

BOOK REVIEW

Park Hyunhee, *Soju: A global history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 281 pp.

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Hyunhee Park's book entitled *Soju: A global history* is a fascinating account of the history and evolution of the national distilled alcoholic drink of Korea as a means to locate Korea in world history. The narrative told from a historical perspective begins in the 13th century and takes the reader all the way into the 21st century. This work covers 800 years of the journey of distilled liquor in Korea and weaves it into an intricate and complex tale of connections and exchanges in the geographical contours of Afro-Eurasia which is both striking and comprehensive. The book is well researched and offers an impressive overview of previous works, Korean and international, to impress the reader with the connected histories of the wider region in which Korea is located. In addition to placing Korea in the middle of Eurasian empires like the Mongol Empire, it offers the reader a chance to contemplate the Silk Road(s) through material culture, in this case an alcoholic drink which is very dear to Korean national culture today. In the author's own words the book offers a "hemispheric perspective" of the "interactive relationship between technology and culture" (Park, 4). The main contribution of the book is the consideration of the transfer and evolution of soju culture in Korea from an earlier time period than the Choson [Joseon] period which is widely accepted as the origin point of the national drink. In taking us a century before, in to the 13th century and the Koryo [Goryeo] period, Park offers insights into the Eurasian world of the Mongol Empire which was rife with interactions and was the hub of numerous scientific technologies and cultural ideas in time and space. The richness of the account brings to light soju's place in Korean society and its evolution through the ages from a possibly foreign or acquired drink to a local product which defines and reifies Korean culture today. Park begins with outlining the spread of distilled liquor in the Mongol period and goes on to mention that her research is not only about the transfer of the liquor and associated technologies but also soju's evolution through different epochs of Korean history. One of the fundamental messages of the book is to locate Korea in world history

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because it has long suffered from being in the shadow of bigger neighbours historically and great power politics in the modern era. The book contributes to global history, material studies, food studies, history of science and technology and Korean and Eurasian history.

The book is divided into six chapters following an introduction that is well organised and speaks to the ambitions and research undertaken by the author, namely to place Korea in world history. The first chapter is entitled, *Soju and Arak*, which provides a brief history of distilled liquors in global history via an enquiry into the links and connections first established under the Mongol Empire (13th century) which was a Eurasia-wide empire. Starting from a linguistic perspective of *arak* and *soju* which are similar sounding to distilled liquors like *shochu* (Japan) and *shaojiu* (China), Park identifies links and connections between Chinese and Korean characters and offers a window into the pre-modern East Asian world. The chapter delves into cross cultural and inter-civilizational exchanges in Eurasia including Korea. She outlines the role of the Mongols as agents and interlocutors in the wide expanse of the Afro-Eurasian region and offers a discussion of the role of food and medicinal technologies in pre-modern times.

Chapter two on the Mongols and the Koryo dynasty begins with a history of alcoholic drinks in Korea and provides some detail of the transfer of *soju* and *arak* in Korea by the Mongols (army and elite) in this period. Park engages with archaeological, anthropological, historical and linguistic studies on the diffusion of distillation technologies across Mongol Eurasia to challenge the traditional view on Korea's distillation technologies which locates the origin of *soju* and associated technologies in South East Asia. The main puzzle in this chapter is to reuse established origin theories with new understandings of the historical context informed by insights into distillation and China-Korea relations in the Yuan period (Park, 84). Park uses cross-disciplinary arguments and evidence to revisit scholarly debates on the Mongol period, covering both anti-Mongol and pre-Mongol scholarship.

In chapter three, *Contextualising Soju*, the author delves into cross-cultural contacts between the Koryo dynasty and the Yuan Empire (Mongol Empire in China) to lay the groundwork for the unprecedented exchanges that signify this period. Set within the context of this relationship, Park focuses on historical implications of the transfer of distilled liquors from the Yuan period to the Korean peninsula. In a research method that often looks like detective work, Park finds clues and signs to paint a vivid picture of how the transfer of *soju* and associated distillation technologies were part of larger exchanges. She provides descriptions and evidence of cosmopolitan Eurasian societies which flourished under Mongol patronage across the Empire. Koryo dynasty as a close ally of the Yuan Empire, both as a son-in-law dynasty and a vassal state, came into ever closer contact with Mongol elites and became a natural hub of prolific exchanges both into and out of Korea. The chapter in particular offers insight into both the Mongol Empire in global history and the special place of Korea within it.

Chapter four focuses on the Choson period of Korea which is long held as the period in which soju came to occupy the important position it enjoys in Korean society. It was the period which saw widespread use, both for leisure (by the nobility) and for medicinal purposes. The localisation of soju and distillation technologies is discussed in depth along with references to cookbooks and medical treatises that provide the nuts and bolts of soju production in Korea at the time. Park takes the help of court documents and legal instructions and laws to discuss the ingredients that were used to make soju, especially rice, and informs the reader of the economic conditions in Korea especially with regard to historical grain production, an essential sector of the Korean economy. The chapter ends with theories on how soju would have travelled to Japan in this period. Japan was never part of the Mongol Empire and thus would have missed out on the direct contact that Korea had during the earlier Koryo period with Eurasia, including China.

Park does more than summarise the origins of soju and its place in society, she offers a unique perspective of soju having appeared in Korea in an earlier period with the Mongol army and elite and/or through the Yuan court. This is an important juncture at which, while acknowledging the importance of the Choson period in the impact on soju and its distillation processes and usage in Korea, Park leads the discussion into the soju culture as a continuation of the spread and processes of production of soju which began in the earlier Koryo period. In doing so she offers a narrative of Korean history which is global in nature and points to the importance of the connections with the outside world (beyond China) and into the depths of Eurasia. In her rendering of events, Soju seamlessly flows from the Koryo period into the Choson period and leaves an indelible mark on Korean society and culture in a way that continues to be important both for Korea and globally.

In chapter five, Challenges of Modernity, the transformation of soju in the contemporary period is discussed. It references the period of Japanese colonial rule in Korea and the arrival of new distillation technologies which revolutionised soju production, unregulated and produced by individual households until then, into factory manufactured soju on a much larger scale and more accessible to larger number of Koreans. The modern period brought with it different varieties and changes in the alcohol content and made soju much cheaper to produce. She discusses how these technologies were supported by subsequent Korean governments as well, altered somewhat in the 1980s when traditional distillation techniques were sought in order to promote Korean national culture. The narrative then tells of Japan's position in the world and the impact of colonial policies on a local drink which contributes to the understanding of colonialism through material culture in this context and is a valuable contribution to colonial studies.

Chapter six is on Alcohol Globalism and brings soju into the world as a Korean national drink, enjoyed and associated with Korean K-pop and food which has now become part of global culture. It provides connective and comparative perspectives by looking at Japan and Mexico, shochu and tequila respectively. Starting with a

brief history and description of the evolution of shochu, the Japanese national drink, provides the reader with ample information and historical connectivities in Asia. Park is convinced of the theory of distilled liquors arriving in Japan from outside and offers a possible route especially through Ryukyu islands and Kyushu from Korea. In the case of tequila, Park brings up possible pre-Columbian, i.e. Mongol, connections to explain how distillation technologies could have travelled from Asia to the Americas. In general, the chapter offers myriad ways in which distilled liquors similar to soju could all have originated or been influenced by nomadic, namely Mongol, peoples. The connections between arak and soju discussed in the first chapter allow the reader to contemplate the possibilities and the opportunities that came with Eurasia-wide exchanges starting in the 13th century.

The conclusion pulls different themes in the book together and gives a succinct picture of the study of soju and its place in global history. She begins with trying to answer what is soju and tries to connect it with the complex processes of distillation that originated in Afro-Eurasia. In doing so, Park expands the geographical horizon in which to locate Korea and uses distilled liquors, especially soju, as a means to an end. In the concluding remarks there is ample evidence to point to the author's ambitions to trace the history of soju to a time period before the Choson period. Her interests in the Mongol period and the impact of exchanges and connections in Mongol Eurasia as a natural place to find the first appearance of distilled liquors and the transfer to Korea in that period is convincing. She challenges Korean nationalist claims of soju being a traditional Korean drink with little to no influence from anywhere else by locating it well within the flurry of exchanges in the Mongol period that led to unprecedented trade on the Silk Road(s). Her work is supported by Mongol Empire studies which have taken an exciting turn in the last decade or so with a renewed interest in the Silk Road(s). Through this enquiry, Park reaffirms her claim to contributing to global history, both for soju and for Korea, and goes even further to point out comparisons with Japan and Mexico, while openly admitting that there is still much work to be done in locating the alcohol bridge between Asia and the Americas. She ends with a discussion on food and the pathways of exchanges and connections which testify to an interconnected pre-modern world while at the same time celebrating Korea and its contributions to the world.

The journey of distilled liquors from the Mongols and other nomadic peoples to Korea and other parts of Eurasia is what makes this book stand out. The passion with which the book delves into Korean history is indeed noteworthy. The methods of enquiry are interesting and while they offer a wide variety of textual and archaeological evidence to support the author's assertions, there is a fair bit of guess work and future research is required to make those claims more robust. The history of the Mongol Empire is fast becoming a natural place to begin enquiries of the pre-modern world and Park does well to locate soju's arrival and distillation technologies in that period even when there is little to no textual evidence to support the claim. The pre-modern era especially with regards to nomadic empires is a neglected field and this

book is a testament to the need to revisit the period for many regions in Eurasia. New work on the history of Eurasia through an enquiry into material culture has become more and more popular over the last decade and Park does well to reference all those works. However, historians of Korea and East Asia will find the book veering away from accepted notions of transfer and exchanges and will require more convincing. Until then this book will stand out as a brave and timely attempt at rewriting the history of Korea's beloved drink, soju, as a means to show how deeply connected Korea has been with the rest of the world.