Tokyo. In this section I discuss the methodology used, linking my research to wider discussion on the merits of ethnography. This is followed in the discussion section with excerpts from my fieldwork, provided to make explicit my anthropologically motivated approach to data collection and knowledge production. Notably, data from my field notes and participant observation are combined with ethnographic work conducted online to explore how this can impact upon research findings. Finally, my data is placed in a wider context to demonstrate its relevance to inquiry on contemporary Japan.

Highlighting shifting preferences, demographics, and cultural practices requires revisiting one’s research methods (Lunnay et al., 2011). More specifically, ethnographic fieldwork that emphasizes sustained inter-personal interaction and participant observation offers insight into how a more in-depth understanding of the meanings given to Japan’s changing patterns of alcohol consumption can be charted. Alcohol as the drug of choice in Japan is unsurprising given the severity of punitive power and cultivated “panic” around the government’s approach to the use of illicit drugs (Alexander, 2013: 238; Kingsberg, 2013; Vaughn, Huang, & Ramirez, 1995) – which also works to dampen state intervention or concern for possible health-related issues stemming from alcohol consumption. As such, drunkenness among young and often tenuously employed adults in Tokyo is increasingly understood as a form of sophisticated engagement with global cultural others (Roseberry, 1996), a tool for these drinkers to assert a distinctly cosmopolitan identity while remaining compliant with state juridical institutions and norms of socialization.

An ethnographic approach also highlights the motivations and intricacies mitigating cultural change. Echoing Moore’s question of “how might alternative truths be infused more fully into the [alcohol] field?” (2002: 50), the position taken here is that drinking, including the decision of what to drink, is a reflection of culturally meaningful individual and group negotiations pertaining to issues of selfhood and identity. The larger meanings given to drinking practices reveal how Tokyo’s young adults negotiate an uncertain lived reality stemming from the “precarity” (Allison, 2013: 9) surrounding Japan’s stagnant economic growth and rising concern around the state’s ability to chart a meaningful future (Brinton,

2011). As such, young Japanese drinkers use alcohol—either expertise on the subject or active consumption – to challenge and change conventional societal expectations they increasingly find incompatible with their lived reality. Building on Lunnay et al. (2011: 431) and their use of Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital, drinking here is “interpreted as a symbolic and powerful activity young people engage in to influence their position in social hierarchies,” particularly as it pertains to conversations on how meaningful cultural practices are enacted. In short, ethnographic attention reveals how alcohol consumption is discussed as a culturally meaningful pursuit illustrative of major societal shifts and challenges confronting Japan.

Online and offline ethnography

The majority of ethnographic data presented here was gathered over 14 months of fieldwork in Tokyo between April 2007 and August 2008. Data was supplemented by a research trip, again to Tokyo, in the summer of 2012 and ongoing participation in online conversations, primarily on the popular social media website www.mixi.jp. As with all ethnographic work, measures were taken to protect the identity of interviewees and other participants. All names given here are pseudonyms; where necessary, place names have been omitted or changed. All informants who contributed to this paper were aware of my research, the potential role they might play in it, and gave their consent to participate. Elsewhere I have argued that work that takes place in public or semi-public spaces, such as bars, must balance the ethnographic opportunities provided by such sites with careful ethical protocols (Christensen, 2012: 242). As Punch argues, bars and other sites of drinking are complex cultural settings where “a strict application of codes will restrain and restrict a great deal of informal, innocuous research... that are unproblematic but where explicitly enforcing rules concerning informed consent will make the research role simply untenable” (1994: 84). I have adopted such an approach here to allow for meaningful data collection alongside the protection of participant confidentiality and the maintenance of anthropology’s recognized ethical protocols.

While in Tokyo, I joined the group “I ♥Sake” (wine) on the mixi website mentioned above and systematically cataloged relevant entries from the group’s forum. The group has over 60,000 members, although many are minimally active. The group bills itself as a place for people who “above all love sake” and “do not lose interest” in alcohol as an item of consumption, even when drinking every day. Participation in I ♥Sake is open to anyone with a mixi account who wants to join, yet group administrators monitor postings and can expel those they deem unwelcome or harassing. The group’s centerpiece is its discussion forum, prominent on its main page. Here members can post questions, conversation topics, and invitations to events that once clicked on expand to reveal the larger thread of responses from other members. It is, in short, a popular forum for discussing alcohol, particularly its role in shaping individual identities. The group’s forum is used here to illustrate how such discussions—and the accompanying alcohol consumption – take on significance often missed in measures of national consumption levels or by other more quantitatively focused research.

After receiving permission from the I ♥Sake administrators, I posted a survey to the group’s main page on mixi. The survey questions were visible to all group members; those who responded, approximately fifty individuals, were asked to be interviewed individually over Thirty-two members responded to individual emails requesting interviews. Finally, particularly active group members were interviewed in-person and asked open-ended questions on how they came to join the group, how their interest in alcohol developed, and how they dealt with the consequences of over-consumption (hangovers and other health concerns). Finally, I

joined group members offline for drinking sessions, typically organized with a thematic focus (world beers or whiskeys of Japan) and a consistent emphasis on economical ways to imbibe. In total, I interviewed 10 group members in-person for approximately 1 h each, surveyed online 45 active I ♥Sake users, and participated in six drinking sessions organized through the website or with group members at other in-person meetings.

The primary tools of ethnography—participant observation, in-depth interviewing, immersion in the place and context under consideration—can reveal numerous and often subconsciously rooted decisions made by individuals as cultural beings. Ethnography makes apparent this push and pull between “culture” as a force shaping identity and human agency challenging and changing ingrained predilections. It is a “flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emergent phenomena and emergent research questions” (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012: 6), an approach that centers on “discovery and interpretation” where explanation of observed phenomena is favored over hypothesis-driven prediction (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 31). Participant observation and interviewing are used here to examine drunkenness among Tokyo's young adults to highlight how – despite evidence of a decline in overall national consumption levels—some drink frequently and heavily as a means to assert a sophisticated individual identity.

Ethics

While studies of drunkenness are not a new area of anthropological or ethnographic attention, they continue to generate controversy (Brandes, 2002; Heath, 2000; Pine, 2008). This stems from two areas of concern. The first is the dis-inhibitive properties of liquor – itself a culturally variable inference (MacAndrew & Edgerton, 2003; Marshall, 1979) – and its potential to cause individuals to divulge things they otherwise would not. Second, concern arises from the possibility for transgressed degrees of intimacy as researchers negotiate whether they should participate in the consumption (and likely the drunkenness) alongside the individuals they are observing and studying. The second point is more contentious, as drunken admissions, particularly in Japan, are often made knowingly and with the use of alcohol as an adjudicator for potentially problematic disclosures (Bestor, 1989: 256; Johnson, 2003: 151; Moeran, 2005: 27). However, drinking with the sources of one's ethnographic data – captured below in my outings with mixi group members – forces anthropologists to confront their own subjectivity, how they view and interpret observed occurrences, when considering how to give an account of drunken comportment. Even the “holding of one's liquor” and trying to appear sober while continuing to drink (common among young American males) conforms to a culturally mandated practice that is challenged in Japan by overt and immediate drunkenness as the expected and desired state of group drinking comportment (Allison, 1994: 46).

Additionally, the combined focus on the meanings given to drunkenness by young adults in Tokyo and their use of social media raises important questions pertaining to the ethics of online ethnographic fieldwork. The need to carry over established ethical principles governing anthropological fieldwork – “showing respect for people under study, protecting their dignity and best interests, protecting anonymity or giving proper credit, and obtaining informed consent” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002: 461) – are crucial in the quickly changing context of online interaction. As noted earlier, I took steps to ensure that all of these components were followed during the course of fieldwork. More importantly, I echo the position of Boellstorff and collaborators in structuring the ethics of online fieldwork around “care,” and aspiring to produce work that is somehow beneficial to the study participants (2012: 128–129). As such, a goal here is to illustrate how drunkenness and connoisseurship of alcoholic beverages is used by young Japanese adults

to confront an uncertain future of limited employment options and opportunities. It is my hope that this work can, in some way, foster greater recognition of the difficulties facing many in Japan as they negotiate a stagnant economic landscape and eroded domestic faith in their government's ability to chart a productive and meaningful future.

Ethnography allows culture to become evident “at the level of experience” (Marcus, 1998: 59), bringing into focus the “variety of modes of accommodation and resistance by individuals and groups to their shared social order” (Marcus & Fischer, 1999: 133). Combined with the growing normalcy and expectation of online interaction among Japan's young adults, it is a “powerfully” affective tool to illustrate the “inevitable blurring of work/life boundaries” that such interactions inspire (Driscoll & Gregg, 2010: 16). This was evident in the fluid transition between I ♥Sake postings and nights spent in Tokyo bars with group members. As such, ethnography is a technique that places individual behaviors within “broader socio-cultural, institutional, and historical contexts,” embedding human cultural behavior within a meaningful milieu of socially significant actions (Lopez et al., 2013: 3). In short, an ethnographic approach reveals the meaningful gaps – the why and how of drinking, the motivations and meanings given by individuals to fluctuating patterns of use – that are not captured in national surveys of consumption levels or state sponsored health initiatives. In doing this, ethnography seeks to clarify the connections individuals make between localized acts, the selection of a particular bar or drink, and nationally or globally meaningful transition and change.

Discussion

What follows is an account of an evening spent drinking at several bars in Tokyo with I ♥Sake group members. It is offered here as a brief example of an ethnographic narrative and the process by which such observations are then linked to other areas of wider relevance. These include the use of alcohol, either its consumption or the cultivation of expert knowledge around it, as part of young Japanese drinkers' “search for self,” the pursuit of a fulfilling and meaningful existence increasingly divorced in Japan from employment, family, or other major social institutions (Sterling, 2010: 195). The goal of this narrative is thus twofold: to demonstrate how the ethnographic process unfolds and then to link the account to larger areas of cultural and intellectual concern.

Kita-Senjū in the north of Tokyo is a transit hub linking outlying suburban communities to the city center. Like similar transit transfer points, it hosts an impressive array of bars, *izakaya* (pubs), and other drinking sites. Kita-Senjū's drinking establishments attract commuters on their way home as well as locals from the neighborhood, lending a sense of uncertainty around who one might encounter on excursions into the narrow alleyways of bars to the west of the station. My first visit to the area was in the spring of 2007 through an online invitation from the I ♥Sake group on the social media website www.mixi.jp. As noted above, the group is a forum for mostly Tokyo-based young adults to discuss the impressive array of different alcoholic drinks and varieties they have sampled as well as share discoveries of new and interesting bars around the city. The forum is also a focal point for coordinating offline drinking sessions that provide members an opportunity to inexpensively consume a lot of unusual wines, beers, spirits, and other intoxicating mixtures.

Unsure of what to expect and momentarily lost in the tangle of small streets, I arrived a few minutes late to what was my first drinking session with the group. Gen, one of the group's administrators, had instructed everyone through the website to meet at a small standing bar that specialized in *sake* and also offered a wide

selection of *shōchū*, a clear liquor typically made from barley or sweet potatoes. On this night a whiskey from a boutique Japanese distillery was also on offer at a discount. The bar's cozy interior was of rough-hewn wood, with nostalgia-inducing reprints of deliberately weathered-looking advertisements from the 1960s. Upon arrival I was happily greeted by eight already assembled group members who immediately assumed I was the "foreign researcher" who had recently posted an interest in studying "drinking culture" to the group's forum.

Gen, a slight and talkative man in his mid-twenties, immediately introduced himself and then everyone else—six men and two women, all in their twenties or early thirties except for one man in his mid-forties who, despite being older than everyone else, was a regular on group outings. Gen then asked what I would like to drink, suggesting several *shōchū* options. The gathering was relaxed and largely free of formality; everyone stood around two high tables chatting animatedly or engaged in eager discussion of the menu and plotting strategy on how to sample as many of the offered varieties as possible. As we talked, the conversation remained fixated on alcohol. Gen and Hiroka, a female student in her mid-twenties, spent almost half an hour discussing *sake's* regional variations in taste. After those who had placed an order took their first sip, drinks were immediately shared with others to ensure no taste went unsampled. The flavors of the ordered drinks were described, typically in great detail, while the bar was compared to other similar spaces throughout the city. This bar had been selected for its appealing decor, extensive list of regional *sakes* and *shōchūs*, and its low prices – a generous pour over ice in large glasses was only ¥400 (approximately \$4.20 at the time of writing). By the time we left the bar a little over an hour later, everyone had consumed several rounds of strong drinks covering almost the entire menu.

Now flush and boisterous from drink, we all walked several blocks to a nearby *izakaya*, a pub where patrons gather over shared food while drinking. This one was particularly popular with local residents, having been featured numerous times on television and in newspaper stories during its more than 50-year history. The *izakaya* was nearly full when we arrived a little before 9:00 pm. We were given a low table on the second floor. The room was large and brightly lit, divided between Western-style seating and tatami mats around low tables that required the removal of shoes. Loud and comfortably chaotic, the room heaved with conversation, cigarette smoke, and the intermingling aromas of food and drink as we settled into our seats. The gathered patrons were an eclectic mix of groups of students, construction workers, and salarymen (white-collar office employees in suits and ties). Drunkenness was the unifying constant across the groups.

Our order for drinks was taken immediately and within minutes a tray heavy with mugs of draft beer and *shōchū* cocktails arrived. Many in the group had ordered two drinks, a draft beer to use in the *kanpai!* (cheers!) and quaff quickly as well as a cocktail to drink immediately afterwards. While the previous bar offered variety, both from across Japan and the globe, this *izakaya* emphasized the experimental. *Shōchū's* high alcohol content (generally between 25% and 30% by volume) and relatively neutral flavor, allow it to be combined and augmented with almost any ingredient, encouraging unusual and challenging concoctions. The *shōchū* varieties created in-house included *yuzu* (a citrus fruit), apricot, garlic, bitter melon, and turmeric. Such variation is important; despite everyone's increasing level of intoxication, experimentation and sampling remained the norm. My order of a garlic *shōchū* met with good-natured teasing and cautious yet interested sips from everyone at the table, followed by renewed ribbing once everyone had tried it and left me with most of the overpoweringly strong liquor.

Conversation throughout that evening and on subsequent drinking outings remained centered on alcohol. I asked Gen several times that night about his job and received vague generalities in response.

It was only months later when he and I were drinking in a smaller group that his girlfriend mentioned that he had recently found a steady yet uninspiring job in an office. Gen quickly added that it was a job he did not intend to hold for long. Marginal employment alongside access to disposable income – due to family allowances, living with parents and therefore not needing to pay rent, or savings from previous jobs – was a constant across this group in their twenties and thirties. For them, alcohol consumption, connoisseurship of its diverse varieties, and online participation in discussions constituted a "system of social norms" allowing them to assert cultural capital and a global disposition despite their marginal employment status and precarious future (Bourdieu, 1990: 56; Painter, 2000: 242). Takako, a group member in her late twenties interviewed by email, noted that Japan's "breadth" (*haba*) of suitable alcohol offerings, when compared globally, is wanting. She added that while there is certainly an abundance of choice on store shelves, it is often a choice between products she and other connoisseurs regard as unsuitable. Her connoisseurship impels her to seek out the unusual, enabling her to assert a sense of self which she views as globally minded. Consumption and connoisseurship of alcohol thus helps to shape the identities of economically marginal and societally uncertain, yet culturally rich, individuals who feel confined within Japan's overall wealth.

Scattered throughout Tokyo's cityscape are further examples of the prominence given to alcohol as an item of consumption and marker of individual identity. The popular *manga* (comic book) series *Tears of the Gods* (*Kami no Shizuku*) tells the story of a young man's journey to try and become the world's greatest sommelier. It has also burgeoned Japan's appetite for wine among younger drinkers to such a degree that varieties mentioned in the *manga* have quickly sold out from wine store shelves (New York Times, 21 October 2008). The popularity was such that French and Italian vintners took to actively lobbying for specific bottles to be given mention in the *manga* as a means of boosting sales. Additionally, Yoyogi Park in the center of Tokyo, one of the few expansive areas of green in the dense metropolis, attracts numerous "flair bartenders" practicing their techniques with appropriately weighted plastic molds in the shape of cocktail shakers and variously sized liquor bottles. All are young adults and the majority are men, twirling, spinning, and catching their practice implements in order to entertain patrons (and not shatter glass) during evening shifts at popular bars.

These seemingly disconnected examples engender inquiry into what a cultivated connoisseurship of alcohol does for Tokyo's young adults. It allows individuals to present both expertise and sustained inquisitiveness of both the domestic and the global. Yoshi, another mixi group member and recent college graduate in his mid-twenties, who at the time of our interview was between part-time jobs, gave a long lecture on the subtleties of flavors from across Japan that he believes are driving renewed interest in *shōchū* after years of stagnant sales. He added that *shōchū* is his "specialty" and that he feels confident speaking authoritatively on what he regards as essential information for anyone with an interest in this particular variety. This pool of knowledge around alcohol also allows Yoshi, Gen, and other group members to engage in *jibun sagashi* (the search for self), a process Sterling identifies as central to "self-shaping" among young Japanese adults wherein "the individual makes choices. . . in an effort to achieve a fulfilled selfhood" (2010: 195). This sense of self is also often understood as a response to the limited horizon of opportunities facing Tokyo's young adults.

The recent popular growth of *ji-biru* (craft or micro-brewed beers) further reflects the globally-minded connoisseurship pervading drinking in Japan and the pursuit of *jibun sagashi* among brewers and drinkers. Toru of Echigo Beer, one of Japan's better known *ji-biru* breweries, noted in our email interview that the inspiration behind the company's founding comes from the owner's

“belief in the power of well made beer to improve an individual’s quality of life.” Toru added that Echigo aims to brew beers that the increasingly sophisticated palettes of young Japanese drinkers will recognize as meeting or exceeding international standards of taste and quality. Toru’s response creates a global hierarchy of taste that positions Japan as behind and in need of improvement to meet international standards of taste and quality. He viewed declining national consumption levels as tied more than anything to young Japanese drinkers’ frustrations with the unimaginative ubiquity of domestic lagers from Asahi, Kirin, and other major manufacturers. In Toru’s view, “good” beers (meaning those that break from the previous monotony) will appeal to a growing number of drinkers who see their sense of self most deeply invested not in where they work or whom they marry, but in how they select what they consume.

Conclusion

Criticisms of ethnographic methods have typically centered on their subjective and interpretive nature, particularly their reliance on qualitative data and their potentially essentializing depictions of cultural others (Clifford, 1988). My own position is that the role of ethnography is to illustrate the diversity of human behavior and offer informed interpretations of the culturally derived reasons that motivate action. Ethnography can enrich quantitative data and research by providing a nuanced picture of the societal unpredictability that objectively focused approaches are hard-pressed to capture. In short, ethnography combined with quantitative analysis allows for more “robust” and nuanced findings on the motivations behind individual alcohol and drug use (Lopez et al., 2013: 101). As Sewell has noted, quantitative methods provide the “hard skeleton to which the flesh and blood of available qualitative data might be attached” (2009: 32).

I have argued that connoisseurship of a diverse array of *sakes*, *shōchūs*, beers and other alcoholic beverages – and the attendant drunkenness – are a form of cultivated cultural capital for numerous young adults in Tokyo. Their practices are not seen by the participants as the frivolous pursuits of youth. Instead, they are a response to an uncertain future where Gen, Hiroka, Yoshi, and other group members see little reason to invest in education, marriage, or employment—official institutions they increasingly regard as irrelevant or dysfunctional. For them, expert knowledge and cultivated connoisseurship become means to shape a meaningful existence amid the wealth and precarity structuring the paradox of contemporary Japan. By engaging in a “search for self,” I ♥Sake group members are asserting an identity they regard as globally engaged while also celebrating Japan’s history of brewing and distilling alcohols of distinct characteristics and flavor. Largely neglected in such orientations are not only the shortcomings and failures of the contemporary Japanese state, but also concerns of bodily harm and the heightened risk of long-term health consequences stemming from regular and heavy alcohol consumption. By cultivating a sense of cultural capital through consuming alcohol, Tokyo’s drinkers enrich a sense of self that fills an immediate void in their lives. The long-term outcomes of these still emergent cultural practices, particularly as they are a response to individual feelings of disconnect from previously powerful institutional expectations of life, remain unknown.

Ethnography was used in this paper to illustrate the links between alcohol consumption among young adults in Tokyo and various conversations of national significance across Japan, including individual understandings and manipulations of selfhood, engagement with global cultural others, and dissatisfaction with governing institutions. While Japan is consuming less alcohol overall, a trend often attributed to the nation’s aging population,

drinking persists among young adults for an array of reasons that reflect individual decisions pertaining to presentations of self as well as larger concerns facing the nation. Ethnography highlights these motivations for consumption, particularly how they allow individual drinkers to form symbolic connections to wider components of self and identity, including a global disposition that for many is no longer realized through meaningful and sustained employment. Thus alcohol and drunkenness for some young adults in Tokyo and across Japan, serve as a means of asserting expertise and sophistication, of exercising connoisseurship and dispensing cultural capital through a recognized and legally sanctioned form of socialization.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Eric Cunningham, Alvaro Jarrin, Nicolas Sternsdorff, Ana C. Vaz, Christine R. Yano, and the reviewers and editors at IJDP. Funding for this project came from a Monbukagakusho (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) Scholarship, sponsored by the Government of Japan, and the Union College Faculty Research Fund. While in Tokyo I was graciously hosted by David Slater and Sophia University. Finally, my deepest thanks to everyone in Tokyo who made this research possible.

Conflict of interest

Author confirms that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

References

- Alexander, J. (2013). Japan’s *Hiropon* panic: Resident non-Japanese and the 1950 Meth crisis. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(3), 238–243.
- Allison, A. (1994). *Nightwork: Sexuality, pleasure, and corporate masculinity in a Tokyo hostess club*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Allison, A. (2013). *Precarious Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Bestor, T. (1989). *Neighborhood Tokyo*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C., & Taylor, T. L. (2012). *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Borovoy, A. (2005). *The too-good wife: Alcohol, codependency, and the politics of nurturance in postwar Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice*. California: Stanford University Press.
- Brandes, S. (2002). *Staying sober in Mexico City*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Brinton, M. (2011). *Lost in transition: Youth, work, and instability in postindustrial Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Christensen, P. (2012). Real men don’t hold their liquor: The complexity of drunkenness and sobriety in a Tokyo bar. *Social Science Japan Journal*, 15(2), 239–254.
- Clifford, J. (1988). *The predicament of culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature, and art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Duff, C. (2013). The social life of drugs? *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(3), 167–172.
- Driscoll, C., & Gregg, M. (2010). My profile: The ethics of virtual ethnography. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 3(1), 15–20.
- Furlong, A. (2008). The Japanese Hikikomori phenomenon: Acute social withdrawal among young people. *Sociological Review*, 56(2), 309–325.
- Genda, Y. (2007). Jobless youths and the NEET problem in Japan. *Social Science Japan Journal*, 10(1), 23–40.
- Heath, D. (2000). *Drinking occasions: Comparative perspectives on alcohol and culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Higuchi, S., Matsushita, S., & Osaki, Y. (2006). Drinking practices, alcohol policy and prevention programmes in Japan. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 17(4), 358–366.
- Higuchi, S., Matsushita, S., Maesato, H., & Osaki, Y. (2007). Japan: Alcohol today. *Addiction*, 102(12), 1849–1862.
- Higuchi, S., Suzuki, K., Matsushita, S., & Osaki, Y. (2004). *Young Peoples Drinking Behavior in Japan*. Retrieved from <http://www.icap.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=tMW8of1JAgU%3D&tabid=199>
- Inui, A. (2005). Why Freeter and NEET are misunderstood: Recognizing the new precarious conditions of Japanese youth. *Social Work & Society*, 3(2), 244–251.
- Johnson, D. (2003). In T. Bestor, P. Steinhoff, & V. L. Bestor (Eds.), *Getting in and getting along in the prosecutors office. Doing fieldwork in Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.

- Kingsberg, M. (2013). Methamphetamine solution: Drugs and the reconstruction of nation in postwar Japan. *Journal of Asian Studies*, 72(1), 141–162.
- Leheny, D. (2006). *Think global, fear local: Sex, violence, and anxiety in contemporary Japan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lin, H. S. (2012). Tokyo at 10: Establishing difference through the friendship networks of women executives in Japan. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 18(1), 83–102.
- Lopez, A. M., Bourgois, P., Wenger, L., Lorvick, J., Martinez, A., & Kral, A. (2013). Interdisciplinary mixed methods research with structurally vulnerable populations: Case studies of injection drug users in San Francisco. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24(2), 101–109.
- Lunnay, B., Ward, P., & Borlagdan, J. (2011). The practise and practice of Bourdieu: The application of social theory to youth alcohol research. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 22(6), 428–436.
- MacAndrew, C., & Edgerton, R. (2003). *Drunken comportment: A social explanation*. Percheron Press.
- Marcus, G. (1998). *Ethnography through thick and thin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Marcus, G., & Fischer, M. (1999). *Anthropology as cultural critique: An experimental moment in the human sciences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marshall, M. (1979). *Weekend warriors: Alcohol in a micronesian culture*. Palo Alto: Mayfield.
- Moeran, B. (2005). Drinking country: Flows of exchange in a Japanese valley. In T. Wilson (Ed.), *Drinking cultures: Alcohol and identity*. New York: Berg.
- Moore, D. (2002). Opening up the cul-de-sac of youth drug studies: A contribution to the construction of some alternative truths. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 29(1), 13–62.
- New York Times. (2008). *Next week, our hero chooses a Médoc*. (21 October). Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/22/dining/22comic.html>
- Osaki, Y., Matsushita, S., Shirasaka, T., Hisanori, H., & Higuchi, S. (2005). Nationwide survey of alcohol drinking and alcoholism among Japanese adults. *Nihon Arukōru Yakubutsu Igakkai Zasshi (Japanese Journal of Alcohol Studies & Drug Dependence)*, 40(5), 455.
- Osaki, Y., Tanihata, T., Ohida, T., Kanda, H., Suzuki, K., Higuchi, S., et al. (2009). Decrease in the prevalence of adolescent alcohol use and its possible causes in Japan: Periodical nationwide cross-sectional surveys. *Alcoholism Clinical and Experimental Research*, 33(2), 247–254.
- Painter, J. (2000). In M. Crang, & N. Thrift (Eds.), *Pierre Bourdieu. Thinking space*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Pine, A. (2008). *Working hard, drinking hard: On violence and survival in Honduras*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Punch, M. (1994). Politics and ethics in qualitative research. In N. Denzin, & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 83–104). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Roseberry, W. (1996). The rise of yuppie coffees and the reimagination of class in the United States. *American Anthropologist*, 98(4), 762–775.
- Sewell, W. (2009). *Logics of history: Social theory and social transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sterling, M. (2010). *Babylon east: Performing, dancehall, roots reggae, and rastafari in Japan*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sugimoto, Y. (2010). *An introduction to Japanese society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sugimoto, Y. (2012). Kyosei: Japan's cosmopolitanism. In G. Delanty (Ed.), *Routledge international handbook of cosmopolitan studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Takakura, M. (2011). Does social trust at school affect students' smoking and drinking behavior in Japan? *Social Science & Medicine*, 72(2), 299.
- Vaughn, M., Huang, F., & Ramirez, C. (1995). Drug abuse and anti-drug policy in Japan: Past history and future directions. *British Journal of Criminology*, 35(4), 491–524.
- Wilson, S., & Peterson, L. (2002). The anthropology of online communities. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 449–467.