



Beyond Cultural Authenticity and National Branding: *Telling Global History through Soju*

Soju: A Global History. By Hyunhee Park. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 297 pages. ISBN: 9781108816113.

Sixiang WANG

Soju is among many well-known Korean cultural exports today. This alcoholic beverage's origin, however, is far more complicated than its national association might at first suggest. Like other emblems of contemporary Korean culture, soju is a product of interconnection that predates our current age of globalization. Hyunhee Park's *Soju: A Global History* situates soju in a broader history of distilled spirits (not to be confused with non-distilled fermented brews such as rice beer or fruit wine). It explains soju's arrival in Korea, its subsequent localization since the 14th century, and its eventual globalization as the consumer product it is commonly known as today.

Park's *Soju* urges us to eschew simplistic origin stories. Its research cautions against treating cultural products as virtual trademarks of national brands, a tendency common to both Western liberal identity politics and cultural nationalism on the international stage. Instead, it offers a schema where food, culture, and technology (distillation) are intertwined through processes of transfer, adaptation, and localization. It reminds us that any cultural product is the historical result of many complex inputs, and rarely a *de novo* invention with a single, identifiable origin. At the same time,

Sixiang WANG is associate professor in the Department of Asian Languages and Culture, University of California Los Angeles. E-mail: six@ucla.edu.

however, a conceptual tension between this methodology and the questions of cultural authenticity and soju's Koreanness (p. 166) remains throughout the book's six chapters and conclusion.

The book's six chapters proceed as follows. Chapter 1 is an overview of the history and techniques of distillation in Eurasia. It weighs a "linear transfer" model against a "multiple invention" model of the technology's dissemination before eventually settling on the latter, a conclusion supported by the parallel development of regional varieties of distilled liquor across early medieval Eurasia. Chapter 2 focuses on the emergence of soju in Korea. The word "soju," the Korean cognate for the Chinese word *shaojiu*, appears alongside Arabic language-derived *aralgil* to describe distilled spirits in the late 13th century. Their spread to Korea had much to do with the rise of the Mongol empire (ca. 1200–1400) and the diplomatic and commercial networks it facilitated. Chapter 3 points to how the Korean Goryeo (918–1392) kingdom's close ties with the Mongols led to the transmission of not just distilled liquor, but also influences ranging from food, medicine, and astronomical knowledge, to styles of dress—all of which later had important effects on the development of traditional Korean culture.

A core lesson of the book's first half is that a cultural product's iconic status for a national identity often belies its complex origins. That said, the global or transregional origins of distillation does not mean soju is not Korean. On the contrary, distillation technology underwent a long period of localization during the Joseon period (1392–1910), the subject of chapter 4. Surveying a wide range of Joseon-period written records, the chapter reconstructs both the processes of distillation and cultural meanings of what they produced. Notable is the widespread use of a particular still, known as *kori*, which enabled small-scale, household-based production. Not surprisingly, soju production in this period varied from place to place and used different grains and aromatic ingredients (pp. 138–151).

Amidst this diversity, there was no single, quintessential, *Korean soju* to speak of. That would have to wait for the 20th century, which saw a series of important transformations. First, Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) introduced the industrial column still—the technological foundation of

factory-produced distilled liquor. Tapioca and other cheaper starches replaced rice and other grains, a change that supported the industrial-scale production of profitable liquor monopolies and cartels—all results of colonial era policy with legacies well into the post-liberation period (pp. 170–178). These processes produced the standardized green bottle, a recognizable icon across the world thanks to the Korean Wave, but also largely displaced traditional soju-making practices. Now, attempts both to recreate traditional soju and to innovate soju production for expanding globalized markets defy efforts by scholars, state authorities, and entrepreneurs to settle on a single, general definition of Korean soju (pp. 188–196).

Throughout, the author draws on a wide range of scholarship and proceeds with an exhaustive evaluation of the evidence before making any claims. To give a few examples, the author returns several times to Joseph Needham's work on the history of distillation technology (pp. 15–16; pp. 27–29; pp. 136–137; pp. 214–215; pp. 224–227), sometimes to defer to its authority and other times to correct its neglect of certain pathways of technology transfer. The author also criticizes prior scholarship that advocate theories of singular origins (pp. 86–93) or otherwise rely on unilinear narratives of soju's history (pp. 178–180). This laudable empirical diligence, however, sometimes crowds out the book's important historical discoveries and conceptual insights, overshadowing the author's own valuable interpretations. This rhetorical ambivalence is perhaps most pronounced in chapter 6, where the author entertains several scenarios regarding the origins of Japanese shochu and Mexican agave liquor. In the latter case, the author seems to be in favor of an Asian connection over the theory of a pre-Columbian development of the "Huichol still," but hedges the discussion by concluding very generally that "the world's distilled liquors are interconnected directly and indirectly, into a single global history" (pp. 219–231).

The text's stylistic deference to prior authority and its rhetorical modesty in presenting the author's views can therefore leave readers uncertain as to what should count as a scholarly quibble or critical field-

changing intervention. It seems to this reader that the author leaves unsaid the book's fundamental conceptual and methodological differences from the work it criticizes (and by extension the full significance of the author's contribution). Rather than a mere genealogy of a technology's origins, Hyunhee Park's *Soju* is a history of culture and technology that unfolds through the thick description of all the ways distillation figured into social practice. It is, as the author states, about how "highly local cultural items like soju are linked to bigger flows of world history" (p. 235), but the significance of its findings goes far beyond merely "identifying soju in the history of global distillation" or "pin-pointing soju in the history of Korea's history of cross-cultural exchanges" (pp. 19–20). In this respect, the book's repeated debunking of erroneous narratives and dated scholarship pulls the reader away from the textured, bottom-up, human-interest cultural history that the book tries to unfold.

To be sure, grappling with the scholarly literature across so many fields—archaeology, anthropology, science studies, food studies, and history—not to mention historical Chinese and Korean primary source materials, is a monumental task. How best to present the material is as much an analytical challenge as an aesthetic one. Moreover, considering how alcoholic drinks, whether soju, mescal, whiskey, or baijiu, are often wrapped up in the touchy politics of national identity, the author's rhetorical caution is understandable. To the author's credit, the book takes great care to bring in contextual information useful for non-expert readers, including undergraduate students (the book was very well-received by this reviewer's students in the classroom). In particular, the discussion of Korea's relationship with the Mongol empire (pp. 99–104), the overview of the varied cultural uses of alcohol in Joseon (pp. 151–157), and the succinct treatment of technologies related to alcohol distillation (pp. 29–42; pp. 133–138; pp. 164–169; pp. 181–186) provide useful entryways to thinking about food in world history.

Hyunhee Park understands soju not as a single object, but as a moving marker. This is an understanding that captures several key issues in cultural history, especially the complex dynamics of cultural transmission,

acculturation, and transformation. The author adopts an approach in vogue in food studies: the use of a single well-traveled food product as a proxy for a host of other issues, in this case, early global circulations only faintly documented in written materials. This offers a corrective to a Eurocentric history of distillation that has largely neglected Asia (p. 12). By dealing both with the emergence of distilled alcohol in East Asian and the emergence of soju as a modern, industrialized Korean cultural commodity, this study also bridges the common premodern-modern gap in discussions of science, technology, and its history. Park's research demonstrates the value of thinking about Korea's history beyond its customary national frame of reference and towards a wider regional and global context. In this regard, the author effectively uses soju as a device for writing global history.