

THE BREWING SCENE IN ASIA

PART ONE — CRAFT BREWING IN SHANGHAI

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From our most treasured and active ‘correspondent’ in Shanghai, China, Michael Jordan, currently head brewer at the Boxing Cat Brewery in Shanghai, we have received this article on the craft scene in Shanghai – the first in a series of articles from Mike on various aspects of the beer scene in Asia in general. We are eagerly awaiting the coming articles as well!

This is the first of several articles where I will discuss the brewing scene in Asia, as I six months ago moved to Shanghai to work for an American themed craft brewery called Boxing Cat Brewery. It has been very interesting thus far as life in China is much different than my previous two years in Denmark. I will not really delve into ‘Why China’ as I think the media has done enough coverage about the massive opportunities here already. Instead, I will focus on the brewing culture throughout Asia and begin this first article discussing Shanghai and my job as brewmaster for Boxing Cat Brewery. In future articles, I will highlight other Asian breweries as I expect to travel throughout SE Asia sampling other craft beers.

The Bund Brewery was the first small brewery in Shanghai, opening its doors in 1994. It’s located on The Bund, a highly visible spot along the Huangpu River, known for being a major tourist attraction. The brewery features a small Kaspar Shultz brewhouse and pours two German inspired beers of average quality. Although The Bund Brewery opened in 1994, the first brewery to be considered a modern day craft brewery was Henry’s Brewery, which opened its doors in 2006, but unfortunately closed in early 2008. Despite the closure, many other small breweries have opened in the Shanghai area. The German brewing culture in China is pretty strong and has prompted some of the more famous German brewers to open large brewpubs focusing on their heritage by decorating many of the interiors as traditional beer halls. There are three Paulaner and two Hofbrauhaus locations brewing on site with small pub brewing systems to guarantee fresh beer. The beer offered at these locations is of good quality and focuses on traditional German beers such as Helles and Weizen. There are also a few locally owned brewpubs producing beer that, at best, would be considered amateur homebrew. These local brewpubs are more family run restaurants that have decided to capitalise on house-brewed beer without hiring a trained brewer. The lack of expertise distracts from the focus on beer quality, leaving the customer feeling less than satisfied. While sub-par craft beer is a shame, it is typical for an immature craft beer market. Fortunately, the population pool in Shanghai is dynamic and large enough, so, little damage has been done to the general image of the craft beer industry.

In recent years, several new breweries have opened including the one that I brew for, the Boxing Cat Brewery. The three owners (Gary Heyne, Kelly Lee, and Lee Tseng) opened Boxing Cat in April 2008 and brought with them an extremely different skill set. Gary Heyne, co-founder and original brewmaster, had more than 14 years of brewing experience, dating back to

his time brewing for Bardley’s in Houston, Texas. Kelley Lee, co-founder, a formally trained chef and management guru from Southern California, brought with her a vast amount of restaurateur experience. Lee Tseng, born in Taiwan, spent his youth and also attended university in Toronto, Canada, where he studied business management. Starting with a 10 hl brewing system (purchased from a Canadian brewery equipment supplier), the three came together with their respective expertise and opened Boxing Cat Brewery. The business has grown, so Boxing Cat now consists of two large restaurants in prime central city locations and a separate brewing facility that has grown around the original 10 hl system. Since the beginning, the focus of Boxing Cat has been American inspired beer and food. The food is Southern US style and includes dishes one might find along the Interstate 15 corridor, essentially ranging in anything from Tex-Mex to Cajun style food. The beer menu is very diverse and the six draught beers include anything from Pilsner, Scotch Ale or Imperial IPA. My job here is very flexible as I have been able to brew some very interesting craft beers recently and even begun to barrel age several different products. A large proportion of Boxing Cat’s customer base is expatriates who miss the beer from back home. We are also seeing increased interest from locals who become pleasantly surprised by the flavour possibilities of craft beer. Since my arrival here, I have also been able to use some local ingredients in beer including a recent Belgian Tripel beer with Szechuan peppercorns and fresh ginger. The interest in such beers is very high, making me optimistic about craft beer in China. I definitely foresee more experimental beers using local ingredients!

Within the last year, two other legitimate brewpubs have opened, Shanghai Brewery and The Brew. Each brewpub is located within an entirely different district of the city. This is exciting as it adds exposure to craft beer and helps the entire industry along. The Shanghai Brewery was started in the fall of 2010, and is located along a busy pedestrian street called Hong Mei Lu. They offer seven draught beers and, as well as their own IPA, Stout and several different Weizens. The head brewer is based in the USA and has many years of experience in the Pacific Northwest brewing scene. The Brew is the newest brewpub to open and is located in Pudong within the Kerry Hotel, part of the Shangri-la chain. The Brew opened in February 2011 and has a wonderful design incorporating the brewhouse prominently in the centre of the restaurant. The Brew has seven regular draught products ranging from Wit to Vanilla Stout plus a Cider. The head brewer, Leon Mickelson, hails from New Zealand and has worked in many different craft breweries →

in New Zealand, Australia and England. I have enjoyed meeting Leon and we are both pushing the boundaries of craft beer in Shanghai while focusing on educating consumers.

A recent development we have pursued is the formation of the Shanghai Craft Brewers Guild. Our focus is for the three major craft breweries (Boxing Cat, Shanghai Brewery and The Brew) to work together to promote the craft beer industry in Shanghai. We have organised three craft beer festivals for the spring and summer, and we will rotate locations so each brewery will host an event. The festivals will also include other craft beer as we are inviting distributors and two local beer-centric pubs to join us. The guild will also allow the founding breweries to work together for cooperative purchasing since premium malt and hops can be difficult to source in China.

The biggest hurdle I have experienced since moving to China is sourcing hops, yeast and specialty malt. There are many restrictions for acquiring premium ingredients within China and, so far, the majority of global malting companies have avoided the red tape associated with the Communist government. The Chinese government also makes it rather

difficult for a microbrewery to open, which has forced any prospective craft brewers to reclassify their establishment as a brewpub. The major difficulty is the licensing involved for a true factory and the actual guidelines for setting up a bottling facility. This is one reason why the global brewing companies invest in an existing brewery, thereby bypassing all the regulations required to build a new brewery. In essence, if you have a fully certified brewery, it is potentially worth much more than the physical assets because the licensing is so difficult to acquire. Still, the licensing is not impossible to obtain, and I imagine I will have some rather interesting stories once Boxing Cat Brewery begins to build a new production brewery!

I have yet to explore the large breweries that are located within Shanghai, but imagine I will seize the opportunity to visit Tsingtao and Suntory. The local palate is very used to these standard lager beers, but I think Shanghainese people are willing to explore different flavours. The region is famous for several local dishes that tend to be sweet in character, so, I think delicious malty beer is right up their alley. The international flare of Shanghai is prominent, and I look forward to the future of craft beer in Shanghai and the surrounding provinces! ☺

