

DRINKING CULTURE IN THE THAI-ISAAN CONTEXT OF NORTHEAST THAILAND

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Abstract. Ethnographic research aimed to explore drinking context, drinking behaviors, and perception of lay people about their drinking and drinking-related behaviors in Thai-Isaan context. The study was conducted in a suburban village in the northeast of Thailand during 2008. Participant observation and informal interview were employed for data collection throughout the year. Findings of the study revealed that alcoholic beverages and drinking were woven into everyday life and integrated into various social events and traditional rites as part of social life. Alcohol consumption was permitted overtly with positive attitudes toward drinking and a low level of restriction. Enjoyment and social functions of drinking were recognized by direct experience in real life. Conversely, problem drinking and overt intoxication with loss of self-control or lack of responsibility were not expected or acceptable. Drinking was rarely perceived as a social distress. From an insiders' view, their drinking was less correlated to alcohol abuse or alcohol-related social problems. In the context of a permissive drinking culture, the existing alcohol regulation measures may be neither supported nor conformed as expected. An alcohol policy that aims to reduce the overall volume of consumption or to indicate the negative consequences may dispute local perceptions and norms. The challenge for public health within this culture is how to persuade the drinkers to realize such negative potential and how to raise societal awareness of negative consequences. Positive local norms and values should be emphasized and strengthened to promote a more healthy drinking culture.

Keywords: alcohol drinking, drinking culture, drinking context, local perceptions, Northeast Thailand

INTRODUCTION

In Thailand, alcohol consumption by Thai youth and adults has increased over time. The estimation of per capita consumption of pure alcohol showed a fourfold increase between 1970 and 2000

(WHO, 2004a). The proportion of drinkers also increased from 31.5% in 1991 to 35.3% in 2004 (Ekachampaka and Wattanamano, 2007). In 2007, the proportion of Thai adults (age 15+) who drank in a 12-month period was 30.02%, while the north and the northeast regions had higher proportions than the whole kingdom (NSO, 2008). To alleviate negative alcohol-related consequences, the Thai government has employed various strategies to reduce the alcohol consumption level and to prevent

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alcohol-related harm that have ranged from regulation of access and availability, partial regulation on advertisements, drink-driving countermeasures, to the promotion of "no alcohol" at religious-related events (Sornphaisan, 2006; Thamarangsi, 2006). However, these efforts have been of limited success. Public awareness of regulatory measures has been raised, but not the conformity, while enforcement of laws seems to have been limited in scope and intensity (Suriyawongpaisal *et al*, 2002; Thamarangsi, 2006). The proportion of everyday drinkers and regular drinkers has increased in the last decade among both men and women, including the proportion of female drinkers (Ekachampaka and Wattanamano, 2007; Sornphaisan, 2008), and the per capita consumption trends have not decreased (WHO, 2011). The National Household Survey for Substance and Alcohol Use in 2007 estimated that about 23.6% of Thai population aged 12-65 years could be classified by the AUDIT as hazardous drinkers, 3.3% as harmful drinkers, and 2.0% as alcohol dependents (The Administrative Committee for Substance Abuse Research Network, 2008).

From the public health perspective, alcohol use is related to wide range of physical, mental, and social harms through the physiological and psychological effects of alcohol (Rehm *et al*, 2004). Two main variables correlated to alcohol-related consequences are pattern of drinking and average volume of consumption. However, drinking patterns among the general public can be affected by the customs of drinking among individuals or different groups, the social customs surrounding it, or the attitudes and norms regarding drinking behaviors by society (Jernigan, 2002). Moreover, the impact of the average volume on such consequences is partly

moderated by patterns of drinking.

Conversely, drinking is inherently social and usually a social act (Douglas, 1987). The consumption of alcohol reveals the cultural processes and concerns rather than the determination of the chemical effects of alcohol (SIRC, 1998). Alcohol consumption is influenced by the role of alcohol in daily life, beliefs and values of drinking in the culture, drinking norms and expectations about drinking, and the relationship of drinking to other aspects of the culture (Heath, 2001). Drinking practices vary from culture to culture because of the distinction of attitudes among different cultures, which include the appropriateness of drinking or particular forms of drinking in various socio-demographic groups and in various contexts (Simpura, 1991), and the attitudes to behavior while drinking or intoxicated (Room and Mäkelä, 2000). The identification of normal drinking and alcohol-use problems are also culturally constructed, and differs across societies and drinking cultures (Bennett *et al*, 1998; Room *et al*, 2001). Problematic drinking, or the problem drinker, is framed by cultural definitions and judged within a cultural value-system (O'Neil and Mitchell, 1996). The differences between normal and pathological drinking may reflect the socially acceptable level of drinking and cultural expectations of drinking-related behavior.

An understanding of the socio-cultural context of alcohol consumption in a society is essential to comprehend their drinking behavior and to predict possible consequences (Jernigan, 2002). Nevertheless, knowledge about social and cultural context of drinking in Thailand is limited, particularly in the northeastern or Thai-Isaan culture (Center for Alcohol Studies, 2008). The existing data are mainly derive from epidemiological studies. Although

epidemiological surveys can show levels and trends in alcohol use, they may not explain how individuals and society perceive or think about alcohol consumption and act of drinking behaviors in particular cultural contexts (Room *et al*, 2001). Therefore, this ethnographic study was conducted to examine the drinking context and drinking behaviors within everyday life and society in the Thai-Isaan context. Perceptions of lay people about their drinking and drinking-related behaviors were explored from the insider's view.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research was part of an ethnographic study that was conducted during 2008 in a village of northeast Thailand. A suburban village was purposefully selected based on the characteristics of the community, which was a traditional Thai-Isaan community with evidence of modernization and urbanization. Another reason was indications of alcohol consumption in everyday life, and in social and cultural events. The village is 20 km from the municipal area, located on the bank of a river, and covers an area of 4.5 km². The village was established more than 100 years ago. The population is quite homogeneous, of Thai-Isaan origin, and all are Buddhist. Around 900 people live there, and 73.8% of people are more than 18 years old. The numbers of adult men and women are comparable. Today, the occupations of most people are in the food and drink service business—working in traditional restaurants on bamboo rafts on the sandy beaches and the bank of the river—and in fisheries or fishing. A small number of people work outside the village, for example, as construction laborers, company employees, or civil servants. Most people living in the village

were born there, while only few people migrated into the village by marriage. Most villagers still have strong kinship ties, as well as adhering to traditional culture. Conversely, there is evidence of modernization, such as motorcycles and cars, styles of housing, and a satellite receiver. However, there are no modern public drinking places, such as bars, clubs or karaoke parlors.

Participant observation and informal interviews were employed for data collection. There were 80 events observed throughout the year, both drinking and non-drinking related events. The researcher participated in fifty-eight social events and special occasions, whether personal or public occasions, with permission or invitations from the hosts. Eight traditional rites and fourteen communal activities were involved in the study.

Informal interviews were conducted at the time of the social and cultural events or as soon as possible after the events, and recorded by note taking or audio recorder after permission was obtained. Audio recording was transcribed into concrete descriptions as soon as possible. The key informants were people who were born and had lived in the village for most of their life. The ages of all interviewees were more than 20 years old. More than 50 men and 30 women were selected purposefully, according to drinking experience, including the drinker, the abstainer, spouse of the drinker, and the host of the events. The elderly were also interviewed for the history of the village and other aspects of socio-cultural life. In addition, chatting and talking with other people provided information of the village life and other alcohol-related issues.

Data were analyzed by content analysis and thematic analysis (LeCompte and

Schensul, 1999; Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Statements from field notes and transcriptions were read thoroughly, coded, and categorized. Code and categories were based on the objectives of the study and emerging issues from field experience. Conceptual models and emerging themes were hypothesized and identified. Then, core themes were created from connected categories. Fig 1 demonstrates such an example of a pathway of data analysis.

The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of Khon Kaen University, Thailand (No HE501123, 2007 Dec 20). The protocol and process of the study were given verbally to the village headman and the advisory committee of the village and discussed in detail.

RESULTS

The presented findings emphasized the drinkers and types of beverage in the village, drinking occasions throughout the year, the functions of alcohol and drinking on each occasion, drinking practices in village life, and local perceptions.

The drinkers and types of beverage: "Our village drinks quite a lot, not only men but also women"

Walking around the village, there was much evidence of alcohol drinking among villagers, such as empty bottles or cans of beer in household garbage and caps of both whiskeys and beer lying along the pathways. All alcoholic beverages are Thai branded commercial beverages that are distributed throughout the country. The most common type of beverage is whisky, which is usually drunk by mixing with ice and soda water, or soda and still water. Beer is the second preferred drink. Beer drinkers usually pour it from a bottle into a glass with ice. *Lao khao* is a local, colorless distilled liquor that contains 40%

alcohol. Some people may mix *lao khao* with an energy drink to make it easier to drink because of its sweet taste and fragrance. Another type is a wine cooler, which is made from wine and grape juice.

The headman estimated that about 90% of the adult males in the village had consumed alcohol once in a year, and more than one-half of them drink frequently, at least 1-2 times a week. The volume and frequency of drinking tends to be highest among young and middle aged men and declined with increasing age. However, there were a number of frequent drinkers among the elderly. Social and cultural events are the primary opportunities for occasional drinkers to drink and sometimes drink in a greater amount than is a usual practice. The common type of beverage among men is whisky, followed by *lao khao* and beer. Although the number of adult men who abstained is quite low, their abstinence is not considered to be offensive by drinkers. To drink or not to drink is accepted as the decision of each individual.

For women, around 40% of adult females were estimated to be the drinkers. Most women are occasional drinkers, but a number of women drink at least once a week. They usually drink at their house or at social and cultural events. Women drink less per occasion and with less frequency than men. The proportion of women who drink generally increases with age, but decrease among women over the age of 50. The preferred drinks for women are beer, followed by whiskey.

Adolescent drinking usually occurs in communal activities associated with religious or cultural events. Birthday parties are another occasion, where peers gather at the host's house. They usually drink to a limited amount and in front of

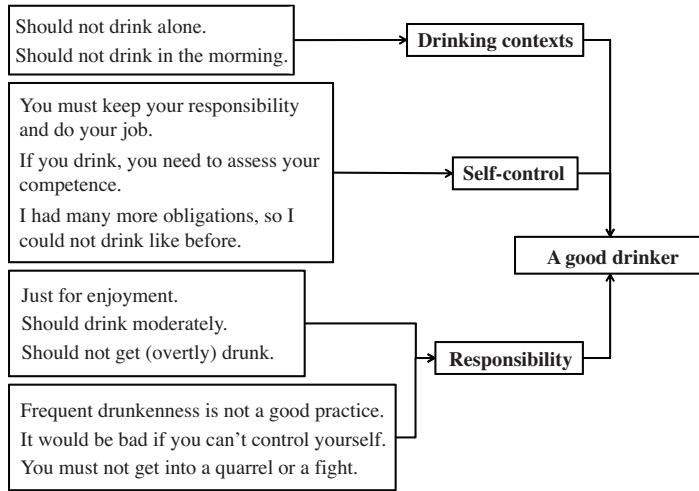


Fig 1—Example of pathway data analysis.

the elders. Beer and wine coolers are the favorite drink among them.

The choice of beverage is a personal preference. Some people may drink any type of alcoholic beverage, but some may drink only a specific type or specific brand. Specific types of beverage are not linked to drinking occasions. The strength of beverages is perceived by flavor and taste rather than real alcohol content, also influences beverage choice. Although *lao khao* and whisky are similar in alcohol content, several *lao khao* drinkers said that whisky cannot satisfy their thirst. Conversely, several whisky drinkers said “*lao khao* is too strong to drink.” Beer and wine cooler are considered to be the lighter alcoholic beverages. However, wine cooler is sometimes not considered to be “a real drink” for adult men because of its sweet taste and the belief that it has low alcohol content; although it contains 5% alcohol, the equivalent concentration of beer.

Drinking is regarded as a part of daily life and socio-cultural events

Drinking can occur throughout the year as a part of daily life, a social activity,

a way of marking the life cycle, and a part of cultural events or traditional rites. In each context, alcohol and drinking have specific functions and meaning for those who drink.

Drinking in everyday life

In the evening, hard workers or laborers may stop at a grocery shop in the village to buy a small bottle of *lao khao* or a bottle of beer before returning home. They may drink together at someone’s house before returning their houses. Drinking

is considered as a relaxation after a hard day’s work or relief ‘from’ their muscle aches, as well as socializing with others. Dinner is a time for drinking too. Some villagers buy a small glass of *lao khao* (30 ml) and drink at the grocery shop before they have a dinner to stimulate their appetite. Many people drink to accompany the meal, particularly when relations or close friends gather together. It is again considered as a way of relaxing and facilitating social contacts and relationships.

Alcohol may be consumed for medicinal purposes. In this context, it is consumed in a small amount and not regarded as a liquor or intoxicant. For example, a man who identifies himself as an abstainer drank a can of beer to relief his dizziness. Another woman drank occasionally when she felt faint. She explained, “It’s just a little amount, for the blood circulation” (F, 64 years, occasional drinker). Alcohol is also used for mood alteration. It is supposed to enhance mood and facilitate fluent speaking. Drinking is expected to bring cheerfulness and pleasure to the drinkers.

Drinking in social activities

Celebration is the most common reason for drinking alcohol. Each significant occasion in daily life can be marked by a celebratory drink, such as when someone has obtained new property, a new car or motorcycle, after renovation of a house, or at a birthday party. New Year is another significant occasion for celebration. The celebration may involve only the family members or relatives and close friends who are invited to participate.

When groups of friends or relatives go to a river site or to a pond for fishing and picnicking, drinking is expected, and frequently, it becomes the central feature of the event. Alcoholic beverages are regarded as a social lubricant for sociability, mediating relationships between individuals, or establishing friendships. Some guests may bring alcohol with them to drink together. It is considered a reciprocation for the invitation.

When relations or friends are asked to assist in personal work, they are treated to food and drinks as an expression of thanks for their generous participation. After a work feast, at which groups of people volunteer to work for a communal project, participants are treated likewise after work. One elderly person added that alcohol could make the atmosphere of working more enjoyable, but it should not be drunk too much.

Drinking is also an adjunct to hospitality. When one's long-separated friends or relatives visit, the host and visitor usually drink together. Even one who defines himself as an abstainer said that he should drink at least a glass of alcohol on this occasion. Encouragement to drink by the host seems to be an extension of the hospitality of a good host.

Drinking on special occasions of the life cycle

Besides the significant moments of life cycle, *su khwan* ceremony is an important custom that is performed in several socio-cultural events. In general, this ceremony is held to recall one's *khwan* (soul or living essence) to one's body. It may be carried out at times of crisis such as a curing ritual for illness or after recovery from illness, personal tragedy, or ill fate. The ceremony is also performed as a warm welcome or congratulation at time of a good fortune or success. During the ritual, a tray of food and a bottle of alcoholic beverage may be presented to the ancestors and spirit for inviting them as the witness or for blessing the participants. The ceremony usually concludes with participants eating and drinking together. In the event of welcome or congratulation, guests are usually encouraged to drink by the host.

Each moment of the villagers' life cycle is associated with drinking alcohol. When a couple has a baby, relatives and close friends will be invited to the "monthly birthday celebration" to congratulate and celebrate with the family. On a wedding day, alcoholic beverage is shared by relatives as a sign of reciprocity between the bride's and the groom's families. After *su khwan* ritual in late morning, food and drinks are served to all participants to celebrate the moment. Alcohol is an essential part of a wedding party. In an ordination ceremony of someone to be a Buddhist monk, relatives and close friends are invited to participate in celebration where food and drink are served after the *su khwan* ritual. Drinking is also a part of celebration in a religious ceremony to bless a house and a housewarming party.

The funeral ceremony, which is usually held between three to five days later

at the house of the deceased, also is related to drinking. Food and drinks are served after the religious ritual in the evening. After the cremation ritual, all guests are invited to have a meal at the deceased's house where food and beverages are served. However, alcoholic beverages are drunk to accompany the meal and not in a large amount. It appears to be a part of the hospitality.

Drinking in traditional rite

According to Thai-Isaan culture, there are 12 traditional annual rites or *heed sib song*, one of which is conventionally held each lunar month. However, in this village, only 8 out of 12 rites are performed, including in the 4th, 5th, and 7th-12th lunar months (around March, April, and June-November): *boun phawet*, *boun songkran* or *songkran* festival, *boun sam hah*, *boun khao phansa*, *boun koaw pradub din*, *boun koaw sak*, *boun ok phansa*, and *boun kathin*. Most of these ceremonies are a form of merit-making that encompass the values of religion and community. Another ceremony, which is held on an auspicious day in the sixth lunar month, is *pu ta* (the village guardian spirit) worship.

Among the traditional annual ceremonies, there are only three that drinking is considered as a part of the events, including *boun phawet*, *boun songkran*, and *pu ta* worship. These ceremonies consist of two parts, religious-related or spirit-related rituals, when celebration or hospitality drinking have roles.

Boun phawet is a great rite of the year, and drinking is expected during the event. Several villagers said that this was a great occasion of drinking, more than any other occasion in the year when alcohol was usually consumed in large quantity. *Boun songkran*,—the traditional Thai New Year,—is another occasion of great festivity.

Alcoholic beverage is expected to be drunk during the event, and everyone should be cheerful. As one elderly man explained, "It is the joyous day. They drink from morning 'til the end of the festive period, both men and women". (M, 73 years, occasional drinker). In *Pu ta* (spirit) worship, food and alcoholic beverage, one tray from each family, are presented to worship *pu ta* for the village's security and peacefulness in the coming year. The offerings are shared for eating and drinking after the ritual. Both food and alcoholic beverages are consumed, not only for a celebration of the event, but also a blessing for those who drink.

Drinking is accepted in specific times and spaces

Drinking times vary by the nature of the occasion. In everyday life, drinking time is usually in the evening, or from evening until nighttime. Alcohol may be consumed throughout the day at cultural events. Drinking can occur at the time of specific social events, for instances, in the morning or evening at a wedding ceremony, in the afternoon after a cremation ritual, or during or after a work fest. For hospitality and sociability, alcohol may be offered and consumed at any time.

Villagers usually drink within the boundary of the village, particularly when they drink in large amounts. In daily drinking and social events, it may take place in front of a house, in a courtyard, or at a location close to a house, but rarely in a closed space, such as living room or kitchen. A drinking group may settle nearby a pathway or at the waterfront where they can be easily seen by others, and sometimes the passers-by may be invited to drink together. On special occasions, drinking also occurs at the location of the event, regardless of whether it is a

private or a public space. In a communal activity or a traditional rite, drinking mainly occurs in public or open spaces.

Drinking is considered to be a social activity which should be done with others. It is unusual to drink alone, particularly in a large amount. It is considered inappropriate if someone drink alone until drunk. Even a regular drinker said that "I've never drunk alone. I can't imagine it. I hesitate to do it without friends". (M, 40 years, regular drinker). Solitary drinking may be found in everyday life, but usually just a small amount is consumed.

On every occasion related to drinking alcohol, both sexes and various generations can participate in those events whether they drink or not. Children and adolescents are allowed to stay or play nearby a drinking group in all alcohol-related occasions. But, in a drinking group, there are some restrictions. In general, men usually drink with the same gender or male friends, while women usually drink with family members, relatives, or close friends. Women may be present at or join in a male drinking group only if they are with their spouse, or relatives. Both men and women may join together in a drinking group only at a traditional ceremony or communal activity.

Drinking is permitted under self-control

Drinking is generally accepted as a way of the villagers' life and is regarded as a norm in most social and cultural events. Several villagers concluded that, in their village, alcohol is consumed more than nearby villages. Local perceptions and attitudes can affect both drinking practices and drinking behaviors.

Positive outcomes of drinking are perceived more than negative consequences

Most villagers agree that drinking brings them an enjoyment, and it is not

a problem of the community. Drinking is regarded as a social activity and social relationship enhancer. Drinking tends to intensify harmonious relations, promote social cohesion, and affirm kinship ties. Several former drinkers realize that drinking is an essential component of enjoyment and socializing. Even non-drinkers or spouses of drinkers also recognize positive outcomes.

I drink just for fun. I always drink with my friends. Drinking, eating, and chatting are all that we do in a drinking session. If I do not drink, I think I won't have any friends to enjoy with. If we do not drink, how can we have a good time together? (F, 42 years, occasional drinker).

Alcoholic beverages are made for drinking, so, drink it when you can drink (M, 67 years, former drinker).

Physical health consequences are major issues associated with drinking that concern villagers; however, they usually are concerned with health consequence only when they do not feel well or get an illness. It is a major reason for quitting among several drinkers, but they usually return to drinking when they feel well again.

Drinking alcohol is rarely perceived as a social distress or raised as a public issue. Family problems related to alcohol consumption, such as high household expenses or potential family violence, may be raised only when someone is drinking heavily or in a problematic pattern. From the headmen's point of view, drinking rarely leads to a fight or a brawl. Most fighting is because of annoyance with drunken person who is hit by a sober one. It is the drinkers that are criticized, but not alcohol or drinking. Although women and abstainers tend to perceive lack of

responsibility for family obligations and accident as the consequences of drinking, they also realize the social benefits from drinking, particularly moderate drinking.

A drinker should control his/her drinking behaviors

Most villagers emphasize the value of moderate drinking. Overt drunkenness with physical signs and loss of control is not accepted, but ridiculed and scorned. Some degree of drunkenness may be accepted on occasions associated with celebration or traditional ceremonies. It is tolerated if a person can control his or her behavior and takes responsibility for themselves. Many villagers agree that, "If you enjoy drinking, you need to assess your competence." Drunkenness is not an excuse for failure to control their behaviors. One woman who is an occasional drinker explained:

Drinking is both good and bad. It would be good if you drink moderately. It would be bad if you can't control yourself. Though you get a bit drunk, it doesn't matter if you just have fun with your friends. It's an enjoyment. But, you mustn't get into a quarrel or a fight. (F, 62 years, occasional drinker).

In general, normal drinking is defined without reference to quantity of consumption. It depends on the ability of the individual to know when and how to drink, actual drinking practice, and how to behave even slightly intoxicated.

If you drink, you must take responsibility and do your job. Not just walk around, looking for drink. (M, 35 years, regular drinker).

A problem drinker? They love to drink, any kind of alcohol. They usually get drunk. When there is an

event, they can drink and get drunk all day long or for several days. (M, 74 years, abstainer).

Problematic drinking does not primarily depend on the quantity or frequency of consumption, but rather to the interference with personal responsibility or obligations during and after a drinking session and the ability to control one's behavior. It emphasizes the negative effects that drinking can have on social wellbeing, or the family and work obligations. One can be defined as a problem drinker if he/she frequently gets drunk and cannot take the responsibility, or frequently behave in a problematic drinking pattern. Nevertheless, the consensus is that the number of villagers who abuse alcohol, characterized by continual problematic drinking, is low.

Alcohol consumption among women tends to be more acceptable both in private and public spaces. Nevertheless, women are expected to drink infrequently and to not get drunk. Drinking alone or getting drunk are improper and criticized. It is considered as inappropriate if a woman drinks with a group of men. From a women's viewpoint, drinking with men can be followed by sexual harassment, particularly when someone gets drunk.

It's OK for women to drink alcohol. Many women here drink. But it's not the same as men when they get drunk. It's not so good if they get drunk and lose their control. (M, 38 years, former drinker).

It's not good if a woman drinks with a group of men. You may be harassed by a drunken man...grab your hand or say something dirty. It's OK to drink in a group of women or with female friends. But you must not get drunk. You can lose your control,

do an awful thing, or do something unashamedly. If you drink you must aware of yourself. (F, 62 years, occasional drinker).

DISCUSSION

Among the typologies of drinking that use culture to explain and classify, alcohol consumption in the studied village can be defined as 'the permissive culture,' which Pittman (1967, cited in Room and Mäkelä, 2000) described. Alcohol consumption is integrated into several aspects of villagers' lives and overtly accepted. People seem to have positive attitudes towards alcohol consumption. Although some degree of drunkenness is tolerated, society does not accept intoxication or overt drunkenness with a loss of self-control, even in social and cultural occasions where heavy drinking or some degree of drunkenness is expected. An individual's responsibility and obligation are concerned. Drinking places also reflect the permissive attitude of the villagers towards alcohol (SIRC, 1998). They usually drink in open and highly visible spaces, whether on private or public occasions. Conversely, drinking in open spaces where the others can join together also facilitates social bonding among the drinkers and familiarity for witnesses and the young.

Drinking has several functions in specific contexts (Sulkunen, 2002). Socializing, celebration, hospitality, and reciprocity are the most common social functions of drinking. Therefore, drinking has become the norm during several events. The more drinking functions in a particular context the more it encourages increased consumption or heavy drinking, and promotes more drinking in the society. The prevalence of drink-

ing, social approval, and expectations of benefits are the reasons for initiating and reinforcing drinking behaviors (Rimal and Real, 2005).

In general, drinking in this village can be considered as a drinking culture which is less correlated with alcohol abuse or dependence, and alcohol-related social problems (Peele and Brodsky, 1996; Research New Zealand, 2006), at least from insider's viewpoint. Constraints on consumption with drinking norms and values are passed and learned comfortably within the domain of kinship. While positive attitudes promote alcohol consumption, drinking norms, drinking contexts, and drinking behaviors can decrease the potential for harm. Moderate drinking, by a lay definition, is more evident than overt intoxication. Heavy drinking, which may lead to accidents or injuries, usually occurs within the village environment, where norms are recognized and shared. Fig 2 summarizes the character of drinking culture and the impacts on drinking behavior.

Although findings from this study may not represent drinking culture in all Thai-Isaan communities, to some extent, it demonstrates that there is a permissive drinking culture as a subculture in Thai society and reveals the influence of culture on the perceptions, beliefs and shaping drinking behavior. Conversely, it could reflect the effect of alcohol policy and explain the low conformity rate in a particular culture.

In Buddhism, refraining from alcohol consumption is one of the five precepts to which all Buddhists are expected to conform, while alcohol policy also attempts to promote a 'no alcohol' strategy during religious-related events. Our findings demonstrate that drinking is associated

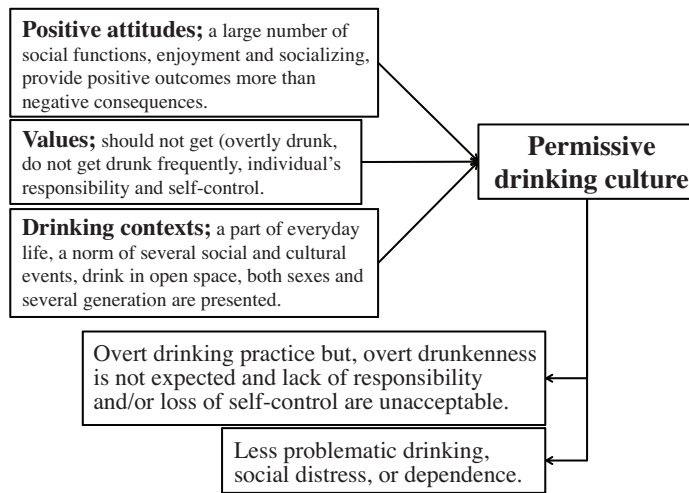


Fig 2–Drinking culture and the impacts on drinking behavior.

with several religious-related occasions. However, it is considered as an essential part of the feast or social activity on these occasions, but not the religious activity. Studies in other parts of Thailand have shown that drinking which involves religious activities or practices seems to affect drinking behaviors among Thai Buddhists less than expected (Assanangkorchai *et al*, 2002; Newman *et al*, 2006). They noted that the fifth precept may be interpreted differently among Buddhist laymen; several people interpret it as a total abstinence, while others may perceive it as moderate drinking.

Observation of positive effects in real life may influence perception and frames of reference for interpreting risks and consequences more than general public information. Enjoyment and excitement of drinking can encourage more drinking and can induce the young to become involved and expect positive outcomes or social reinforcement. The perception of there being benefits that are more than risks, high frequency of drinking

and consumption volume, and beliefs about alcoholic beverage and drinking in society also influence public opinion on alcohol policy (Hemström, 2002; Greenfield *et al*, 2007; Holmila *et al*, 2009); therefore, the existing alcohol regulatory measures may not be supported or conformed to as expected by policy maker.

The integration into sociocultural life of the high frequency of drinking occasions can lead to an increase in community tolerance to drinking and

related behaviors (McIlwaine and Moser, 2004). Therefore, societal responses to the consequences of drinking is limited, and alcohol-related problems at an individual level can belatedly be noticed by the public (Cottino, 1995). It may be difficult to raise alcohol-related problems as a societal concern or a public awareness, which are the indicators of the success of harm reduction strategies (Roche *et al*, 2005) and the key elements in initiating and establishing local measures (WHO, 2004b; ICAP, 2006).

In the context of a permissive drinking culture, alcohol control measures and law enforcement may not be the only suitable strategies. As alcohol consumption is permitted overtly and social benefits are recognized by direct experience, alcohol policies that aim to reduce the overall volume of consumption or to indicate the negative consequences may interfere with local perceptions and norms. The challenge in a culture like this is how to persuade the drinkers to realize negative potential and to raise the societal

awareness of negative consequences. Public information of related consequences or recommendation about alcohol consumption should be concerned about drinking culture and lay perceptions about risks and benefits from drinking. Positive local norms and values should be emphasized and strengthened along with a harm reduction strategy to promote a more healthy drinking culture.

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