

# The Rise of *Soju* 燒酒: The Transfer of Distillation Technology from “China” to Korea during the Mongol Period (1206–1368)\*

Hyunhee PARK 朴賢熙\*\*

## Introduction

Since 2012, Paul Buell has examined the key role that the Mongols played, during the age of their massive empire (early 13th to late 14th century), in improving on a pre-existing Chinese technology through producing an easily portable apparatus for distillation. He argues that the Mongols, at a key early stage in the history of globalization, did two important things: not only did they disseminate this improved technology widely, but they also created an environment in which a variety of cultures could produce their own distilled liquors using local ingredients.<sup>1</sup> I adopted this theme in turn and applied it to Korea, in order to

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\*\* The author is associate professor of history at the City University of New York, John Jay College.

1 Paul Buell presented and discussed this at the International Conference on “Recovery of Traditional Technologies I: A Comparative Study of Past and Present Fermentation and Associated Distillation Technologies in Eurasia and Their Roots,” Salzburg University, Austria, May 11–13, 2015, and at the 14th International Conference on the History of Science in East Asia, held at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), Paris, France, July 6–10, 2015. See Paul Buell's latest paper on the topic entitled “Mongol-era stills: Spread and impact of a New, Portable Technology with Examples from China, Korea, the Volga and Istanbul”

develop a case study that illustrates what happened with distillation technology in Korea during Mongol times.<sup>2</sup> Many individual pieces of evidence hint at the introduction of this technology from China to Korea through the Mongols. In the process of this transfer, however, Koreans promoted a new type of distilled alcohol, made with local ingredients in China and Korea mixed with fermented rice rather than mare's (or today cow's) milk as used by the Mongols.<sup>3</sup> This sparked the development of *soju*, Korea's national alcoholic drink, which has now become one of the world's most popular drinks.<sup>4</sup>

Like many other distilled alcoholic drinks appearing at the time, *soju* was often called *arakhi*<sup>5</sup> by the Koreans, who adopted the 'Arabic' word for brandy popularized by the Mongols (although not all *arkhi* / *arakhi* drinks then were brandies). While *soju*, as a foreign drink, stood out among traditional alcoholic drinks and was quickly popularized beginning in the late Koryŏ 高麗 period (918–1392), tracing its origins and process of popularization has proven difficult. The several scattered sources relating to the transfer of distilled wine technology do not provide entirely consistent information, which has led to debates over differing theories in the past as well as present. This has led to the development of two major theories about how distilled alcohol technology transferred to Korea: The Mongol-period origin theory and the pre-Mongol period origin theory.

Although early studies of distillation technology in Korea have helped to build an important foundation for further study, they face two major limits. First, they have focused mostly on documentary sources, merely recycled by

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that he presented at the workshop entitled "Scientific Transfer in Mongol Eurasia" at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, June 10–11, 2015.

- 2 This project was inspired by the larger project entitled "A Comparative Investigation of Distillation Technologies, Wine Production and Fermented Products," a collected study of the topic undertaken with several co-workers from different academic institutions including those in Germany, Mongolia, and Mexico over the course of three years (2014–2017). Its temporary title is "The Story of *Soju*: Distillation in Mongol Korea and its Eurasian Roots and Global Context."
- 3 I gave the presentations entitled "Traditions and Change: Distillation Technology and Mongol Korea" and "The creation of *Soju*: Transfer of Distillation Technology from the Yuan China to Koryŏ Korea" at the aforementioned conferences respectively in Salzburg and Paris in 2015.
- 4 For example, see Dreisbach 2013.
- 5 This word occurs in our sources in many forms. Some, e.g., *alaji* 阿刺吉, Mongolian *araji*, shows a palatalized Turkic intermediation. This is the form found in the *Yinshan zhengyao* (3.6B) of 1330, which was probably written with the active participation of Uighurs.

later studies.<sup>6</sup> Recently, however, new evidence from archaeological and anthropological studies has shed considerably fresh light on discussions about Eurasian distillation transfer generally, which suggests that the time has come to revise the standard approaches to the history of distillation technology in Korea in cross-disciplinary ways, in order to take advantage of these new sources.<sup>7</sup> Second, none of the various arguments in existing theories deny that the sudden popularity of distilled alcoholic drinks in Korea happened during the Mongol period. Despite this fact, few of the early studies have made the connection between the popularization of *soju* as a 'new' beverage and the unprecedented level of cross-cultural contact that existed throughout thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Asia. Mongol rulers actively promoted the transfer of this distillation technology along with a host of other kinds of technologies, ideas and goods. It is important, then, that new studies reflect a global context.

I aim to produce an academic monograph that examines in detail the ways in which the transfer of distillation technology from Yuan 元 China to Koryŏ Korea took place and traces the influences present in the processes involved. As a political suzerain state for nearly 100 years, the Mongol empire was able to exert a major cultural influence on Korea, not only in the area of distilled alcohols such as *soju* but also in terms of many foods and other cultural items, including dresses. While developing this idea for the proposed monograph, I have presented and discussed some important pieces of evidence about Mongol-era distillation technology transfer from China to Korea at three academic conferences. The present paper offers an expanded version of those presentations and will serve as a foundation for the forthcoming monograph. It will first examine the basic characteristics of Korea's traditional alcoholic drinks in order to distinguish *soju* from other alcoholic drinks consumed in Korea, including those of foreign origins that existed before the appearance of *soju* in Korea. After that, the paper will critically review specific transfer vectors based on earlier sources and then add new archaeological findings to the conventional documentary sources. Finally, it will expand the historical context that facilitated the rapid rise of *soju* at the end of the Mongol (and late Koryŏ) period, in order to consider larger patterns such as the distribution of Mongol army camps and international trade.

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6 Yi Sŏngu (1984, esp. 178-298) and Chang Chihyŏn (1989) provided the most thorough analysis of the topic based on available documentary sources.

7 For example, see Luo Feng 2012 and Feng Enxue 2015.

## Traditional Alcoholic Drinks in Korea before the Rise of *Soju* in the Mongol (Late Koryŏ) Period

There were several different kinds of alcoholic drinks consumed in Korea prior to the Mongol period, that is, in the late Koryŏ period. According to scattered written sources (both in Chinese and in Korean), Koreans had produced and consumed alcoholic drinks since ancient times. Many historical accounts as well as legends and folktales hint at the fact that that alcoholic drinks were also an important part of the lives of Koreans, who enjoyed and used them on various occasions such as festival days.<sup>8</sup> The sources prior to the Koryŏ period, however, lack details regarding what kinds of alcoholic drinks Koreans consumed in early times. Scholars have assumed that, as ancient Korea was an agrarian society, alcoholic drinks consumed were most often a turbid kind of unstrained wine (called *t'akchu* 濁酒 in Korean) made from fermented grains. This is not very difficult to make.<sup>9</sup> Such drinks might have been similar to today's *makkŏlli*, another popular Korean alcoholic beverage. It is milky and sweet and is made from rice or other kinds of Korean grains. *Makkŏlli* contains about 6-8% alcohol by volume. It forms one of three major traditional liquors commonly drunk in Korea, along with *ch'ŏngju* 淸酒 (clear strained wine) and *soju* (distilled).

Sources also hint that different kinds of Chinese alcoholic drinks were also transferred to Korea. For example, the best preserved ancient Chinese agricultural text, *Qimin yaoshu* 齊民要術 (Essential Techniques for the Welfare of the People, ca. 533–544), written by the Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534) official Jia Sixie 賈思勰, was probably introduced to the Korean kingdoms through contacts with Chinese dynasties and might have influenced Korean traditional wine making over time.<sup>10</sup> Some sources suggest that the Koreans developed distinctively good liquors that could compete with the best that China had to offer. For example, two Korean accounts, *Chibong yusŏl* 芝峰類說 (Topical Discourses of Chibong, 1614) by Yi Sugwang 李晬光 (1563–1628) and *Hae-dong yeogsa* 海東繹史 (Unraveling the History of Korea, 1823) by Han Ch'i-yun 韓致淵 (1765–1814), introduce a poem by the Tang 唐 (618–907) dynasty poet Li Shangyin 李商隱 (c. 813–858), which includes the following lines: "I am afraid that the aroma of a glass of Silla wine will go away with the wind at

8 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 197f, 201ff.

9 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 10; Pae Kyŏng-Hwa 1999, 5.

10 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 198.

dawn.” This same poem appears in Li Shangyin’s poetry collection as a poem entitled “Young Nobleman” (*Gongzi* 公子).<sup>11</sup>

Silla 新羅 was one of three Korean kingdoms that unified the southern and middle parts of the Korean peninsula in 668 by allying with the Tang dynasty. It maintained close contacts and carried on exchanges with China, which probably affected the development of Korea’s unique liquor making methods through synthesizing and improving earlier traditional and borrowed brewing techniques.

We have a more varied source material on Korean liquors for the Koryŏ (918–1392), a dynasty that replaced the United Silla and lasted for almost four centuries. From this period, many literary works including poems specifically mention different kinds of alcoholic drinks consumed by Koreans. The earliest surviving source about Koryŏ liquors is the *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經 (Illustrated Account of an Official Mission to Koryŏ during the Xuanhe Reign, 1119–1125) by Xu Jing 徐兢 (1091–1153). Xu was a Chinese envoy dispatched to Koryŏ by the Song emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126) to conduct a special diplomatic mission to grasp the situation in Koryŏ and request the kingdom’s military support for the Song war against the Jurchens (Chin. Ruzhen 女真). Xu Jing’s exceptional account, full of details about the political system and culture of Koryŏ society from the perspectives of outsiders, includes a brief discussion of the alcoholic drinks he saw being consumed in Korea.<sup>12</sup> Xu says that, because the people of Koryŏ loved their liquors, they drank many cups, and even went to several drinking parties a night. It seems that, unlike the earlier Tang-dynasty Chinese who praised a distinctive Silla liquor, Xu did not like the Koryŏ wine he tasted, as he emphasized several times in his writings. We learn from his account that ~~Koreans used rice and malt~~ malt [yeast] to brew alcoholic beverages. They did not have sticky rice. Xu says this is why Korean liquors were not as good as contemporary Chinese liquors made with sticky rice. The fact that liquors were fermented with a type of yeast known as *nuruk* shows that common Korean alcoholic drinks popular at that time were probably all based on grains.<sup>13</sup>

Another important characteristic of Koryŏ liquors, Xu explains is that those consumed by kings and nobles were of higher quality, comprised of *ch’ŏngju* (clear strained liquor) and another named *pŏpchu* 法酒 (meaning “Recipe” liq-

11 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 197f; Wang Qixing 2001, vol. 2, 2818: 一盞新羅酒，凌晨恐易消。

12 For more information about the work, see Vermeersch 2016, 1-55.

13 About *nuruk* and grain fermentation, see Yi Sŏngu 1984, 179f; Pae Kyŏng-Hwa 1999, 7-17.

uor, a kind of *ch'ongju*). Both wines were brewed by the Yangonsö 良醞署, the government office that presented alcoholic drinks to the court during the Koryö period. By contrast, ordinary people could not find these kinds of fine liquors and instead drank liquors that were thickly colored and tasted turbid.<sup>14</sup> This shows that by this time Korean alcoholic drinks were already divided into two classes: those consumed by nobles and those consumed by ordinary people. This big division of liquor types in the Koryö period, as attested by Xu Jing, is also expressed in the *Koryö sa* 高麗史 (History of Koryö, 1454), the principal surviving history of Korea's Koryö dynasty. It was composed nearly a century after the fall of Koryö during the reign of King Sejong 世宗 (r. 1418–1450) of the Chosön dynasty. The text shows that the government office for alcoholic drinks (Yangonsö) was established during the reign of King Munjong 文宗 (r. 1046–1083) in order to brew high-quality alcoholic beverages – namely, the noble drinks *ch'ongju* and *pöpchu* – to use in state ceremonies.<sup>15</sup> We learn from Chinese and Korean sources that *ch'ongju* was made by condensing fermented yet unstrained base liquor. *Pöpchu*, a kind of clear strained wine, was brewed using a rich base composed of certain proportions of raw ingredients. It was also called *öju* 御酒 (royal liquor) or *kwanju* 官酒 (official liquor), the kind of liquor kings conferred on their officials. Its compression brewing method was probably transferred from China to Korea to be used by kings and nobles and for ancestral memorial ceremonies at the Royal Ancestors' Shrine. The unstrained, turbid liquor called *t'akchu* 濁酒 and described by Xu Jing as a wine for ordinary people is also testified to by other contemporaneous sources of the Koryö period. For example, scholars' poems mention white liquors such as *t'akchu* and *paekchu* 白酒 (white liquor), as well as a *pakchu* 薄酒 (light wine), which was found consumed in the fields and drunk by travelers.<sup>16</sup> All of these had a weaker taste (smaller alcoholic content) and were dark in color. It was easy to make them, too. The Chinese envoy who had a chance for a quick look at Korean culture for a few months aptly grasped the essential characteristics of the major kinds of liquors consumed commonly by different classes in Korea in the twelfth century.

We can find more details about liquors enjoyed in Korea in sources for the second-half of the Koryö period. There was even a special genre of literature that personified wines to satirize the times and offer lessons for life. These are the *Kuk Sönsaengchön* 麴先生傳 (Biography of Mr. Kuk) by Yi Kyubo 李奎報

14 Vermeersch 2016, 199. Yi Söngu 1984, 210f.

15 Yi Söngu 1984, 211. *Koryö sa*, *juan* 85, section II of criminal law.

16 Yi Söngu 1984, 212.

(1168–1241) and the *Kuk Sun chŏn* 麴醇傳 (Biography of Kuk Sun) by Im Ch'un 林椿 (fl. late twelfth century).<sup>17</sup> All of the characters in the two works, including Mr. Kuk, represent liquors of different kinds here personified. The kinds of liquors that appear in this particular literature, i. e. biographies of wines, are mostly based on fermented grains. Therefore, we can assume that grains were the primary ingredients in fermentation for the liquors commonly consumed.<sup>18</sup>

While mid-Koryŏ sources attest to the strong period preference for consuming grain-fermented wines, more literary sources reveal that a variety of liquor types existed in the mid- to the late Koryŏ period. For example, Yi Kyubo, a low-ranking official who particularly enjoyed drinking liquors and authored the above-mentioned *Kuk Sŏnsaeng chŏn* in the thirteenth century, also wrote about different kinds of liquors in his poems.<sup>19</sup> These include *ihwaju* 梨花酒 (pear-blossom liquor), *jaju* 煮酒 (boiled liquor, distilled liquor?), *hwaju* 花酒 (flower liquor), *ch'ohwaju* 椒花酒 (Sichuan pepper liquor), *p'ap'aju* 波把酒 (wave liquor), *baegju* 白酒 (white liquor), *bangmunju* 方文酒 (liquor brewed according to recipe), *chunju* 春酒 (spring liquor), *cheonilju* 千日酒 (thousand-day liquor), *cheongeumju* 千金酒 (liquor [brewed using the bark of a] cheongeum [tree]), and *nogpaju* 綠波酒 (green wave-like clear liquor). There are many other names of liquors mentioned in other literary works as well. Counting all of these, there were more than 25 different liquors enjoyed by the Koreans. Later sources show that most of these kinds of alcoholic drinks continued to be consumed in the Chosŏn period.<sup>20</sup> Here, we should note that many sources suggest that there were various kinds of alcoholic drinks other than grain-fermented liquors, one that did not receive the attention of the Chinese traveler of the twelfth century.<sup>21</sup>

Among the liquors of Koryŏ, some were quite distinctive. Chang Chihyŏn 張智鉉 (\*1928) has provided the most complete analysis of available documentary sources. He argues that various distinctive alcoholic drinks were imported from China and its northern dynasties, including those of the

17 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 224f.

18 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 16.

19 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 220; Pae Kyŏng-Hwa 1999, 6.

20 We learn that Korean alcoholic drink system was established at that time. Pae Kyŏng-Hwa 1999, 6.

21 These sources include literary collections discussed above and other sources, such as episodes contained in the *Koryŏsa*.

Khitans, Jurchens, and Mongols, as diplomatic gifts and commercial goods.<sup>22</sup> Based on his analyses of the passages on diplomatic relations recorded in the *Koryŏ sa* and other documents, Chang Chihyŏn suggested possible dates for the importation of certain liquors from China to Koryŏ. Here is a list of names of liquors of foreign origin and possible dates of their transfer to Koryŏ based on Chang's analysis:<sup>23</sup>

- *haenginja beobju* 杏仁煮法酒 (liquor made from almonds boiled according to method): June, 32th year of the reign of King Munjong 文宗 (r. 1046–1083)
- *yangju* 羊酒 (sheep's milk liquor): During or before the reign of King Yejong 睿宗 (r. 1105–1122)
- *gyehyang-eoju* 桂香御酒 (Cinnamon court liquor): December, 12th year of the reign of King Yejong 睿宗
- *hwaju* 花酒 (flower liquor): During the reign of King Sukchong 肅宗 (r. 1095–1105)
- *Tongnak* 潼酪 (a *mayuju* 馬乳酒, mare's milk liquor, *kumiss*): December, 18th year of the reign of King Kojong 高宗 (r. 1213–1259)
- *podoju* 葡萄酒 (grape wine): February, 28th year of the reign of King Ch'ungnyŏl 忠烈 (r. 1274–1308)
- *sangjonju* 上尊酒 (supreme liquor): December, first year of the reign of King Ch'ungsŏn 忠宣 (r. 1213–1259)
- *baegju* 白酒 (white liquor): August, 28th year of the reign of King Ch'ungnyŏl
- *jungsanju* 中山酒 (Zhongshan liquor): Mid-Koryŏ period
- *jeunglyuju* 蒸溜酒 (distilled liquor): Late-Koryŏ period

Among these, particularly noticeable besides the distilled liquors are liquors that were based on ingredients other than grains, including *podoju* (grape wine), *yangju* 羊酒 (sheep's milk liquor), and *mayuju* (mare's milk liquor). Evidence for sheep's milk liquor is found in a reference to king Yejong. He presented it to a Koryŏ general in honor of his achievement in conquering the Jurchens in 1107. The *Koryŏ sa* does not explicitly discuss its origins; however, Chang Chihyŏn argues that the Koreans had probably received it from the Khitans or Jurchens through official trade before this particular gift-giving event, because sheep's liquor was a typical liquor of nomads and did not de-

22 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 10-36.

23 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 36.

velop in agricultural societies. Our sources also clearly document mare's milk wine and grape wine as offered to the Koryŏ court by the Mongols. According to Chang Chihyŏn,

*Tonglao* 潼酪 was a nickname for an alcoholic drink based on mare's milk drunk commonly by northern nomads, which was also called *ma tonglao* 馬潼酪.<sup>24</sup>

It appears in the *Koryŏ sa chŏryŏ* 高麗史節要 (Essentials of Koryŏ History) as part of a 1231 offering by a Mongol general to Koryŏ king Kojong following the initialization of diplomatic negotiations between the two.<sup>25</sup> At that time, the Mongols were invading and devastating virtually the entire Korean peninsula while the Koryŏ government resisted the Mongols from the small island of Kanghwa on the west coast. The Yuan emperor also offered grape wine to the Koryŏ king Ch'ungnyŏl as a gift in 1302 and 1308.<sup>26</sup> As seen in the sources, most of these foreign liquors seem to have been used exclusively by kings and nobles receiving special royal gifts, and were not shared by ordinary people.

Among these foreign alcoholic drinks, one kind did spread through the ranks of the ordinary people rapidly: distilled liquors, called *aralgil* 阿刺吉, the Chinese *alaji*, representing the Turkic form *araji* (e. g., Mongolian *arkhi*), grape wine and then *soju*. As we have seen above, because the liquor is not found in Yi Kyubo's writings of the mid-Koryŏ period, it most likely was not popular until the mid-thirteenth century. Yet several pieces of late-Koryŏ period sources hint at the fact that it had become quite popular at local levels by that time, and later sources even demonstrate that it had become one of the most important liquors in the Chosŏn period that followed. While the way how other foreign wines were transferred can be traced quite clearly in documentary sources (as seen in the example of *mayuju* discussed above), relevant sources on distilled liquors provide only inconsistent information about their origins, resulting in several different theories. The following section will examine the ways in which distilled alcohols were transferred from China to Korea by reviewing some of the major points of existing theories as well as examining broader ranges of sources and studies, including the most recent works on the history of distillation and new evidence from archaeological and anthropological findings.

24 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 23f.

25 *Koryŏ sa chŏryŏ*, juan 16.

26 *Koryŏ sa chŏryŏ*, juan 22. Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 23-27.

## *Arakhi* and *Soju*: Introduction and Popularization of Distilled Alcohols in Korea during the Late Koryŏ Period

Three passages from the Koryŏ-period sources suggest the popularization of distilled alcohol, specifically *soju* and *arakhi*, in the late Koryŏ period. Two of them, both in the *Koryŏ sa*, explicitly mention *soju*. The first of these passages, in the biography of Ch'oe Yŏng 崔瑩 (1316–1388), introduces a general under Ch'oe Yŏng's command named Kim Chin 金縝 (fl. 1360s), who loved *soju* excessively, failed to do his duty, and was punished.<sup>27</sup>

Before this event, when Kim Chin was the head of Kyŏngsang province, he drank wines and played day and night along with officers under his command calling in many famous *kisaeng* (female entertainers). Because Kim Chin enjoyed drinking *soju*, people in the army called him and his men the “*soju* group.” And because he assaulted and insulted his soldiers and assistants if they displeased him, they all possessed resentments and grudges against him. When Japanese enemies burned and looted the barracks in Hapŏ 合浦, soldiers said: “Did the *soju* group defeat the enemy. How can we fight?” They then retreated and made no effort to go and fight. Yet Kim Chin fled alone on horseback, and the army was defeated in the end. Then he [Ch'oe Yŏng] degraded Kim Chin to a commoner and condemned him to exile to Ch'angnyŏng 昌寧 County, and then moved him to the island of Kadŏk 嘉德. Then he executed Yi Tongpu 李東搏 and Kim Wŏnkok 金元穀 of the Mongol regiment in Hapŏ.

Ch'oe Yŏng was one of the most important generals in late Koryŏ history. He supported the last kings of Koryŏ against the Yuan and also against the newly rising powers that would establish a new dynasty, named Chosŏn 朝鮮 (1392–1897).<sup>28</sup> We can understand that the compilers of the *Koryŏ sa* included the story of Kim Chin in Ch'oe's biography in order to show that there were bad officers like Kim who violated the military code of conduct in crucial situations and that Ch'oe Yŏng punished them appropriately. The fact that a group of people who enjoyed *soju* to excess were also called a “*soju* group” shows that *soju*

27 *Koryŏ sa* 113.1451 (biography no. 26). Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 42f. 集一道名妓與麾下士晝夜酣飲。縝嗜燒酒軍中號曰燒酒徒。卒伍偏裨少忤其意輒鞭辱衆忿怨。及倭焚掠合浦營衆曰：“可使燒酒徒擊賊我輩焉能戰？”却立不進縝單騎遁走遂大敗。於是廢縝爲民流昌寧縣尋徙嘉德島斬合浦都千戶李東搏金元

28 Ch'oe Yŏng attempted to maintain the Koryŏ dynasty, however, he was eventually executed by pro-Ming people. After the last king of Koryŏ was forced to abdicate, his dynasty was replaced by the new dynasty, named *Chosŏn*, which was established by the pro-Ming faction.

was a strong alcoholic drink, was commonly known, and its consumption had spread widely among Koryŏ armies.

Another piece of evidence in the *Koryŏ sa*, in the section on prohibition, shows that *soju* was broadly popular in many sectors of society. An article issued in 1375 prohibited *soju* and other luxury goods such as silks and gold and jade wares in order to stop their consumption, because many people squandered their fortunes on them. *Soju* is not documented in any of the earlier Koryŏ-period literature by those who enjoyed alcoholic drinks, but it is suddenly found to be consumed among nobles and probably rich merchants (if not ordinary people) commonly like silks and other luxurious goods were consumed at that time.<sup>29</sup>

Whether the *soju* mentioned in these two passages of the *Koryŏ sa* was distilled liquor is not clear, but this is likely from the name *soju*. We can assume from the contexts of these texts that *soju* was regarded as a strong and special alcoholic drink, and unlike earlier traditional Korean alcoholic drinks. Other Koryŏ sources do not explicitly reveal what kind of drink *soju* was, but another piece of evidence from the same period suggests that there was distilled liquor at the time. A poem by Yi Saek 李穡 (1328–1396, also known by his pen name Mokŭn 牧隱), an important Neo-Confucianism scholar and a tutor to many major governmental officials of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn periods like Chŏng Tojŏn 鄭道傳 (1342–1398), describes a liquor called *aralgil* liquor as

[...] forming like autumn dewdrops, and dripping down at night ... after drinking half a cup of the liquor, a warm feeling spread to the bone.<sup>30</sup>

We can easily assume that this *aralgil* liquor described in the poem was produced by making a liquid extract from raw spirits through a distilling process, and that it was a strong alcoholic beverage. The fact that *soju* was also called *noju* 露酒, that is, “dewdrop wine,” in later Chosŏn-period sources suggests that the distilled *aralgil* liquor described by Yi Saek, which was clearly popular among the literati, was related to *soju* at the time. Yet these earliest pieces of documentation do not reveal more details about these liquors such as their ingredients. Nor can we find out from Koryŏ-period sources how new types of alcoholic drinks began to increase in popularity in Korea during Koryŏ times.

29) *Koryŏ sa*, *juan* 85, criminal law 39. Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 43f. If *soju* had been a special product consumed only occasionally by kings and highly upper-level class nobles, the government would not have banned it officially.

30) 秋露溥溥入夜零... 强吸半杯熏到骨。Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 53. See also Chu Yŏng-Ha 2015.

Sources from the succeeding Chosŏn dynasty provide more details about *soju*, including its origins, its relationship to *aralgil* liquor, and instructions on how to make *soju*, including the ingredients to be used. These sources include different kinds of literature written by Korean scholars, including informal essays, poems and writings for practical use. Several sources explicitly say that *soju* originated in the Yuan period. According to these sources, *soju* was transferred from China to Korea during the latter part of the Koryŏ era. This matches well with the sudden and simultaneous rise of *soju* attested by our sources at that time. However, there are passages with different content that some scholars have used to refute the Yuan-period transfer theory seen in many Chosŏn-period accounts. Chang Chihyŏn, who examined the documentary sources most thoroughly and systematically in order to trace the origin of *soju*, developed different ideas into three theories:

- 1) *soju* was created during the Yuan-period;
- 2) *soju* was created before the Yuan-period;
- 3) *soju* was transferred from West Asia to China and Korea along overland routes.

Chang found some logical gaps in the existing theories and tried to supplement them with new reasoning by connecting these theories from comparative perspectives. Yet Chang's analysis is limited to an examination of Korean and Chinese documents and studies about alcoholic drinks done up to the 1980s; he somewhat neglects technology and archaeology and fails to pay sufficient attention to some important historical contexts that would explain aspects of technology transfer in depth. Later works on the origin of *soju* in Korea have mostly relied on earlier studies like that by Chang. Moreover, although most of the Korean passages that discuss the origin of distilled alcohol imported their discussions directly from earlier Chinese passages or re-interpreted them, many of the earlier studies of the debate did not perform sufficient textual critique. These Korean passages about the origin and rise of *soju* in China have been the subject of major debates. There had already been huge debates about the general origin and transfer of distillation technology on a worldwide basis, and new findings and studies have fueled this even more. Yet, regarding the history of *soju* in Korea, after Chang's study, there has been no major new study.

By considering these weaknesses in earlier analyses and using new evidence, let us discuss the most important points that help trace the origin of *soju* in Korea. We will divide and discuss the history of *soju* in Korea in terms of two basic

periods: the Mongol period and the pre-Mongol period. Then we will examine the pros and cons of different interpretations for each of them.

### The Mongol Period Origin Theory

The earliest Chosŏn period account about the origin of *soju* is the *Tongŭi pogam* 東醫寶鑑 (literally meaning “a precious mirror on the medicines of eastern [countries]”) by Hŏ Chun 許浚 (1539–1615). This is the most renowned medical book of the Chosŏn period. The passage reads:

*Soju* appeared beginning in the Yuan period. Its taste is extremely intense. Immoderate drinking will ruin your health.<sup>31</sup>

This description is short, yet several later Chosŏn-dynasty accounts, which basically say the same thing about the origins of *soju*, probably because of the influence of Hŏ Chun’s account, give more details about its characteristics and include other associated dangers. For example, an early seventeenth-century writer says:

*Soju* is a liquor that arose from the time of the Yuan dynasty. As it was only taken as a medicine, it was not used haphazardly. Due to this, it became a custom that small cups were called *soju* cups. In the present day, however, those of upper status drink great amounts, to their heart’s content; in the summer they drink much *soju* from large cups. Drinking their fill and becoming drunk like this has caused many a person to suddenly die.<sup>32</sup>

That they used small cups for liquor clearly shows that the liquor was a stronger alcoholic drink, as Hŏ Chun mentions; this should be distilled liquor. This passage shows that *soju* was basically used as a medicine; in addition, it was often drunk by elites.

Hŏ Chun wrote his medical book by reviewing all of the East Asian (mostly Chinese) medical works transmitted until his time, summarizing their most important content. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Yuan-period transfer theory started by Hŏ was influenced by information in the *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Principles and Categories of Materia Medica), written at the end of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 by Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593). It contains

31 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 41.

32 *Chibong yusŏl*, 19: 燒酒是元朝發明的酒，只能作為藥來飲用，不能隨便喝。在風俗中，把喝酒時拿的小杯子叫做燒酒杯。近來士大夫們生活豪奢，盡情飲用。夏天拿大杯子飲用，一醉方休，因此猝死的人很多。English translation from Pettid 2008, 119.

almost identical wording about the origin of Chinese *shaojiu* 燒酒, *soju* as found in Korean sources.<sup>33</sup> The authors of the Chosŏn period often cited earlier Chinese accounts in making their points. Because of this, we have to examine the original Chinese sources used by Chosŏn authors, as some might have been written in different contexts and from different points of view. Other questions need to be answered as well: What were the distilled alcoholic drinks like that are mentioned in the Chinese sources? What were their names? When and where were they from? What kinds of ingredients were used?

Li Shizhen's *Bencao gangmu* says that *shaojiu*, "roasted liquor," is *huojiu* (火酒, "fire wine") and a *alaji jiu* (阿刺吉酒, i. e., "araji wine"). As its primary source, it cites Hu Sihui's 忽思慧 *Yinshan zhengyao* 飲膳正要 (Proper and Essential Things for [the Emperor's] Food and Drink), the official dietary manual for the Mongol court in China, presented in 1330. As the earliest extant documentary source on *alaji* (aralgil), this account renders the liquor's name according to its Uighur pronunciation, *arajhi*.

While it does not discuss its ingredients, it does establish *arajhi* as a distilled liquor and describes the distillation process.<sup>34</sup> While not found in Hŏ Chun's book, many sources of the Chosŏn period were influenced by Li Shizhen's account, which refers to *shaojiu*, the Korean *soju*, as *aralgil* 阿刺吉 wine. Sŏ Yuku 徐有榘 (1764–1845), a *Silhak* (practical learning) scholar of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, cited Li's sentence about *shaojiu* in order to argue that the alcohol originated in the Yuan period.<sup>35</sup> Besides this, the fact that Yi Saek's poem (cited above) also refers to the distilled wine as *aralgil* rather than as *shaojiu*, or *soju*, shows that the distilled drink had found its way to Korea under the name *arakhi* / *arajhi* before Li Shizhen's *Compendium* arrived in Korea, in the early Chosŏn period. Another Yuan-dynasty account, "Poem about *Arajhi* Liquor" (*Yalaji jiu fu* 軋賴機酒賦) by Zhu Derun 朱德潤, uses a different set of Chinese characters with a similar pronunciation – *yalaji* 軋賴機 – to describe the liquor.<sup>36</sup> According to anthropological research conducted in the early twentieth century, many regions of the Korean Peninsula called *soju arajhi* liquor in similar yet slightly different forms of transcription, such as "arak liquor" (*arakju*) or "arang wine" (*arangju*).<sup>37</sup> Various other transcriptions of *arajhi*

33 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 61.

34 Laufer 1919, 236f; Luo Feng 2012, 505f; Buell 2015.

35 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 49f, 61.

36 Liu Guangding 2002, 317.

37 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 56ff.

are found in documentary sources from the Chosŏn period, e. g. in *Yŏn'gyŏngjae chŏnjip* 研經齋全集 (Complete works of Yŏn'gyŏngjae) by Sŏng Haeŭng 成海應 (1760–1839).<sup>38</sup> This again suggests that *arajhi* / *arak* transferred to Korea through diverse channels, one of them at least associated with the mixed elite, Turkic and other, of North China during the time of transmission. In his study, Chang Chihyŏn tried to examine *aralgil* liquor and *soju* side-by-side and trace their origins. He concluded that, because many sources define *soju* as *aralgil* wine, the latter liquor existed before *soju*. He also provides more details about these two kinds of distilled liquors, such as their ingredients. Citing several sources including encyclopedias, Chang argues that the *alajhi* or *aralgil* wine that began to appear in Yuan-dynasty documents were based on milk fermentation, and that the Chinese imitated the Mongol distilled liquors and began to make distilled liquors using their traditional brewing materials calling it *shaojiu* to distinguish the new products from Mongol *arajhi*.<sup>39</sup> From this perspective, we should now investigate available sources about the *arajhi* wine in order to understand its relations to *shaojiu* and Korean *soju*.

Recent findings strongly suggest that *arajhi* or *aralgil*, consumed in China before its transfer to Korea, was based on cow's and mare's milk (or even camel's milk). In his article about the recent discoveries in Mongolia of stills that date back to the early part of the Yuan dynasty or even slightly earlier, Luo Feng 羅豐 argues that the stills were created to distill *airag* or *kumiss*, the alcoholic drink based on a form of fermented mare's and cow's milk popular among the Mongols and in other nomadic societies.<sup>40</sup> From there, it continued to develop, to be consumed as *arakhi* / *arajhi* in distilled form in modern Mongolia and other nomadic societies inhabiting northern Eurasia although due to the influence of Islam most Kazakhs no longer distill mare's or cow's milk. Luo Feng also introduced eyewitness accounts of the stills and distillation practices of the Volga Kalmucks and Mongols written by the late-eighteenth-century German zoologist and botanist Peter Pallas (1741–1811), to which Paul Buell has now added an extensive comparative analysis.<sup>41</sup> Considering the archaeological findings and following the subsequent developments of distillation in Mongolia, it is highly likely that the *arajhi* consumed by the Mongols, and also documented—in

38 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 53. *Yŏn'gyŏngjae chŏnjip*, *Oejip* 外集 (supplementary volume), *juan* 60, "P'ilgiryu" 筆記類.

39 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 47-60.

40 Luo Feng 2012, 501-504.

41 Luo Feng 2012, 502f. Buell and de Pablo Moya 2016.

*Yinshan zhengyao* in the fourteenth century, was based on mare's or cow's milk fermentation. On the other hand, Li Shizhen's *Bencao gangmu* of the Ming period, which introduces *shaojiu* as being *arajhi* liquor citing the *Yinshan zhengyao*, clearly testified that people in his time made distilled liquor based on grain-fermented liquors.<sup>42</sup> As Chang Chihyön suggests, it is possible that the Mongols used mare's or cow's milk when they first popularized the distilled wine called *arajhi*, yet that when it spread in China, people began using fermented grains to make distilled liquors, as documented in the Ming-dynasty account.

Then, as such distilled liquors spread in China, were they then transferred to Korea during Koryŏ times? What were the relationships between Mongol China's *arajhi* liquors and Korean *soju*? How and why did *arajhi* and *soju* become identified in the Chosŏn period? How did such drinks become popular in Korea so quickly? These are only some of the questions that we have to tackle in order to solve the mystery of the sudden rise of *soju* at the end of the Koryŏ period based on findings of earlier and more recent studies.

It seems clear that the nomadic Mongols played a major role in facilitating the spread of *arajhi* / *arakhi* in China and in its transfer to Korea. Before we look at the historical context, however, we have to address the challenges offered by another theory that argues, based on different interpretations of sources, that such distilled liquors existed before the Yuan dynasty. It will help us to investigate details such as the ingredients of distilled liquors and a possible transfer of distilled liquors to Korea before the time of the Mongols, at least on a limited scale.

### The pre-Mongol Period Origin Theory

The Korean document from the Chosŏn period that states explicitly that Korean *soju* and *aralgil* liquor existed before the Yuan and that challenges the Mongol-period origin theory most systematically is one written by Yi Kyu-kyŏng 李圭景 (1788–1856), a *silhak* 實學 (practical learning) scholar of the late Chosŏn period. He states in his essay, “Dialectical Argument for *Soju* from Southwestern Foreigners, namely, Arigöl 阿里乞”:<sup>43</sup>

42 Chang Chihyön 1989, 61f.

43 *Oju Yŏnmun Changjŏn San'go* 5.151, “Nambŏn soju pŏnmyŏng arigöl pyŏnjŭngsŏl”  
番名阿里乞辨證說: 露酒卽燒酒 (? 稱火酒), 自元時中原赤有名焉,  
書朝備。S. a. Chang Chihyön 1989, 51.

*Noju* is *soju*, and some people call it *hwajiu* 火酒 (fire wine). It became known in China from the Yuan period. In general, it was imported from the foreigners of the maritime southeast (*Sōnambōn* 西南番). It probably originated in the Tang-dynasty period.

Here, the term “foreigners of the maritime southeast” means societies in Southeast, South and West Asia accessed through the then maritime routes. This passage suggests that *shaojiu* / *soju* was transferred to China from the southern maritime routes, rather than via the northern routes used by the Mongols. It also implies that it is possible that *soju* was transferred to Korea before the Mongol period. Yi Kyukyōng cited as his primary source a Chinese household encyclopedia, entitled *Jujia biyong shilei* 居家必用事類 (Essential Things for Living at Home), which was probably written in the late-Yuan or early-Ming period. The main passage in question which unmistakably refers to distillation and seems to refer to a Western-style distillation apparatus with a serpentine reads:<sup>44</sup>

“Cooked Liquor”

Whenever one cooks liquor, use 2 *qian* of wax, 5 slices of bamboo leaf, and “official” *Arisaema japonica*, a fine half a kernel for each *tou*. Transform and put into the liquor. Close up tightly according to method. Place inside a boiler. ([subtext] During autumn and winter use an *Arisaema japonica* “pill.” During spring and summer use wax and bamboo leaves). After that start the fire. Wait until the aroma of the liquor penetrates up into the boiler twists [of the apparatus]. The liquor will come forth in profusion. Then raise the boiler again. Then take up the entire pot [with the liquor], open up and look. If the liquor is boiling then it is ready. Put into the fire for a long time. When you take it down put it into lime. One should not move continuously. One wants the white liquor to expel to obtain the clear [distilled] liquor. Afterwards when cooking again and again, use mulberry leaves to repose. This is to prevent the aroma *qi* [vapor] from being cut off.

Elsewhere the text has some of the same phrases about the origin of *soju* as those found in Yi Kyukyōng’s account.<sup>45</sup> As for *arajhi*, Yi Kyukyōng refers to it as *aliqu* 阿里乞, another transcription of the name *arakhi* / *arajhi*. A form of *arakhi* / *arajhi* is used in *Jujia biyong shilei*, rather than the *alajhi* 阿刺吉 used by Yi

44 *Jujia biyong shilei* 11.35a, “Zhujiu” 煮酒:  
化入酒中如法封繫置在甌中 (秋冬用天南星丸春夏用蠟并竹葉)  
透酒溢出倒流便更揭起甌蓋取一瓶開看酒滾即熟矣便住火良久方取下置於石灰中不得  
頻頻移動白酒須撥得清然後煮時瓶用桑葉冥之庶使香氣不絕. S. a. Chang Chihyōn  
1989, 50.

45 Chang Chihyōn 1989, 54.

Saek and Li Shizhen, or the *yalaiji* 軋賴機 as used by Zhu Derun. Yi was able to use the greater number of sources available to him in order to enhance his theory. First, he provides another name for *soju*, *noju* (dewdrop wine), which is only found in Korean sources, including the Koryŏ-period poem composed by Yi Saek. Second, he cites other Chinese documentary sources to argue that *soju* / *shaojiu* indeed should be traced back to before the Tang dynasty.<sup>46</sup> In fact, before Yi Kyukyŏng, Yi Kyukyŏng's grandfather and another practical-learning scholar named Yi Tŏkmu 李德懋 (1741–1793) refuted the Mongol-origin theory by citing in his work a Song-dynasty account that talks about *Xianluo jiu* (Xianluo liquor, 暹羅酒), a liquor, judging by its name, possibly of Southeast Asian origin, that was twice-brewed from *shaojiu*. Yi argued that *shaojiu* / *soju* already existed during the Song dynasty, and that because *shaochun* 燒春 existed during the Tang, it is possible that *shaojiu* / *soju* also existed before the Song period, too.<sup>47</sup>

While the arguments by Yi Kyukyŏng and Yi Tŏkmu are based only on documentary sources available to him at that time, it is both supported and challenged by new findings in recent studies. Based on a variety of sources including archaeological finds, Huang Hsing-tsung shows in his volume in Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China* series that the Chinese invented distillation methods before the Mongols, as far back as the Han dynasty.<sup>48</sup> Feng Enxue 馮恩學, in the most recent paper about archaeological findings related to distilled alcohols in China, proves that distillation technology existed in the later Han period, and argues that the earliest documented textual evidence as opposed to archaeological evidence for Chinese distilled alcohols is found in an account from the Song dynasty.<sup>49</sup>

Yi Kyu-kyŏng's argument that *shaojiu* (but not particularly Korean *soju* which shares no more than a name with *shaojiu*) originated before the Yuan period, is supported in our sources but this may not mean much for Korea. The question of the role of the maritime routes needs further study from broader historical context including evidence for very early distillation in India discussed by Needham *et al.* To make his point, Yi cites the *Jujia biyong shilei*, which he

46 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 64-75.

47 Yi Sŏngu 1984, 214; *Ch'ŏngjanggwan chŏnsŏ*, vol. 9, 12.

48 Huang Hsing-tsung 2000, 203-208.

49 Feng Enxue 2015. We should also consider counterarguments that liquor with a high alcohol-icity documented in pre-Yuan sources are not necessarily distilled one. See Liu Guangding 2002, 318-333.

interprets as saying that *shaojiu* / *soju* came from the southwestern barbarians, that is, societies reachable via maritime routes. What the one late Yuan–early Ming account does suggest is that the spread of *arakhi*, the form of the word in the *Jujia biyong shilei*, is related to the maritime trade that flourished during the Song–Yuan period, but exactly how is not entirely clear. However, Yi Kyukyŏng ferociously argued that the text had probably a much greater significance. He discusses the spread of *soju* via maritime routes, even to Okinawa, by utilizing new sources available to him at the time of his research. That is, the situation regarding the transfer and spread of distilled liquors in Yi Kyukyŏng’s time had grown more complicated. In his case, the arrival of Europeans in Asia might have worked a new variable into the region’s liquor trade, making some of his evidence uncertain. Therefore, rather than take Yi Kyukyŏng’s argument at face value, it is important to consider that the historical context behind the transfer of distilled alcohols that he describes differs from the context that surrounds the original Yuan-dynasty sources.

While we can put aside Yi Kyukyŏng’s arguments of the nineteenth century, it is still important to pay attention to the reference in a Yuan-dynasty source taken to indicate the origin of the *arakhi* liquor via southern maritime routes although the passage in question only marginally supports such an interpretation. For sure, many goods including spices came to China during and prior to the Mongol period through the maritime connections in which many merchants from Southeast, South, and West Asia actively participated. The Mongol period witnessed an unprecedented boom in maritime trade, yet the international trade through the sea routes had already been flourishing even before the Mongol period. There is a possibility, therefore, that distilled liquors were transferred to China and Korea before the Mongol period, if we consider another theory of its origin from West Asia through India and Southeast Asia, which has been argued by some earlier studies.<sup>50</sup> How then can we interpret this case in connection to other sources like the archaeological findings discussed above?

In order to validate the credibility of this southwest transfer theory, let us summarize a possible scenario of distilled-liquors transfer that we can consider based on discussions offered above. Distillation technology had already developed in China from ancient times, and it is possible that the Chinese commonly drank distilled alcohol based on grain-fermented wine during the Song dyn-

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50 Forbes 1948. Some scholars argue that distillation technology developed first in China and was transferred to West Asia. Cf. Miyazaki Masakatsu 2007.

asty. The Mongols, as they expanded their political power across Eurasia, adopted Chinese distillation technology in order to create the kind of milk-ferment liquor they drank. They called this new liquor *arakhi* / *arajbi*, appropriating a foreign term, and thereafter popularized it wherever they expanded. When they conquered southern China and established the Yuan, they encountered Chinese who manufactured distilled alcohols based on grain fermentation, a method which had evolved thanks to China's largely agricultural environment. They might have continued calling their traditional liquor *shaojiu* in order to distinguish it from the *arakhi* / *arajbi* popularized by the conquering Mongols. Similar patterns of transferring, spreading, and transforming distilled liquors like *arakhi* / *arajbi* and later *soju* could apply to Korea, which fell into the sphere of Mongol influence at this time. Where, then, did the name *arakhi* / *arajbi* come from? It may have originated somewhere in the maritime trade networks via South and Southeast Asia but the term was still transformed and Turkicized once it had arrived, and identified with Chinese *shaojiu*.

Based on linguistic analyses, there have been differing theories about the origin of the term *arakhi* / *arajbi* proposed, including two major theories. The most convincing theory claims that the wine's name comes from the southern Arabic word *araq* for water drops (sweat or sap of trees).<sup>51</sup> Some scholars who support this theory have argued that distilled alcohol called by this name was imported from West Asia to East Asia through either maritime or overland routes. Detailed arguments vary, yet a major claim of this theory is that distillation technology was first invented in ancient Greece under the name *alambic* and then transferred to Persia [the Middle East], where it was given a new name and technology for making wine; then it was transferred to India (although Indian distillation is very old and may be an independent invention)<sup>52</sup> through merchants before travelling southeast to Southeast Asia through the maritime routes and even northeast via the overland routes; along both routes, according to this theory, it traveled on to China and Korea. This theory of a possible West Asian origin of *soju* was discussed first in Korea by Ch'oe Namsŏn (1890–1957) 崔南善, a pro-modernization scholar active from the late Chosŏn era to the early years of the Republic of Korea. By considering that *aralgil* and similar transcriptions derive from the word *arakhi* / *arajbi*, Ch'oe Namsŏn argued that the West Asian culture of distillation first influenced the transfer of distilled alcohol east,

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51 Laufer 1919, 237.

52 Allchin 1979.

which continued through the contact routes to eastern Eurasia.<sup>53</sup> In fact, he proposed that *soju* was transferred from West Asia to China and Korea through the northern Eurasian routes rather than the southern maritime routes.<sup>54</sup> Introducing this argument by Ch'oe as a distinctive theory, Chang Chihyŏn concluded that, while it sounds plausible, it is also worth considering the transfer of distilled liquors by West Asian merchants via southern maritime routes. Another theory about the origin of the term *arakbi* / *arajbi* posits that the liquor comes from the areca nut in India, which was called *arrak* for many years.<sup>55</sup>

Both theories demonstrate the possibility that a distilled liquor called *arakbi* was transferred to China through its maritime trade with India and Southeast Asia. (Since some Yuan-dynasty sources mention that the drink originated via the southern maritime routes, I will address the history of distilled liquors in Southeast Asia in another work.) We can now consider it possible that this southern *arakbi* gradually attracted the attention of Chinese, who had their own *shaojiu* traditions too, after it was imported to China as a trade good, and that the Mongols assimilated it together with Chinese *shaojiu* traditions as maritime contacts grew. Documents report that northern peoples enjoyed *soju* more than southern peoples due to their colder environments, and all of the stills excavated have been found in northern China, so it is highly likely that the Mongols adopted and developed distilled liquors and modern Mongol distillation technology is a variant of Chinese.

If we consider the prevailing theory that the name *araq* originated from Arabia, it is indeed possible that a Middle Eastern or Indian distilled alcohol was imported from West Asia through traders traveling to other regions, who referred to it using a variety of transcriptions of its original name *arak*. Some scholars even suggest that it was transferred from West Asia to Korea by West Asian merchants during the Silla period through Tang-dynasty China, as there are some pieces of evidence for the travel of West Asian merchants all the way to Silla.<sup>56</sup> However, there are also problems with this theory, because West Asian merchants, most of whom were Muslim, probably did not often consume or deal in alcoholic drinks because of their religious ban, although this was not so true yet in that period; while they were allowed to use alcohol for medical pur-

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53 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 75-82.

54 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 75-88.

55 Chang Chihyŏn 1989, 73f.

56 Pae Kyŏng-Hwa 1999, 25f.

poses, it might have been difficult for them to carry it with them as a trade good, especially on a large scale.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the fact that the Chinese had already developed some distillation technology independently from the beginning of the first millennium and used it at a limited degree before they had developed active trade relations with West Asia, a fact supported by recent studies and archaeological excavations, challenges these direct West Asian origin theories. In addition, sources that talk about trade goods do not mention it explicitly as one among them. Even though distilled liquors were transferred through these avenues to a limited degree, it is highly likely that distillation technology, as they found it in China whatever its ultimate origins, spread during the Mongol period, when the Mongols connected Eurasia and promoted unprecedented contacts. New studies show that West Asian merchants also visited Koryŏ on a large scale during the Mongol period.<sup>58</sup> These would work as complimentary factors to accelerate the promotion of distilled liquor in Korea during the Koryŏ period.

In sum, until more concrete pieces of evidence become available, the debate about the origin of distillation and its transfer to Korea will continue. Yet, in fact, all of the available sources discussed above do not deny the key fact: distilled liquors including *arakhi* and *soju* began to spread rapidly in Mongolia and China beginning in the Mongol-Yuan period. These types of distilled liquors that developed through complex processes in China under Mongol rule could have been transferred to Koryŏ through its political and military relations and the international commerce these relations facilitated, leading to the rapid rise of *soju* in Korea. Whichever way it was, it is clear that the Mongols played a major role in causing a big change in the drinking culture of Korea. The following section will examine the historical context.

### **The Avenues for the Rise of *Soju* in Korea: via Mongol Army Camps, International Trades, and Cultural and Technological Influences through Scholarly Contacts**

All of the existing theories about the origin of *soju* in Korea, including those proposed by Chang Chihyŏn and others reviewed above, focus more on documentary sources and linguistic analyses. They fail to devote sufficient attention

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57 It has been the subject of big debates. Luo Feng 2012, 506f.

58 Lee Kang-Han 2013, ch. 4; Lee Hŭi-Su 2012, 173-240. There are many studies about the Yuan-Koryŏ relations, which I will refer to in the proposed monograph.

to the transfer of distillation technology through cultural contacts between the Mongols and Koreans. All of the *soju* and *arakbi* liquors that became popular from the Koryŏ period on are distilled alcohols and thus involve a special technological method called distillation. This makes their transfer different from those of other liquors that were brought from other societies like China to Korea as diplomatic gifts or as trade goods. Unlike other alcoholic drinks of special kinds like grape wines, the official Koryŏ-period documents do not record an occasion of *soju* transfer as an official gift or trade good. Therefore, we have to assume that it came to Korea through other means. It was also difficult in pre-modern times for a special gift to be transmitted into a different society so quickly, and the fact that several other liquors of foreign origins did not spread so quickly supports this conclusion. Here, we have to pay attention to the fact that the Mongols who influenced Korea from the mid-thirteenth century had enjoyed drinking liquors including *kumiss*.<sup>59</sup> If they brought their brandies to Koryŏ, how did they do so, and how did this new type of alcoholic drink become popular so quickly?

We have to view historical context more carefully, focusing on the many unprecedented conditions and circumstances of Koryŏ society that emerged only at that time. The *Koryŏ sa* shows active political and cultural relations between the Koryŏ dynasty of Korea and Yuan dynasty of China. This served as a facilitating environment for the transfer of distillation technology, among other things, from China to Korea. Starting in the early thirteenth century, in the course of their Eurasian conquest, the Mongols invaded Koryŏ. Koryŏ resisted for about 30 years but finally sued for peace in 1259 and became a *quda* (marriage alliance) state of the Yuan dynasty. After that, the monarchs of Koryŏ became imperial sons-in-law (*kburegen*) until King Gongmin 恭愍 (r. 1351–1374) began to push the Yuan garrisons back around 1350. It is not strange to see many economic and cultural exchanges taking place through the diplomatic relations of that time, including the transfer of *soju*. The Mongol soldiers stationed in Koryŏ brought foods that they enjoyed, and for soldiers, alcoholic drinks were important. Mongol drinks such as *airan* / *kumiss* were also foods of great prestige for the conquerors.

In fact, Yi Sŏngu 李盛雨 (1928–1992) had already argued before Chang Chihyŏn that the Mongol army probably brought distilled liquor to Koryŏ during its invasion. Yi Sŏngu suggested that, since its first introduction to

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59 Bayarsaikhan 2016.

Korea, *soju* developed well in certain locations, such as the capital of Kaesŏng, Andong, Chindo, and Cheju Island, wherever Mongol troops were stationed or waged battles on the Korean peninsula.<sup>60</sup> Chang Chihyŏn did not cite or introduce this theory, yet later works all mention Yi Sŏngu's theory as the most convincing method of transfer and spread of *soju* in Korea. In fact, no concrete pieces of evidence support his theory.<sup>61</sup> However, the story about Kim Chin's *soju* group in the *Koryŏ sa* strongly suggests that indeed the Mongol army camps on the Korean peninsula might have influenced Koryŏ soldiers. Once the Koryŏ government surrendered to the Mongols after a long period of resistance, the official Koryŏ army cooperated with the Mongol army to crush the Sambyŏlch'ŏ 三別抄, a powerful military unit of the Koryŏ dynasty that resisted the Yuan and their new Koryŏ allies. When these soldiers cooperated during the battles, it is highly likely that the Mongol soldiers, who enjoyed *kumiss*, an alcoholic drink made based on fermented mare's milk, during their Eurasian conquests, needed to distill it in order to preserve it for a long time during their stay in Korea, and also taught the distillation methods to Koryŏ soldiers. The Mongols were also famous for relocating people to different places, including many craftsmen, as seen in the account of William of Rubruck.<sup>62</sup> As a consequence, relocated people contributed to transfers of many new cultural elements between different societies, and these probably include distillation techniques. If those who knew how to make distilled alcohols were among the Mongol soldiers stationed in Korean army camps, it would have been easy for them to introduce this new technology of distilling liquor to Korea for their own consumption. In this way they naturally influenced Korean soldiers.

Technology transfers could have continued after Sambyŏlch'ŏ was defeated in 1273, as Koryŏ began to experience Yuan intervention on a full scale. Many Mongols came to Koryŏ as exploiters, and many Koryŏ people were brought to Yuan China unwillingly as tribute. Some of the Koryŏ people brought to Yuan luckily returned to Koryŏ after staying in China for many

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60 Yi Sŏngu argues (1984, 216) that the fact that, from this early time on, these places became renowned for their production of high-quality *soju* proves Mongol influence on the development of *soju*.

61 Pae Kyŏng-Hwa argues in her MA thesis (1999, 62) about Andong *soju* that there is no direct evidence for this.

62 For example, see an episode about William the craftsman from Paris in the account by William of Rubruck, translated into English in Jackson 1990, 183, 209ff.

years. Other Koryŏ people went there for other reasons such as official and scholarly exchanges. The massive and unprecedented movement and exchanges of people between China and Korea contributed to cultural and technology transfers, including distillation. At that time, many foreign merchants including those from West Asia also came to Korea to conduct trade. No source explicitly suggests that these foreign merchants brought distilled alcohols to Koryŏ, yet it is possible that they did so, considering that the Mongol influence on Korean society overall enabled many social and cultural changes, which require further study. Kim Janggoo, a historian of the Mongols, suggests one reason for the sudden popularity of distilled alcohols in the late Koryŏ period may be the introduction of meat eating by the Mongols. Compared to more vegetarian culinary habits during the Koryŏ period based on Buddhist influence, the Mongols promoted meat eating in Koryŏ, as well as stronger wines with stronger alcoholic percentages, such as distilled alcohols, which became a better fit with meat eating.<sup>63</sup>

We have also to solve another mysterious issue surrounding distilled wine: What was the ingredient in *soju* that became popular through Mongol influence? The *arajhi* enjoyed by the Mongols in Eurasia was probably based on *kumiss*, mare's or cow's milk wine. However, *soju*, which became popular in Korea, was made with grains like rice and barley. That is, they distilled traditional clear-strained wine (*ch'ŏngju*) made using fermented grains. We have learned from our sources that *mayuju* (mare's milk liquor) was brought to Korea in 1231 in the course of the Mongol invasion. Yet *mayuju* or distilled alcohol based on fermented mare's milk did not become popular in Korea possibly due to fewer horses there than among the Mongols. And therefore the Mongols themselves also probably applied the same distillation technology to Korean traditional alcoholic drinks such as clear strained wine made of rice wine, or taught Koreans to produce and promote the creation of a new kind of distilled alcohol – that is, *soju*. Chinese sources of the Ming–Qing period say that the Chinese also used fermented grains to make distilled alcohols. Therefore, we need to compare the case of the development of *soju* in Korea with the development of distilled alcohols in China. Yet, *soju* became more popular in Korea

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63 Kim Janggoo provided this outline of an idea during his discussion on the paper at the Korean Association for Central Asian Studies Annual Conference in Korea on April 23, 2016. These various cultural factors that influenced the sudden rise of *soju* in late Koryŏ will be a topic of a separate chapter in the proposed monograph.

as such, and therefore this localization and popularization of the new type of distilled alcohols in Korea is worth noting.

The new distillation technology made it possible to transform the traditional strained rice wines (*ch'ongju*) with an alcohol content of at most 6 to 8 per cent to a much stronger wine, *soju*, with a much higher alcohol content of more than 20 per cent. This new kind of distilled liquor began to grow popular as a high-class liquor at that time, and people used both terms, *arakhi* and *soju*, for the same distilled liquor that was by then mostly based on grain fermentation. However, *Yinshan zhengyao* also mentions “Small Coarse Grain” liquor along with other distilled liquors like *Arajhi* liquor and *Sürmä* liquor.<sup>64</sup> Paul Buell argues that

this might be a sorghum distillate since sorghum was later very popular in China for making a kind of whisky (called like the grain, gaoliang 高粱).<sup>65</sup>

As the account of William of Rubruck in the thirteenth century shows, the Mongols drank not only *kumiss* but also alcoholic drinks based on materials such as grapes and grains in the course of their expansion into Eurasia;<sup>66</sup> therefore, it is necessary to investigate the possibility that the Mongols used these other ingredients to make distilled liquor.

When considering the origin of distillation transfer, we should consider the technological aspects too, such as distillation itself. Unlike other types of liquor-making, the production of distilled alcohol requires a basic knowledge about the fundamentals of the distillation process and proper tools like stills. By examining all available documentary and archaeological sources, Paul Buell has argued that the Mongols popularized distillation technology by making stills portable as are the Mongol stills of today, even made of wood. Without these portable devices, it would have been difficult for the Mongols to transfer this technology to other societies rapidly.

What kinds of stills were used to make the first distilled *soju* or *arakhi* in Korea at the end of the Koryŏ dynasty? Unfortunately, no actual still is available from the period. However, we can gain some ideas of what the early Korean stills were like by looking at document descriptions, archaeology, and anthropological studies providing evidence for stills used during the Chosŏn period, because the earlier late-Koryŏ-period stills continued to be used under Chosŏn,

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64 Buell *et al.* 2010, 498.

65 Buell 2015.

66 Jackson 1990, 178f, 191.

albeit with possible minor modifications. The basic process for distillation remained the same throughout premodern Korea, with great similarities to the processes of other societies in Asia.

The traditional stills for distilling *soju* in Korea were called *soju kori* 燒酒古里. *Kori*, a Korean word meaning a ring or circular object, was probably adopted to signify the traditional bowl that was used to distill *soju*. A Korean dictionary defines it as being “made of copper or glazed earthenware as a folded pair, with one at the top and one at the bottom.”<sup>67</sup> This type of still brought distilled extracts to a collector outside the stills through pipes. Most of the models for stills exhibited in museums in Korea are of this type. Once-strained wine was placed in the bottom pot and then another smaller pot was positioned upside-down to cover the bottom pot. The upper pot has a lid for cooling water. In order to produce *soju*, first one heats the pot; and then, one should pour cold water onto the lid so that the evaporated alcohol inside the pot condenses and collects on the lid, and from there gradually trickles down into the waiting pot. While the above-mentioned still was probably the most popular type of still used in Korea, scholars who have examined stills used in different provinces of Korea attest that Koreans used different kinds of stills made of wood, earthenware, or brass, and different kinds of containers for collecting distilled extracts inside the still or outside through a pipe (for several types of the Korean traditional stills for distilling *soju*, see figure 1).<sup>68</sup> In fact, the stills that developed in Korea have many similarities with those developed in China and Mongolia. These are quite simple and portable, and different from large stills that were used in China during the Ming–Qing period. It should have not been difficult for the technology to be transferred to Korea, and probably to other societies like Turkey and Mexico, cases supported by some archaeological findings. *Soju* production and consumption continued in China after the fall of the Mongols, yet its development differs from that of Korea in many respects. Therefore, it would be worth comparing them to understand why *soju* became popular so quickly in Korea, and what cultural interactions occurred in such a special situation. This will be done in a chapter of the proposed monograph.

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67 *Han'gugō taesajōn*, vol. 1, 445. I think this term *kori* is a Korean word, and the author of the historical records had to borrow Chinese characters to write it down because the Korean alphabet (Hangul) was invented only in 1444.

68 Huang Hsing-tsung 2000, 214. Scholars have categorized them as Mongolian style and Chinese style stills respectively, yet more recent studies suggest a need to revise this earlier categorization.

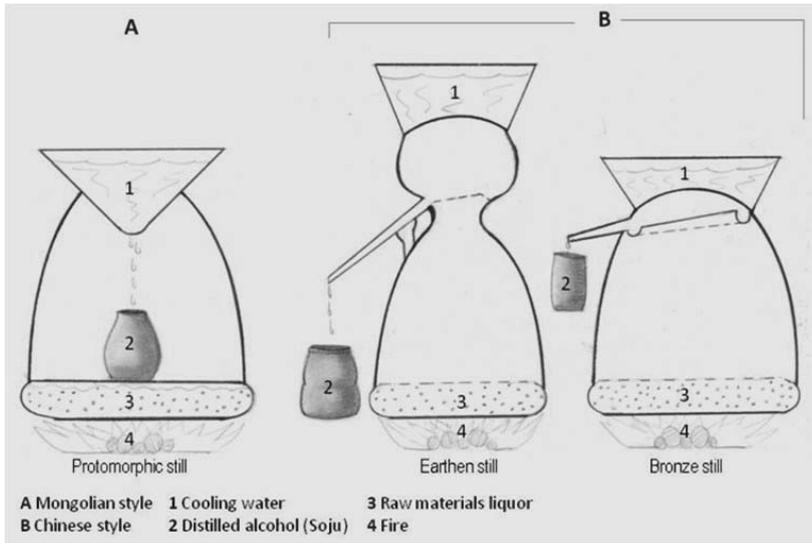


Figure 1: Types of traditional Korean stills<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper re-examines the rise of *soju* at the end of the Koryŏ period, which marked a new era in Korean drinking history from the perspective of distillation-technology transfer in Eurasia during the Mongol period. While making use of all the sources available to date, the relative lack of material forces us to rely on reasoning and inference to create the most comprehensive and convincing explanation possible. By comparing it with earlier traditional Korean alcoholic drinks, we have clearly seen how *soju* was distinctive and new. Yet our sources do not clearly indicate when and how *soju* spread to and in Koryŏ at that time. That is why many different theories have competed for preeminence. This paper has reviewed earlier theories including those by Chang Chihyŏn and Yi Sŏngu, and also examined the most recent studies done in different languages, and also new archaeological findings. Because of the space limitation here, more detailed analyses will be carried out in the proposed monograph; however, we can propose the following provisional conclusion from the current examination. First, distillation developed independently in China. Yet it was the Mongols who adopted distillation technology from other cultures such as

<sup>69</sup> Valenzuela-Zapata *et al.* 2013, 165.

China to make distilled alcohols using the mare's milk ferments that they enjoyed. They named it *arakhi*, a foreign word from West Asia that migrated overland and via the sea routes, and popularized it in large parts of Eurasia including China and Korea under the Mongol influence in the course of their mobilizing goods and people there, including soldiers and merchants. Merchants from different societies active in the international trade of the time probably accelerated the transfer processes.

The case of Korea, where *soju* became popular right after the coming of the Mongols, is supported by a good number of documents and historical contexts. That some Mongol soldiers recruited to Korean army camps were possibly from craftsmen families who were able to introduce distillation technology is a quite likely scenario. While we cannot deny the possibility that *soju* that is, *shaojiu*, was transferred earlier from China to Korea, no evidence supports this so far. Available pieces of evidence all clearly say that distilled alcohol spread widely only after it was transferred from China to Korea during the late Koryŏ period.

The case of *soju* transfer clearly shows that a big cultural influence could occur through exceptional historical changes. Unlike some foreign alcoholic drinks, which transferred beyond their cultural zone as tribute and then spread very slowly among kings and nobles, *soju* spread quickly for a short period of time under unprecedented historical conditions, such as "Korea's close connection to wider parts of Eurasia," through the Mongol empire. This development is intriguing as it involves a transfer of technological knowledge. Once the principles and basic methods are learned, this new knowledge could be simple. Yet it also requires things such as tools, e. g., stills; the people in Korea adopted basically the portable stills used by the Mongols and developed them further. While a form of *arakhi* based on mare's milk was introduced by the Mongol soldiers or foreign merchants to Korea, mare's milk was less available in Korea, and therefore they also used their traditional brewing materials, that is, fermented grains for distillation, and called the new brew *soju*, after an older Chinese term, in order to distinguish it from the original *arakhi*, as contemporary Chinese under the Mongol rule also did calling the new distillate *shaojiu* or, in the plays, *sayin darasun*, good liquor. As the distilled alcohols grew continuously in popularity during the Chosŏn period, their production was based solely on grain fermentation, though people continued to use both terms, *arakhi* and *soju*, to refer to the same distilled liquor.

In short, while this kind of new technology transfer sounds simple, it actually involved very complicated interactions between different cultures amidst dynamic historical contexts in order to ultimately create a new product. A big

change in liquor culture occurred in Korea, while it was involved in large-scale Eurasian cultural contacts and technology transfers through its direct contact with the Mongols. The story of the rise of *soju* in Korea is a good example of the rise of a new cultural element based on tradition and innovation, involving both adaptation and localization of new technologies. A further investigation as part of a larger study of the history of distillation on a worldwide basis will help us explore significance of the case of Korean *soju* in global history.

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