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On September 15, the [Kunming Craft Beer Society](#) (KCBS) held its twelfth monthly meeting. Established by Darryl Snow a year ago, the group has rapidly grown to become a good example of inter-cultural exchange in Kunming. Of the approximately 20 attendees, the meeting was an equal mix of local Chinese, foreign expatriates, new club members, and returnees.

The theme for the evening's event was "beer and food pairings", and the meeting lived up to the title. Not only did the host venue offer food, from waffles to dragon fruit, but Snow also brought in curries made specifically for the occasion.

As the meeting got started, pamphlets were passed around, detailing the basics of home-brewing, as well as clarifying the differences between each style of beer. Going over the latter, Snow discussed each featured beer — first in English, then in Chinese — before informing us which foods they paired well with. For example, spicy curries go best with India Pale Ales (IPAs) while salmon goes best with Brown Ales.

As a whole, KCBS does not have many rules. You can bring beer to share, you can simply listen to what is being said, or you can just be there to socialize. While one could simply buy a Tsingtao, host venues tend to keep a well-stocked supply of craft brews from around the world. After the official segment of the meeting was over, it became much more casual. People spread out, tried the food, bought a few beers, and whiled away the evening. It was at this point that I got an opportunity to have a chat with Snow, and find out about the specifics of KCBS.



GoKunming: Can you briefly explain the main objectives of KCBS?

Darryl Snow: The primary goal of KCBS is to contribute to raising awareness, quality, and availability of [craft beer in China](#). Increasing cosmopolitanism in China, especially the younger population in first-tier cities, has led to an increased demand for foreign trends and commodities. So we've seen the craft beer revolution seep into China via the brewpubs and clubs like ours that have been popping up all over the country. It's now quite common, but only in the past year or so, for there to be craft beer bars and societies not just in the first tier cities, but also in the second and third tier cities. We want to see more of that.

The more people know about and want craft beer, the more access we'll all have to a wider variety of better quality beer. There is a challenge in countering local mis-conceptions about beer — that it's weak and bitter, only comes in 'yellow' or 'black' varieties, that the Germans do it best — as well as adapting craft beer into the local

drinking culture. So what's going on in China isn't quite the same as in other countries, I don't think, and needs a tailored approach. Our approach is through education, social gatherings, and the promotion of relevant business and organizations.

A secondary goal is to encourage people to try making their own beer at home. This is a great way not just to learn more about beer and the great variety of styles available, but also invests people in the craft beer scene, essentially making them brand ambassadors. The more people brew, talk about brewing, share their beer with friends, the more people outside of our organization become aware of craft beer and may be inspired to join and contribute.

The third goal is simply to make friends and connect people who share a common passion.



GK: What makes KCBS unique?

Snow: Knowledge of craft beer. Between us, we have many years of knowledge and experience of both drinking and brewing. We're committed to education and to building a community around craft beer that ties in both locals and expats, as well as consolidating information about the craft beer scene in Kunming. If anyone is interested in learning about anything beer-related in Kunming, then there really is no better resource. Hopefully we'll soon be able to offer members discounts at various craft beer bars around town.

GK: What is the ratio between expat and local members?

Snow: The regular members, those who attend every meet-up, are usually all expats, with just a few Chinese members. We're probably around four to one, expats to locals. Engaging expats has of course been easier because they are generally already familiar with craft beer, have been to other places with a strong craft beer culture, and share the same drinking culture. Being an expat myself, communication and marketing is easier through channels like [GoKunming](#) and [Facebook](#) (requires proxy).

For a local who doesn't perhaps speak English, it can be very intimidating to join a group of majority foreigners, even though a few of us do speak Chinese. The local members though, even the ones who can't speak English, are very enthusiastic and we're always trying to reach out to more like-minded people. All of our materials are presented in both Chinese and English and at every meet-up either myself or someone else will translate everything. We're slowly ramping up marketing efforts, especially on WeChat. Currently our WeChat chat group has over 60 people, half of whom are Chinese.



GK: Is the confluence of demographics of any significant importance to KCBS?

Snow: I really think it's essential that the KCBS remains representative of both expats and locals. The expat community cannot sustain it. Foreigners in Kunming are relatively few and so the gamut of those interested enough in craft beer or brewing is too small. In addition, many stay for only short-term periods, generally frequent the same bars, and may not have the disposable income from teaching jobs to afford the high prices for craft beer that we're currently suffering in Kunming. An 80 yuan IPA may be delicious, but perhaps not marginally more delicious than a good quality 20 yuan [Beer Laos](#). The investment in terms of both space and up-front costs for brewing equipment.

On the other hand, what the foreigners do offer, for the time being at least, is the better experience and knowledge, if not the enthusiasm.

As more and more locals gain interest in craft beer, I expect and hope that they will gradually fill the ranks of the KCBS. After all, we want to raise awareness of craft beer and see more of it available in the local market that will hopefully lead to quality and range increasing and prices decreasing. This requires the support of local business and local customers. The market needs to demand these changes.

In the bigger picture, there is a national craft beer association on the cards, led by the major breweries in Beijing and Shanghai and also the Beijing Home Brewing Society. This will be in the form of a legally registered national entity, which will offer education, accreditation, events and competitions. In order to reach this goal though, they will need the support of this growing national network of organizations like ours. The splintering of groups into expats and locals does nothing towards this goal. I think it's a great idea that requires more inter-organization unity and collaboration, and the support of as many people as possible.



GK: Where do you see KCBS heading, going forward, and what are the long-term goals?

Snow: Starting with short-term, we want to continue expanding and attracting more members, especially locals. I'd also like to see the responsibility for running and organizing KCBS transfer from just myself to a group of elected officers, ideally with local support. This will hopefully make it more of a community-based organization that will be more sustainable going forward. Right now, if something happens to me or if I leave Kunming then it may be over. Also it's important to keep up momentum and I hate to have to cancel or reschedule a meeting just because I'm not available. To this

end, we're going to continue with marketing efforts on social media as well as through promotional materials.

A great way to encourage more people to join is through cold, hard cash benefits. We'd like to cooperate more with local businesses to run craft beer promotions and events, as well as negotiate discounts for members. Eventually we may even be able to offer membership trinkets like branded t-shirts, beer mugs, or bottle openers that will further help garner a sense of community and draw in more members.

In the medium-term we also want to build on not just monthly meet-ups but also events like seminars, workshops, and especially beer festivals. It would be great to invite experts from other parts of China, and further afield, to share their knowledge and experiences with the group. Later this year we'll hopefully be running a brewing workshop.

There are already several beer festivals each year in Beijing and Shanghai, with others in second-tier cities. We'd love to see something similar happen in Kunming, but perhaps we're not quite ready yet — not quite enough local breweries and bottle shops, let alone craft beer enthusiasts. It might be difficult to encourage participants from other cities to join us here, with us being a bit remote. Nevertheless, it is something that's on the cards — hopefully in 2016 — and would be great not just for attracting new members to KCBS, but also towards our primary goal of raising awareness of, and demand for, craft beer.

In the long-term we want to be able to contribute and integrate more on a national scale, seeing this network of city-based beer clubs merge into something bigger and more organized that can offer more to everyone. We'd like to see Kunming represented at all national events. Right now though, we, and indeed the craft beer market in Kunming, are still quite nascent. With the situation changing so rapidly, it's hard to plan for the long-term.

Ultimately, it would be great to see this evolve into a large community of people enthusiastic about craft beer, organized and run locally by locals.



GK: Using KCBS as a microcosm, what do you think its formation and growth indicate regarding Kunming as a whole?

Snow: I think I arrived just at the cusp of the craft beer scene developing in Kunming. At the time there was nothing. Many bars had the same limited selection of imported Belgian and German bottles and that was it. No clubs, practically no home brewing going on, and no brew pubs. How much things have changed in just one year!

Many of the bars we've visited during our meet-ups are now stocking beers that were impossible to find before. Now we're seeing American pale ales and IPAs in the refrigerators all over town, we have [Humdinger](#) brewing four different styles on a

500-liter system with more to come, and of course we now have a growing number of enthusiastic home brewers. This proves that there is a big demand for craft beer in Kunming, just like in the first and second tier cities and suggests a trend that's likely to continue.

The challenge in Kunming is that, unlike in larger, more accessible cities, locals are indeed mostly local. Very few Chinese people in Kunming are from outside Yunnan, let alone Kunming. So people's palettes are generally more limited. Changing the beer culture here is going to be a slower journey than elsewhere perhaps, with it remaining a niche interest for the time being. Add to that the costs are generally higher in Kunming as there are more middlemen to get through before imported beers can make it here.

Luckily, cost is often associated with quality, and so the higher costs might actually play in our favor. We'll just have to wait and see. What's encouraging nevertheless is the support and enthusiasm of a growing number of business owners. Indeed, of the regular members of our group, quite a few run local businesses that are invested in craft beer, so we're all on that journey together.

GK: How do people join KCBS?

Snow: We're not-for-profit and we encourage anyone and everyone to attend our meet-ups, which are entirely free unless otherwise stated. We only ask that you support the hosts by buying something from the bar. Our membership fees are just 200 yuan person and run for one year from Chinese New Year. Membership fees give people access to our ingredients co-op and go towards paying for marketing and promotion, organization, tastings and the sponsorship of events.



Second image: [Jordan Steinberg](#)

All other images: Darryl Snow