

Peter Kupfer

Bernsteinglanz und Perlen des Schwarzen Drachen
Die Geschichte der chinesischen Weinkultur

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Preface

Herewith, Prof. Dr. Peter Kupfer of the University of Mainz presents his magisterial account of grape wine in China, reaching back into the mists of the Palaeolithic period and following its course through the millennia as its cachet rose and fell. The reader is not apt to associate China with wine, but now that Central Asia is once again carpeted with vineyards like it was some 700–800 years ago in Mongol times, people are beginning to sit up and take notice.

French wine, real or bogus, may still be the darling of the wealthy, but as Prof. Kupfer points out in his last chapter, China is on the move with its technology ever improving and as it begins to focus on native grape species and their unique *terroirs*. At a 20–30% annual growth rate in wine production in the past several decades, it is poised to surpass other countries not just in production and perhaps consumption, which might be expected for a country with the largest population in the world (about 1.4 billion at this writing), but also in fine wine for the export market.

I know Prof. Kupfer as “Peter” from time spent together at wine and archaeological conferences in China and Europe, including his own town of Germersheim in the Pfalz (Palatinate), an ancient and famous wine region of Germany. Most recently, we were boon companions on visits to medieval Bavarian and Franconian breweries, traveling together in his “Silk Road Cruiser”, a specially outfitted Peugeot camper. He and his wife, Zahra, had put the vehicle to the test by boldly motoring across Central Asia and back again on a five-month adventure (Marco Polo would have been proud!). Not many Westerners could accomplish such a feat. Zahra, a native Iranian, was a great asset in communicating with the locals on western side of Asia and where remnants of this once common language persist in the central part of the continent, while Peter stepped in to help in East Asia.

As a professor of Chinese language and culture, Peter has a facile command of the Chinese language, so that he can read and critically assess the relevance of ancient texts to understand ancient Chinese grape wine. But beyond assessing ancient Chinese grape wine history from a literary and linguistic perspective, seen through the eyes of others, Peter’s trip through Central Asia gave him a first-hand purview on the dramatic physical setting where the domesticated Eurasian grape (*Vitis vinifera* sp *vinifera*) came into cultivation and on the “wine cultures” who made it happen and then passed their bounty on to the Chinese.

Peter and Zahra were not on a sightseeing tour. Of course, they took in the sights of famous oases, like Samarkand and Bukhara. At the same time, they were constantly on the lookout for any evidence of ancient wine, whether it be in the lush Fergana Valley of Tajikistan with its renowned ancient wine, whose vines were brought back to the Chinese emperor in the 2nd century B.C. to plant next to his palace in Xi’an, or one of the lesser known oases that border the huge, ominous Taklamakan Desert of which it is said “if you go in, you won’t come out.” They stopped frequently along the way at archaeological sites and museums where Peter met the directors and others who had been involved in excavations and projects, and discussed with them how their findings might shed new light on ancient wine. He examined archaeological finds up-close, often unpublished. For example, he focused on the exuberant Sogdian culture, seemingly drenched in grape wine, which was so important in Central Asian trade of the 3rd–7th century A.D. and which brought wine to China during the Tang Dynasty. He met Zoroastrian priests, who still carry on traditions of the ancient Sogdians. In short, this adventurous Central Asian trip had a specific purpose: finding out as much as possible about how Eurasian grape wine came to China and its subsequent impact there. Peter went away with new-found knowledge, while recognizing that much more lies buried in the sands, beckoning future archaeologists, historians, and scientists.

Peter’s book begins with a provocative, even philosophical, overview of how ancient humans might have been drawn to fermented beverage-drinking (the hypotheses go by such provocative names as Quantum Leap, Drunken Monkey, and Palaeolithic). He segues into the biomolecular archaeological discovery of the earliest alcoholic beverage in the world to date. The chemical and archaeobotanical evidence comes from the revolutionary early Neolithic site of Jiahu in the Yellow River valley, dating to ca. 7000–5500 B.C. The Jiahu beverage shows how the early peoples of China were already experimenting with fermentation technology by incorporating a wild native grape into a truly “extreme fermented beverage”, which also included honey and some of the earliest domesticated rice. On the opposite side of the continent at about the same time (ca. 6000 B.C.), similar developments that were centered around its native Eurasian grape were taking place in the southern Caucasus and neighboring mountainous regions.

This is just one example of Peter's wider-ranging perspective on Chinese grape wine, which carries us along through his millennial-long narrative. He goes on to show how a barley beer is scientifically attested around 3000 B.C. for a site (Mijiaya) close to modern Xi'an (also home to the terracotta warriors of the first emperor of a unified China, Shi Huangdi). Barley is a western Asiatic cereal, which was first cultivated and domesticated there. Even at this early date, it made its way along a prehistoric "Silk Road" or "Wine Road" (as Peter has referred to it) from Iran, through Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, past the Tarim Basin dominated by the Taklamakan Desert, and through the strategic Gansu corridor to the fertile loess plateau and alluvial plains of central China in Shanxi province. It was via this conduit, an approximately 5000–6000 kilometer distance as the crow flies, that "ideas" of domestication and fermented beverage technology might have flowed in both directions. It was along this route that important sites such as Dunhuang, Xi'an, and Anyang were eventually established. As trade intensified, the actual domesticated plant, physical artifact or other evidence of technological innovation itself was left behind for the archaeologist to discover and interpret.

Peter does not restrict himself to grape wine, but branches out into the making of cereal-based fermented beverages, which were carried out with the uniquely Chinese invention of *qu* saccharification in which communities of microorganisms from the varied ecological niches of China, especially fungi, were nourished by secret formulations of herbs, to convert starches of rice, millet, and sorghum into fermentable sugars. Yeasts, resident in the breweries, fell from their roof rafters and were incorporated into the *qu* cakes, and did the rest by converting the sugars to alcohol and carbon dioxide. This method might have been used as early as the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, dated to the early-mid 2nd – early 1st millennia B.C.

Peter also touches on another innovation – distillation – which he attributes to an Iranian physician of the 9th–10th centuries A.D. and was later passed on to the Mongols, a warring group on the northern steppes who conquered and ruled China for nearly 200 years (A.D. 1206–1368). Like so much else Chinese with its very long traditions, I have my doubts about this hypothesis. I rather suspect that the Mongol distillation still was a modification of another uniquely Chinese invention from the beginning of the millennium, and is less likely to have been brought to China on the prehistoric "wine road" from Iran. More research is needed.

Alcoholic beverages of every kind, including grape wine, were an occasion for celebration in music, dance, and poetry. Peter recounts exuberant tales and the flowing verses of such notables as the "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove", who took wine-drinking to new heights during the 3rd c. A.D. in their reinvigorated Daoism, in marked contrast to Confucianist ceremonial restraints. The Tang emperors (A. D. 618–907) were to follow up, infusing new life and creativity into Chinese society, in the company of poetic circles like the "Eight Immortals of the Wine Cup". Grape wine was theirs and the rulers' drink of choice.

I have touched on only some of the riches to be gleaned from Peter's book, which is brimming over with his passion for and knowledge of Chinese alcohol and grape wine culture. His is the first book, to my knowledge, to place grape wine in its rightful context in Chinese and broader Asiatic history – East, West, and Central – from prehistory up to the present. His signal accomplishment deserves to be honored, much like my research on ancient wine was recognized by planting a Riesling vine on the old city citadel of Mainz, Germany's wine capital, alongside those of European political and vinicultural dignitaries.

Peter's personal vine might be a native Chinese grapevine – a Black Dragon Pearl or Amber Shine – planted in the "Homeland of Grapes and Wine", south of Taiyuan in Shanxi province. I will never forget the thrill of tasting Black Chicken Heart wine there with Peter and marveling in its deliciousness and Peter's grasp of ancient Chinese grape wine culture. His personal vine, laden with fruit, would stand as a fitting memorial to his scholarship, as does this book.

Ganbei!

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