

Book Note

Soju: A Global History by Hyunhee Park. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 281 pp.

Hyunhee Park's *Soju: A Global History* is the first book of its kind in English, and, it is safe to say, there is also nothing quite like it in Korean or any other language for that matter. While the work is centered on soju, Korea's national spirit, Park does a remarkable job of solidly situating the drink in world history, more specifically the cultural, scientific, economic, and political histories of the premodern, modern, and contemporary eras not only in Asia and Europe but all the way to Africa and Mexico. Equally impressive is the fact that Park is able to present this ambitious and meticulous historical study in such clear and approachable language, something increasingly rare in current academe.

Soju: A Global History begins with a thoroughgoing Introduction that clearly lays out the goals and organization of the work overall. It is then divided into six chapters, followed by a Conclusion that both effectively summarizes the entire work and provides constructive and optimistic suggestions for future avenues of research. Chapter 1 examines the history of distilled liquors, to include both technological and linguistic innovations and exchanges, throughout Eurasia in order to provide a broader historical context for the more focused examination of soju to come. In Chapter 2, Park explores the appearance and rise of distilled alcoholic beverages on the Korean peninsula, with particular focus on the interactions between the Mongols and the Koryŏ [Goryeo] dynasty (918–1392). This section also importantly emphasizes the need to move beyond certain current and limited domestic debates regarding the origins of soju by widening both the scope and sources of research.

Chapter 3 seamlessly picks up where the previous chapter leaves off by

narrowing its focus to the intimate political relations and prolific cultural-technological exchanges between the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and Koryŏ during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It presents the transfer of distilled alcohol—known then both as *arak* and soju—to the Korean peninsula, which prior to this period appears to have produced only fermented alcohol, as part of a much larger exchange of material and intellectual culture throughout premodern Eurasia. In Chapter 4 soju's development and popularization during the Chosŏn [Joseon] dynasty (1392–1910) are examined using a variety of documentary sources. Official court records, privately written medical texts, and aristocratic family cookbooks all testify to a flourishing of soju production and regional diversification as the drink spread throughout the peninsula, as well as to islands such as Cheju [Jeju] and Chinju [Jinju], through a vibrant home brewing and distilling culture.

Chapter 5 explores soju from the early twentieth century to the present day. The Japanese colonization of Korea brought with it many disruptions, which included wholesale changes in distillation technology. Soju rapidly went from being a grain-based, home-produced spirit to an industrially-distilled alcohol made from tapioca or potatoes, and diluted with water and flavored artificially. Traditional soju was largely absent from Korea's liberation in 1945 until the 1980s, when new governmental support for traditional Korean culture began to support it as a *minsokchu*, or national folk liquor. Even following such support, however, it is the inexpensive, factory-produced soju that has continued to grow in popularity both in Korea and, more recently, around the globe. Finally, in Chapter 6, the book makes an unconventional yet highly commendable move: examining of the histories of distilling, to include both technology and consumption, in Japan and Mexico in order to establish a platform for the future exploration of soju. Both countries, like Korea, possess rich traditions of distillation based on unique combinations of interactions with neighbors, often quite distant, as well as indigenous traditions and innovations.

Soju: A Global History has much more to recommend it than can be contained in a simple book review. That said, and as mentioned above, Park's prose style and extended argument demonstrate an admirable balance between academic rigor and approachability. Many writers in the humanities would do well to adopt this model. The sheer scope of the work is also extremely impressive. It demonstrates a rare command of local and global history, as well as an uncanny ability to weave the two together across a vast span of geographical territories, historical periods, and academic disciplines. Narrowing our gaze only to Korea, Park also refreshingly demonstrates that various governmental bans on and taxations of alcohol existed both prior to and following Japanese

colonial rule, and that they were based more on rational concerns over misuse of precious foodstuffs, dangers to health, and tax revenues than on any nefarious desire to extinguish native brewing and distilling traditions.

As alluded to above, this work is quite ambitious. As such, there are a few minor instances where it stumbles. Early on it is claimed that there are currently more than 800 varieties of *makköl-li* [*makgeolli*] being produced in Korea. While there may indeed be 800 different bottle labels, the claim that these represent “varieties” is somewhat misleading. In fact, as is the case with soju, the regional producers are increasingly copying the flavor and consistency of one or two major factories in Seoul. Moreover, when discussing the premodern period, we find the following: “Koreans consumed liquors based on ingredients other than grains, such as *hwaju* (flower liquor), *p’odoju* (grape wine), *yangju* (sheep’s milk liquor), and *mayuju* [sic] (mare’s milk liquor).” There are a few problems here. First is the assumption that, due simply to their names, all of these liquors were based on ingredients other than grains. In fact, many of the extant recipes for both flowers and grapes have them not as primary ingredients but rather as additions, often rather small, to grain-based recipes. Next, in the paragraph preceding the one in which this list appears, *yangju* 羊酒 is translated not as “sheep’s milk liquor” but as “mutton steeped wine.” And there certainly are traditional Korean brewing recipes that include placing an entire dead animal into the ferment, the most infamous among them being *musulchu* [*musulju*] 戊戌酒, which calls for an entire dog. Moreover, since the term for mare’s milk liquor, *mayuju* 馬乳酒, specifically includes the character for milk, one might reasonably expect that *yanggyuju* 羊乳酒 would be the term used for sheep’s milk liquor. Readers may also find it somewhat confusing that the author appears to move without any clear explanation or criterion between “wine” and “liquor” when translating the generic word/character for alcohol, *chu* [*ju*] 酒. Finally, when discussing the relationship between *ch’ōngju* [*cheongju*] 淸酒 and *yakchu* [*yakju*] 藥酒, two synonyms for refined rice wine, no mention is made of the Japanese colonial law preventing the use of the term *ch’ōngju*, *seishu* in Japanese, to refer to anything not brewed with traditional Japanese methods, which is to say using traditional Korean *nuruk* as opposed to Japanese *koji*.

Aside from the more specialized concerns above, there also appear some slight inconsistencies regarding dates. Two different sets of dates are provided for the Koryō dynasty: (918–1392) and (935–1392). A similar issue appears when ending the Chosŏn dynasty. One entry ends it with the proclamation of the Taehan Cheguk [Daehan Jeguk] in 1897, while another ends it more conventionally with the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910. None of the above oversights, however, detracts from the work in any substantive manner.

Park's *Soju: A Global History* represents an ambitious project adroitly rendered. It follows soju and its attendant culture and technology from premodern Afro-Eurasia, throughout the Mongol empire, across the Chosŏn dynasty and Japanese colonial period, and finally to the contemporary Korean Wave. It will amply serve as an end in itself as well as a fecund point of departure for both researchers and students in a wide range of academic disciplines and historical periods.

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