

Introduction

Soju, the “national” distilled alcoholic drink of Korea,¹ has now become one of the world’s most popular drinks, most recently thanks to the recent pop-cultural phenomenon of Korean Wave (*Hallyu*), represented by the growing popularity of K-pop, Korean dramas, and Korean foods in today’s globalizing world.² Clear and colorless, with a taste similar to vodka, soju is a kind of spirit, or distilled liquor, which obtains a high percentage of alcohol content by means of a distillation technology that separates alcohol from the water and other compounds of fermented material. Though not as famous as such spirits as whiskey and vodka, soju currently enjoys increasingly widespread popularity worldwide. Like many other modern spirits today, the companies behind many modern soju brands produce on a mass scale in factories using modern technologies. As a consequence, few people today are aware of the drink’s ancient origins or how it became popular in Korea.³ Nor are they aware of its rich history. Indeed, the search for soju’s origins leads us into the larger complex world of premodern Afro-Eurasia, where hemispheric movements of trade, empires, transfers of scientific and

¹ While one could question who legitimately can determine what a “national” liquor is, many people, including those in Korean and international media, commonly refer to soju as the Korean “national” liquor, in a way that is compared to similar references in Russia to vodka. For example, see Sam Dangremond, “Here’s Everything You Need to Know about Soju, the National Drink of South Korea,” *Town & Country*, February 8, 2018, www.townandcountrymag.com/leisure/drinks/a16752958/soju-korean-liquor (accessed September 25, 2019).

² For example, see Tom Dreisbach, “Move over Vodka; Korean *Soju*’s Taking a Shot at America,” *National Public Radio* (NPR) online, September 22, 2013, www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/09/22/224522548/move-over-vodka-korean-soju-s-taking-a-shot-at-america (accessed May 18, 2016). A 2014 guidebook to the world’s most famous spirits introduces soju as “actually the most widely consumed spirit in the world.” Joel Harrison and Neil Ridley, *Distilled: From Absinthe & Brandy to Vodka & Whisky, the World’s Finest Artisan Spirits Unearthed, Explained & Enjoyed* (London: Mitchell Beazley, 2014), 206.

³ An American journalist asked owners of some Korean restaurants that sell soju in the United States what was the origin of the drink, and they replied that they didn’t know. See Joshua Schenckan, “What Is ‘Traditional’ Soju? A Spirited Debate,” *Serious Eats*, October 3, 2017, www.seriouseats.com/2017/10/what-is-traditional-soju-korea-tokki-brandon-hill.html (accessed October 2, 2018).

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technological know-how, and other forms of cross-cultural exchange created the conditions for the development of what we now regard as a singularly Korean drink. Through soju, we see signs of Korea's deep engagement with the world at large, especially Afro-Eurasia, and more importantly for this story the consequent impact of this interaction on Korean society and culture – here, in the form of a drink now identified with today's Korean nation.

This book about Korean soju is part of a larger study of the history of distillation worldwide, as it relates to the production of medicinals, distillates, and tinctures of various sorts. Liquors such as soju were used in a variety of medical, spiritual, and other social practices. The aspiration in many societies to create stronger alcoholic drinks with a higher level of preservability led to a refinement of the distillation technology that produces them. This development began early; however, the popularity of distilled liquors appears to have grown widespread during the age of the Mongol Empire, which ruled most of Eurasia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Korea is particularly important to this research because several documentary sources strongly suggest that the Mongols who ruled neighboring China introduced soju and its distillation technology to Korea, and similar forms of evidence may provide further clues to other forms of distillation technology transfers from Asia to other areas of the world. Such a study elucidates not only the history of an increasingly well-known form of liquor but also the role of Korea in world history. Despite the historical significance of soju, no Western-language study of it has been undertaken, nor has any detailed study been done from a comparative perspective in any language. This book corrects that oversight.

To undertake this history of soju, we have to start with the origin of its name, which interestingly hints at the complex dynamics that shaped its early development. The name, pronounced *soju* in Korean but written in the Chinese script as 燒酒, uses the same Chinese characters that apply to the name for a similar Chinese distilled liquor called *shaojiu* 燒酒, nearly identical to the characters used in *shōchū* 焼酎 (known as *shochu* in English without diacritics), its Japanese counterpart.⁴ The existence in East Asia of three variations of a traditional liquor of similar make, all bearing the same written name, suggests a shared origin in cross-cultural exchange;

⁴ Ishige Naomichi, “Higashi yūrashia no jōryūshu: jōryūki wo motomete” (Distilled Alcohol in East Eurasia: Seeking the Distiller), in *Shōchū higashi mawari nishi mawari* (Shochu around the World), ed. Tamamura Toyo’o (Tokyo: TaKaRa Alcohol Beverage and Life Research Institute, 1999), 122.

indeed, the evidence for this transfer of a shared recipe and the necessary technology can be found sometime during the premodern period.

This is not the only name relevant to soju's identity and history. Although many have not yet recognized this fact, people in Korea, China, and Japan have to a lesser extent also referred to this form of distilled liquor as *arak*.⁵ As attested in literary sources, the name *arak* was adopted upon its arrival in East Asia as an exotic foreign term; local inhabitants then used Chinese characters to mimic the pronunciation of such foreign terms for the purpose of transliteration. This word probably originated with the Arabic word '*araq* – aka "arak" – which literally means "perspiration," and which serves as a name for many similar forms of distilled alcohol found in the Middle East as well as South and Southeast Asia. *Arkhi*, a form of distilled liquor popular in Mongolia and Central Asia, is also connected to arak in both its origin and the technology used to make it. This name, disseminated through historical trade routes, reveals another possible historical root name shared among the various distilled alcohols developed and consumed in diverse Asian societies, suggesting too that they may also share to some degree a common history of origins. Indeed, this book shows that the consumption of arak began to spread during the Mongol period, beginning with a Mongol-period cook-book written in Chinese that introduced the distilled liquor for the first time. Thus arak plays a kind of ancestral role in soju's evolution.

By closely examining all the documentary and archaeological sources available to scholars so far, we can begin to map out the trajectory of soju's introduction to Korea. For example, a highlight of my study explores the transfer of distillation technology from China to Korea during the Mongol period (1206–1368), an age that scholars now regard as the first stage of globalization's history.⁶ In medieval times, the fact that the distillation of arak and shaojiu (Korean *soju*; Japanese *shōchū*) developed in China and spread to Korea can be verified by both circumstantial evidence and a variety of sources. Due to its alcoholic nature, arak was prohibited on religious grounds in Islamic societies, and therefore its development was not well documented during premodern times.⁷ In

⁵ Some modern brand names for Korean soju are called *arak*, as in the case of this news article: www.thinkfood.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=43694 (accessed April 20, 2017).

⁶ Among the first scholarly syntheses of the Mongol Empire from global historical perspectives are Timothy May, *The Mongol Conquests in World History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012); Morris Rossabi, *The Mongols: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁷ Other possible factors might be local/home production (undocumented), and/or production by minorities, which could be one of the reasons why arak was mainly popular in the Middle East in regions where significant communities historically Christian lived (Lebanon, Syria,

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contrast, the propagation of soju was relatively well documented in both China and Korea. In other words, exploring soju's origin can provide a concrete case for the general possibility that these distilled liquors and their newly developed technological methods spread to far-flung regions in Afro-Eurasia through cross-cultural exchanges, mostly at a gradual and continuous pace yet at times at larger scales through intensive contacts, as was the case in Mongol times.

In short, the conditions of soju's transmission to Korea make compelling history, given the extent of its remarkable transmission. In order to search for this shared origin of distilled liquors, it is important to first place the topic of soju in the context of premodern Afro-Eurasian history. This hemispheric context helps to make sense of the rise of soju and arak in Korea. Conversely, Korean history provides a useful vantage from which to detect the vectors through which a particular form of material culture spread throughout premodern Eurasia and the processes by which soju or arak production technologies, techniques, and terminology localized. Again, a hemispheric perspective helps; the documentation of not only transfers of tools, know-how, and names but also their localization in the process of adaptation in the regions that lay between the Middle East and East Asia elucidates comparable phenomena in contemporaneous Korean society as well. The development of soju in Korea suggests an interactive relationship between technology and culture. On the one hand, technology drives cultural change – consider, for example, the impact of new forms of alcohol on social practices such as medicine, gift giving, and even rituals to a certain degree. On the other hand, culture drives technological development in a local context as the boom in consumption of the new type of liquor facilitated export, import, and further developments of related technologies through exchange with other culture such as Japan and Europe.⁸

This is not a book about soju in the usual sense. Instead, we use the history of a spirit to understand how certain groups of people in specific historical contexts created, consumed, and benefited from a cultural

Egypt, and Iraq). But clearly the main influence was religion in the Islamic world. Based on personal conversations with Limor Yungman.

⁸ This helps us think through how technology and culture relate through a particular example of material culture. Since the initial call to promote the scholarly study of the history of technology, focusing on the relations between technology and other elements of culture using interdisciplinary approaches developed by Melvin Kranzberg, many studies have been published on the relations between technology and culture in history. See Melvin Kranzberg, "At the Start," *Technology and Culture* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1959): 1–10. For a discussion of the influence of technology on culture from various theoretical perspectives, see Andrew Murphie and John Potts, *Culture and Technology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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object, and how, through cross-cultural exchanges, they transferred it and its related technologies – not to mention cultural ideas – to other regions of Afro-Eurasia, leading to the development of premodern connections that ultimately led to our global society. As such, the book focuses on two issues: transfers and localizations. To search for signs of transfer, we trace the origin and development of distilled liquors to premodern Eurasia and follow this history until we reach the Mongol period, when the possibilities for cross-cultural exchange and the propagation of new cultural practices and technologies reached new heights. In particular, soju – whose spread to the Korean peninsula coincided with both the Mongol-run Yuan dynasty in China and Mongolia (1271–1368) and Korea’s Koryŏ dynasty (918–1392) – provides a representative case study of a cultural item that transferred into Korea from Eurasia at large during premodern times thanks to cross-cultural exchange. After soju settled into Korean society, the materials and methods used to make the spirit localized; this made possible the development of its unique characteristics, which contributed to the conditions that encouraged its counter-transmission into the wider world in the tumultuous twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In short, soju, an icon of Korean food culture, first developed in a thriving milieu characterized by trans-Eurasian exchanges of culture and technology. Indeed, such characteristics make soju an ideal cultural object to observe from a global historical perspective. The example of soju ultimately suggests that the process of globalization developed in Asia earlier than it did in the West. It serves as a useful case study representing a larger historical trend, in which premodern cross-cultural encounters profoundly influenced and reshaped cultural patterns in different societies, as Jerry Bentley argued, a pioneer in the field of world history.⁹ Here, let us focus on specific issues that clarify the limitations and problems inherent in existing research and then elucidate the book’s key components.

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This book deals primarily with alcoholic drink as a kind of food, and therefore its narrative first frames its subject within the context of food history. In particular, it borrows methodological frames of “the cultural history of food” proposed by Deborah Valenze, who took food beyond the realm of anthropology by situating food and cultural change “into

⁹ Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Exchanges in Pre-modern Times* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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frameworks related to historical change,” bringing it squarely into the center of historical analysis.¹⁰ (Valenze also stresses the importance of migrations of food and people in world history as avenues for future research, pointing to the precedent set by Alfred W. Crosby’s works on the Columbian exchange.)¹¹ This opened the way for the relatively young field of food history to develop many of the interdisciplinary methods and studies that address issues of globalization in world history.¹²

Soju has also attracted popular attention as a useful means to understand how traditional culture has survived and even become emblematic of national identity in the present global age. Korean kimchi, Japanese sushi, Italian pasta, and Indian curry exemplify foods that successfully developed into national, and then ultimately global, dishes.¹³ Societies in modern nation-states, as a part of their efforts to secure national identities, have increased their interest in the history of foods deemed emblematic of their nation.¹⁴ Of course, as with other historical subjects, closer scrutiny reveals many cases in which larger sets of dynamic influences were mediated through cross-cultural exchanges to shape development.¹⁵ Soju provides just such a specimen. Likewise, evidence demonstrates a number of cases in which cross-cultural transmissions and influences moved the other way, leading society on the Korean peninsula to contribute to changes in patterns of food culture in premodern East Asia. In recent times, Koreans have tried to reverse the trajectory of influence in order to globalize Korean food, which they have done successfully so far. Some government-sponsored books advertise Korean foods globally. The academic world has seen the publication of Korean-language monographs on Korean food in addition to studies by scholars

¹⁰ Deborah Valenze, “The Cultural History of Food,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*, ed. Ken Albala (London: Routledge, 2013), 101–102.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 108–109.

¹² Raymond Grew, “Food and Global History,” in *Food in Global History*, ed. Raymond Grew (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 1–32.

¹³ Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, “We Eat Each Other’s Food to Nourish Our Body: The Global and the Local as Mutually Constituent Forces,” in *Food in Global History*, ed. Raymond Grew (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 271–272. For the cases of pasta and curry, see Silvano Serventi and Françoise Sabban, *Pasta: The Story of a Universal Food*, trans. Antony Shugaar (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Colleen Taylor Sen, *Curry: A Global History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009).

¹⁴ Chu Yŏngha (Joo Young-ha), *Ŭmsik immunhak: ŭmsik ŭro pon han’guk ŭi yŏksa wa munhwa* (The Cultural Anthropology of Food: Korean History and Culture Viewed from the Perspective of Food) (Seoul: Hyumŏnisŭt’ŭ, 2011), 457.

¹⁵ For example, there was a one-day symposium entitled Global Food History at Leiden University in 2016. Several papers presented there, including my paper about soju, discuss various issues crucial to the theme. These include migration of people, circulation of technology, and global and cross-cultural contact.

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like Michael Pettid.¹⁶ However, the origin and history of food culture in Korean history at a level of detail that includes soju is a topic yet to be undertaken.

Korea's case reflects the general situation for food studies in the world. Despite its fundamental importance to human life, food history as a distinct field, particularly global and comparative approaches to the subject, began to receive large-scale scholarly attention only recently. Most recently, scholars began to pay more attention to exchanges in material cultures, including cultures of food and medicines.¹⁷ While interest in the transfers of foodways and culinary technology in global history grows, an interdisciplinary field called *food studies* has developed simultaneously thanks to the efforts of scholars in different fields working on related topics.¹⁸ The tendency to discuss food culture from humanistic perspectives has been expanding worldwide, according to food anthropologist Joo Young-ha. International conferences on food science over the past few decades, such as the 1987 meeting sponsored by the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS), a US group, and more recent meetings such as one held by the Institut européen d'histoire et des cultures de l'alimentation (IEHCA) in 2001, have helped to motivate this expansion.¹⁹ Meanwhile, scholars in recent years have published significant articles and books on various foods and foodways, many of which pay attention to the overall impact of foods and food culture on human lives. Going beyond simple examinations of what people ate at certain places and times, these scholars have examined cases of cultural, material, and technology transfers in their relevant

¹⁶ Michael J. Pettid, *Korean Cuisine: An Illustrated History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

¹⁷ For example, see Paul D. Buell and Eugene N. Anderson, *A Soup for the Qan: Chinese Dietary Medicine of the Mongol Era as Seen in Hu Sihui's Yinshan Zhengyao*, introduction, translation, text, notes, appendix by Charles Perry, 2nd revised and expanded edition, Sir Henry Wellcome Asian Series 9 (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2010); John Kieschnick, *Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ For a recent collective work of scholarship that provides key definitions, methodologies, and theoretical approaches in the field, see Ken Albala, ed., *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁹ For example, the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS), established in 1985, aims at interdisciplinary research on food and society (see www.food-culture.org). They organize annual conferences and publish the academic journal *Food, Culture & Society* in order to promote their relatively new research field. Its European equivalent, the European Institute for the History and Culture of Food (IEHCA), has been active since its foundation in 2001 and is a key actor in the international and interdisciplinary research community surrounding food studies, with annual conferences and their multi-lingual academic journal, *Food & History*, which they have been publishing since 2003 (see <http://iehca.eu/en>). Joo Young-ha argues that the background to this academic trend has been the growing ethnic food culture in the US consumer economy since the 1980s. Chu Yŏngha, *Ŭmsik immunhak*, 31.

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historical and social contexts, including the introduction through cross-cultural exchanges of new food ingredients and cooking ways. In Korea, Joo Young-ha has helped to advance the cause of food studies by developing the Institute for Textual and Oral Histories of Food (ITOHF), a research institute that focuses on food and humanities research, and expanding his research into the field of cultural anthropology. He now has published several major works in Korean on the history of Korean foods, some of which have been translated into Chinese, and continues to advocate for its development through his persistent efforts to facilitate interdisciplinary scholarly exchanges.²⁰

Despite its many fruits, the food studies project also faces limits. Most importantly, nearly all books and articles about foodways written by Western scholars in Western languages have focused on the Western food cultures that are familiar to them and introduce Asian or other non-Western equivalents only to make certain comparisons.²¹ In contrast, studies of Asian food culture written in Asian languages tend to focus specifically on Asian topics, such as the histories of foods and alcohol distillation in places like China or Korea. Moreover, within the global scholarly community, the literature of food history in Asian countries suffers limited readership, which certainly hinders the development of a balanced global perspective. Therefore more academic studies in Western languages from broad and comparative perspectives are needed in order to create wider global access to this topic.²² This book about soju strives to do just that by placing liquor in a larger context of space and time, namely a long history of Eurasia that stretches from the deep past to immediate present.

Alcoholic beverages are an important part of the history of food. Alcohol has always functioned as an important cultural item in human societies, since it has always comprised a key element of food culture. For example, in his book about the history of alcoholic drinks in China, He Manzi argues that alcohol has accompanied foods at feasts and rituals since ancient times and inspired numerous works of literature

²⁰ See many pioneering works by Joo Young-ha, including the following, which was translated into Chinese: *Han'gugin ün wae irök'e mögülkka: siksa pangsik üro pon han'guk ümsik munhwasa* (Why Do Koreans Eat Like This? A Cultural History of Food in Korea Investigated through the Dining Custom) (Seoul: Hyumönisüt'ü, 2018).

²¹ For example, see Raymond Grew, ed., *Food in Global History* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000); Adam Rogers, *Proof: the Science of Booze* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014).

²² A few pioneering works include Eugene N. Anderson, *The Food of China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); and Paul D. Buell, Eugene N. Anderson, Montserrat De Pablo Moya, and Moldir Oskembay, *Crossroads of Cuisine: The Eurasian Heartland, the Silk Roads and Food* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

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and art.²³ Alcoholic brews also found utility as a medicine of major importance during the premodern era. Indeed, modern life would be incomparably different without such alcohol-based treatments, for they have played an important role in the realms of both folk and conventional medicine. This is true particularly for Chinese medicine (while not only for China), where alcohols are used both externally and internally, on the premise that alcohol possesses both preventive and therapeutic effects.²⁴

In recent times, academic interest in globalization has led to several studies of alcohol in world history. While focusing primarily on Western cases, recent works on the history of alcoholic beverages, such as *Uncorking the Past* by Patrick McGovern, are noteworthy for their attempt to bring a comparative form of understanding to topics with a global scope by introducing non-Western examples like China's Yellow River basin, the Silk Roads, the New World and Africa.²⁵ In her attempt to analyze the development of alcohol from a holistic, global perspective, *Alcohol in World History*, Gina Hames argues that alcoholic beverages developed continuously and in accord with patterns common to different world societies.²⁶ Hames's succinct developmental history is too general in scope to investigate alcohol's cross-cultural origins in any depth or detail; however, it has opened further stages for deeper discussion on these topics.

Deeper examinations of the history of alcohol from comparative and connective perspectives would indeed help us contemplate further related issues. One such issue is the implications of long-distance connections among different societies for our understanding of world history. It is true that, since ancient times, many societies developed similar alcoholic drinks, particularly fermented ones like wines and beers that were universal to most societies. Yet we see that, over time, people exchanged these items through cross-cultural contacts, and that people in different societies began to enjoy alcoholic beverages with different (foreign) characteristics, some of which would be popular there, too, and would be assimilated into local cultures (such as French-style wines produced in Japan). We see this phenomenon more often in modern times, but we can find similar cases in the premodern period as well. We also similarly notice that people developed certain technology, like distillation, to

²³ He Manzi, *Zuixiang riyue: Zhongguo jiu wenhua* (Drunken Sun and Moon: Chinese Wine Culture) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991), 35–41, 50–61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62–69.

²⁵ For example, see Patrick E. McGovern, *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

²⁶ Gina Hames, *Alcohol in World History* (London: Routledge, 2012), 1–4, 129–134.

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develop the existing fermented beverages further, and the new forms of alcoholic beverages began to spread further to wider areas. From certain periods of time, people in different regions began to share similar distilled beverages made of similar yet different forms of distillation technology adapted to local environments.

Here we see another issue: the interaction between culture on the one hand and science and technology on the other. The history of distilled liquors provides clear examples of interactions between alcoholic beverages as particular items of material culture and science and technology. In most cases, developments of science and technology in different societies are uneven, and so is the case of distillation technology, which enabled the creation of distilled liquors. This topic requires comparative examination on a global historical scale. As a specialized topic in the field of food studies, the history of distilled liquors requires researchers to possess both a good command of relevant primary sources and also specialized technical knowledge of the relevant details that could elucidate continuities and differences across space and time – such as in, say, distillation techniques that enable the separation of materials using heat, variable boiling points, and condensation-utilizing stills. This creates an important challenge for this current book.

Toward a Global History of Distillation and Distilled Liquors

Scholars have assumed that human beings began to learn about alcoholic drinks by accident; that is, beginning with their interactions with naturally fermented grapes or grains.²⁷ Even in China, whose many written records include myths and legends about the origins of alcoholic drinks, people began to develop a realistic understanding in ancient times. This is evident in works like *Shuowen* 說文, an early second-century Chinese-character dictionary, which says, “if the color of an alcoholic drink becomes white, we call that *sou* 醑 [white wine],²⁸ because this is one

²⁷ Rogers, *Proof*, 20.

²⁸ Nowadays, words for alcoholic drinks are tightly defined due to taxation and regulation. For example, historical words for wine (the latter of which probably derives from the Georgian word *ghvino* via Latin *vinum*; cf. Hebrew *wainos*) refer to fermented alcoholic drinks made from any fruit. Therefore Eugene Anderson argues that, while alcoholic drinks of China, called *jiu*, are usually lumped under the term “rice wine,” this is not correct. Anderson, *The Food of China*, 120. This book, however, sometimes uses the term “wine” to refer to any kind of fermented alcoholic beverage, because some earlier studies – particularly on those in China and Korea – used it as a general term in this way, such as the Korean clear strained wine called *ch’ŏngju* 淸酒 (fermented drink based on rice).