To undertake this history of soju, we have to start with the origin of its name, which interestingly hints at the complex dynamics that shaped its early development. The name, pronounced *soju* in Korean but written in the Chinese script as 烧酒, uses the same Chinese characters that apply to the name for a similar Chinese distilled liquor called *shaojiu* 烧酒, nearly identical to the characters used in *shōchū* 烧酎 (known as *shochu* in English without diacritics), its Japanese counterpart.¹ The existence in East Asia of three variations of a traditional liquor of similar make, all bearing the same written name, suggests a shared origin in cross-cultural exchange; indeed, the evidence for this transfer of a shared recipe and the necessary technology can be found sometime during the premodern period.

This is not the only name relevant to soju’s identity and history. Although many have not yet recognized this fact, people in Korea, China, and Japan have to a lesser extent also referred to this form of distilled liquor as *arak*.² As attested in literary sources, the name *arak* was adopted upon its arrival in East Asia as an exotic foreign term; local inhabitants then used Chinese characters to mimic the pronunciation of such foreign terms for the purpose of transliteration. This word probably originated with the Arabic word *araq*—AKA *arak*—which literally means “perspiration,” and which serves as a name for many similar forms of distilled alcohol found in the Middle East as well as South and Southeast Asia. *Arkhi*, a form of distilled liquor popular in Mongolia and Central Asia, is also connected to arak in both its origin and the technology used to make it. This name, disseminated through historical trade routes, reveals another possible historical root name shared among the various distilled alcohols developed and consumed in diverse Asian societies, suggesting too that they may also share to some degree a common history of origins. Indeed, this book shows that the consumption of arak began to spread during the Mongol period, beginning with a Mongol-period cookbook written in Chinese that introduced the distilled liquor for the first time. Thus, arak plays a kind of ancestral role in soju’s evolution.

By closely examining all the documentary and archeological sources available to scholars so far, we can begin to map out the trajectory of soju’s introduction to Korea. For example, a

---

¹ Ishige Naomichi, “Higashi yūrashia no jōryūshu: jōryūki wo motomete” [Distilled alcohol in East Eurasia: seeking for distiller], in *Shōchū higashi mawari nishi mawari* [Shōchū around the world], ed. Tamamura Toyo’o (Tokyo: TaKaRa Alcohol Beverage and Life Research Institute, 1999), 122.