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Hyunhee Park, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History
The City University of New York, John Jay College and CUNY Graduate Center

Koryŏ Intellectuals on “Middle Eastern” Liquor

Soju, the “national” distilled alcoholic drink of Korea, is fast becoming one of the world’s most popular drinks today, thanks most recently to the global pop-cultural phenomenon of Korean Wave (*Hallyu*). However, the context of *soju*’s invention reaches far beyond the frontiers of Korean society, back to the multicultural milieu and hemispheric economy of Eurasia at a time of unprecedented political unity created by the Mongol Empire. There is little doubt that the liquors ancestral to today’s *soju* first came to the Korean Peninsula from China, in the form of *shaojiu* (literally “burned liquor”), better known today as *baijiu*. Since their first appearance in Chinese and Korean sources, *shaojiu* and *soju* have often been identified as *arak* (also *araki* in various transliterations). This word probably originated with the Arabic word *araq* (or *arak*), which meant “sweat” or “perspiration,” a reference to the essential drops created by vapor during the distillation process. In fact, *arak*, a distilled spirit with a high alcohol content similar to *shaojiu* and *soju*, is popular today throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean region, although the specific relationship between *soju* and modern *arak* brands has not yet been studied fully. This paper examines a few extant sources relating to the transfer of distilled liquors, specifically several documents written by Koryŏ elites, to trace the introduction of distilled liquors into Korea, a process that typifies the interconnected nature of Koryŏ society and China during Mongol times. This stands as one among many examples of cultural elements that transferred between Korea and other societies through the frequent and large-scale interchange that occurred between people at all social levels traveling between Koryŏ Korea and Yuan China and places beyond, including the Middle East.