

Sul, Traditional Medicine and Family Korean case studies

Hanhee Hahm & Haesoo Base

Introduction

Recently Korea's traditional liquors have increasingly drawn the attention of the general public and the national and local governments as cultural heritage. There are, however, some misunderstanding as to what "drinking" liquor means in the traditional Korean society. This is the context in which the authors of this paper decided to investigate the culture of '*sul*' in traditional society and as well as the changing aspects of such culture.

In Korean tradition, *sul* or liquor was considered a part of daily diet not solely for entertainment or social activities. Every household brewed *sul* because its use in family life was very important, specifically with respect to ancestor worship, entertaining relatives, friends, neighbors and guests, and even for medicinal use. This paper deals with *sul* focusing on its medicinal purpose but it also presents the culture of *sul* which should be understood within the context of the daily life of a family.

Recipes for medicinal *sul*, called *yaksul*, have been handed down from generation to generation, confidentially within families. It was brewed with plants, herbs, roots and many diverse pharmacopoeia ingredients. *Yaksul* was kept in a sacred place in the home and treasured as a family heirloom. As such, the recipe was mostly circulated only among family members, especially from mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. This raises the question as to why it has been not transmit from mother to daughter. The method of transmission reflects the peculiarity of the Korean family system. Yet, recent changes in the Korean family system have even greatly affected the culture of *sul*.

This paper tackles the following issues: first, what are the medicinal *sul* in the Korean context? Second, the question of how is it made and who is in charge of brewing are dealt with through three case studies. Third, this paper attempts to explain which parts of the changing aspects of the culture of *sul* are most pronounced in contemporary society.

A Brief History of Sul-Making

'*Sul*' can be translated into liquor or wine in English, but neither word quite properly reflects the linguistic or cultural meaning contained in the Korean word '*sul*'. The origin of the term, *sul*, has several potential explanations (National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage 2013, pp. 15-16). One is that the two words, water (*su*) and fire (*bul*), combined to become *subul* whose meaning is 'fire contained in water.' *Subul* was transformed into *sul* through a long history of linguistic changes. This explanation reflects the traditional philosophy of *yin* (cold or calm) and *yang* (warm or vitality) as well. Water represents *yin* while fire represents *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are opposite properties or elements. Yet, the universe is formed from the harmony between these two. The philosophy of *yin* and *yang* thus emphasizes the integrated, harmonious and unified entity or state formed from two opposite, contrasting or different elements or properties.

Reference to *Sul* can be frequently found in many old books and records representing festivity, vitality, and rituality. When it came to making and drinking *sul*, the old books and records emphasized the realm of morality or *do* (right way) (Baek 2004). In particular, making *sul* was considered as belonging to the divine realm, not a human one. Within this belief system brewers complied with precise and correct rules for production, including a series of rituals praying for a good quality of *sul*. When drinking *sul*, strict etiquette was observed. The culture of *sul* was developed under the Confucius doctrine of philosophy during the period of Chosun dynasty (1392-1910).

During the Chosun period, home brewing was common practice for occasions of ancestor worship, special holidays, and socializations. People mostly used grains such as rice and gluten-rice to brew *sul* for ancestor worship. The use of ingredients such as fruits, flowers, herbs and roots and animals in making *yaksul* for medicinal use became increasingly popular. In the Dongui Bogam (1613), the Book of Korean Medicine, which was compiled in 1613 by Heo Jun, a renowned doctor of the day and is acknowledged to be a masterpiece of Korean traditional medicine, it is stated that liquor brewed with medicinal plants and herbs were effective for the treatment of some ailments.

Due to the fact that the process of fermenting *sul* was typically subject to secrecy, people made medicinal *sul* in their homes. Home brewing of *yaksul* became common practice and an important chore of housewives. The knowledge basis and techniques associated with also

developed and expanded during the later period of Chosun dynasty.¹

When Chosun was colonized by Japan, however, home breweries were abruptly banned by the implementation of legal measures in 1905, 1909, and 1916 (Choseon Chongdonkbu 1935). The Chosun people were in confusion since home brewing was essential in their daily lives. As noted above, *sul* was an important part of ancestor worship and people relied on medicinal uses of *yaksul*. When the Japanese colonial government banned home breweries, home-made *sul* became illegal and substituted by factory-brewed liquors. The colonial government issued liquor licenses to those who were then authorized to operate breweries. Only those who had capital could open a brew house or a factory. Brewing thus became commercialized.

Even under the tight control of the colonial government, some families continued to make *sul* secretly (Cho 2003; Heo 2004). Once such illegal breweries were discovered, those who were caught had to pay fines. Some elders, in our interviews, recollected that they could not comply with the oppressive Japanese order because they could not serve their ancestors factory-brewed *sul* which was considered disrespectful and even improper to serve to their ancestors. The tight control on home brewing during the Japanese colonial period became so severe so that most families stopped brewing *sul* at home. The elders remembered that it was one of the most difficult experiences under colonial rule.

After liberation, the Korean government continued the ban on home breweries. The government attributed the lack of grains at that time as the main reason for the continued ban on home breweries. In 1965, producing ‘all grain liquor’ even in factories was illegal. Such governmental regulations against home brewing were not changed until the Seoul Olympics was held in 1988. The change in the regulations was because of the rediscovery of traditional way of home brewing. The period leading up to 1988 was called the 'Dark Age of Home Brewing.' Government began to recognize the importance of home breweries making traditional *sul*, particularly from the perspective of protecting the distinctive knowledge and skills associated with making *sul* which were long retained within families from generation to generation (Park 2009). In 1985, thirteen items of traditional *sul* were selected and nominated as cultural heritage by the Korean government. In 1988, the government designated some

¹ In the recipe books compiled by women from noble families such as Jang Gye Hyang (1598-1680) and Bingheogak Yissi (1759-1824) home brewing of *sul* was considered important (*Umsik dimibang or recipe book* by Jang Gye Hyang and *Gyuhapchongseo or home encyclopedia* by Bingheogak Yissi.)

traditional *sul* producers as ‘folk liquor (*minsok sul*) producers for tourism’ & ‘folk liquor brewing skill holders’ and gave them special licenses. In 1990, the Korean government finally lifted the ban on home brewing of *sul* (Lee 2013). Since then each provincial and county offices have been competing to find old brew houses and families. Unfortunately, in many families the elders who had kept the knowledge and techniques of making *sul* have already passed away –leading to a loss of knowledge.

Even though Korea established the Law of Cultural Property Preservation in 1962, traditional *sul* and *sul*-making were not included as a cultural property until 1985. The law initially focused on tangible cultural properties and in order to preserve the original forms, structures and conditions the Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA) began to designate ‘cultural properties’ of importance.² CHA then proclaimed the Cultural Heritage Charter in 1995. The cultural policy undertaken by CHA has largely ignored the intangible cultural heritage including traditional knowledge and skills that have been disappearing fast during the periods of industrialization and urbanization in Korea. Due to such an imbalanced cultural policy, *sul*-making knowledge and skill have been rapidly disappearing in Korean society.

The fame and values associated with *sul*, however, after striving to adapt to new environments, have been restored as cultural heritage from something ‘illegal.’ Some people who were nominated as ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage Skill Holders’ have tried to commercialize their old home brewery-style of liquor. We present the cases of traditional *sul* which have been recognized as cultural property and fairly well known in the liquor business world as passing through the regeneration period of *sul*.

Medicinal liquor in Traditional Korea

Traditionally Korean liquors were categorized into four types by taste, brewing method and effect. Liquors were classified and named differently, from the highest quality to the lowest. The last characters in the names of liquors denote their classification: *-ro* (dew), *-ko* (nutrition), *-chun* (spring) and *-ju* (alcohol). Except *ju*, the other three types are considered to be high quality liquors that are good for health in body and mind. The name of *sul* with the

² According to the charter, cultural heritage must be preserved in their original condition. The clause often raises debate and is considered to be problematic.

last character of *ro* (ex. Gamheung-ro) tastes like dew. *Sul* with the last character of *ko* (ex. Jukreok-go) is a rich and healthy liquor. If the last character is *chun* (ex. Hosan-chun) the *sul* is considered to be a spring-like liquor. Yet, if the last character is *ju*, this connotes an ordinary liquor, that is, *sul* of the lowest quality. It is noted that the philosophy and aesthetics of drinking in the traditional society are conveyed through the naming schematic of *sul*.

The Case Study of Igangju (pear and ginger *sul*)

Igangju, pear and ginger *sul*, was nominated as intangible cultural property of traditional home brewery in 1988 and since then Mr. Cho, Jeong Hyeong (76) has been identified as the bearer of Igangju by the Jeolla Bukto provincial government. He is a descendant of a renowned Confucian scholar in the region.

“I grew up in an austere Confucian family. My grandfather always stressed the importance of a righteous life based on the Confucian teachings of loyalty and filial piety as well as the idiom ‘cultivate your morals, then manage your household.’ My mother told me an interesting and meaningful story. When she conceived me, she had a strange dream that was known to tell about her forthcoming conception; a cauldron for brewing liquor skyrocketed upwards from the ground. For this reason, my name came to have the Chinese character ‘Jung’ in it, which means soaring. I was destined to be a brewer. I studied brewing in college, and after graduation went to work for a liquor company in Mokpo, a prominent brewery at that time. There began the inseparable bond between me and liquor. For ten years, I devoted myself to developing new products for the company. I worked hard day and night as a factory manager, taking pride in the thought that I was best in terms of brewing skills. One day I began to think about my role as a brewer: is it really good liquor that only caters to the taste of liquor lovers? I came to a conclusion that without research into the roots of folk liquor, which was at that time was looked down upon as ‘bootleg’ liquor, all the work would just end up being an imitation of others’ liquor. Home-brewed liquor, which has lasted for such a long time transcending generations, was the true liquor of the Korean people representing our spirit. So I set the goal of studying folk liquor, and went for it.

The recipe for Igangju was passed down as secret formula through six generations but unfortunately under the colonial rule it has been on the verge of extinction. I studied brewery skills based on my mother’s memory and old books and records. I make Igangju by distilling soju in a traditional way and mixing it with pear, ginger, curcuma tuber and cinnamon, along with traditional honey. Igangju was introduced by Choi Nam-son as one of the three famous Korean liquors, and was also mentioned in the scripts for the traditional Bongsan Mask Dance. When the King Gojong signed a treaty of commerce with the United States during the late Chosun Kingdom period,

Igangju was on the table as a representative liquor of the nation.” (Interviews with Master Cho)

Mr. Cho grew up hearing from his parents that his family had a long tradition of home brewing including ‘Iganggo’ but that the traditional practices were ceased during the colonial period. After working in a brewery company for around ten years or so he began a new project to research folk liquors, especially his family’s traditional home brewery of Iganggo. In order to uncover the relevant formula and techniques he searched through diverse sources of books, records and oral traditions of his family members. On the basis of such materials, he repeatedly experimented and finally found the secret to home brewing. It was the outcome of uncountable trial and errors through the process of his self-learning. He was successful in the revival of Iganggo with an original taste. Iganggo was known to be one of the three best liquors in the region of Honam (South-western part of Korea) during the traditional period.³ According to *Imwon Gyeongjeji*, the classic book on agriculture, forest and economy written by Seo Yu Gu in the early 19th century, the three best medicinal liquors in Chosun were the following: Iganggo, Jukryeokgo, and Hosangchun. Iganggo was made from pear and ginger. Both ingredients were ground and squeezed into juice and honey, cinnamon and oriental drug bases were further added. The original name, Igang-go, was changed into Igang-ju because the old name seemed unfamiliar to the contemporary people, Mr. Cho thought.

Igangju is now one of the best-selling liquors in the domestic market. The marketing strategy focuses on selling traditional food culture where the food is made with healthy ingredients. Mr. Cho believes that Igangju should be brewed with the spirit of traditional medicinal *sul* for family and ancestors.

The Case Study of Jukryeokgo, bamboo *sul*

Song Myeong Seop (59) learned how to make Jukryeokgo, bamboo medicinal liquor, from his mother when he was in his twenties. His parents were operating a mill and a brewery in a small town, Sintaein in the province of Jeolla Bukto. They sold several different liquors made at the brewery. At home his mother used to make various *sul* for her family. One of these was

³ Jukryeokgo (bamboo liquor) and Hosanchun (enchanted spring liquor) were the other two (Seo, Yu Gu, *Imwon Gyeongjeji*, 1806-1842).

the bamboo *sul*, which was and is still, considered as medicine in Song's family. Song's mother learned the method of its brewing from her maternal grandfather who practiced oriental medicine. In the past, when people heard the name of the liquor, Jukryeokgo, they immediately recognized it as medicinal liquor, not an ordinary alcoholic beverage.

Jukryeokgo is made out of bamboo and oriental drug bases. Bamboo is chopped into chunks which are then baked in fire. The baked chunks are then squeezed into juice and honey, ginger and other drug bases are added. All ingredients are then boiled together. Jukryeokgo has most likely been manufactured since the middle age of the Chosun Dynasty. It was considered to be the best drink along with Pyongyang Gamheungro and Jeonju Iganggo in some old books.⁴

Jukryeokgo, bamboo *sul*, was designated as intangible cultural property in 2003 by the local government of Jeolla Bukto, and Mr. Song was identified as the master of brewery. He learned the secret method of brewing from his mother. She used to brew it for her husband who was frequently sick. The bamboo *sul* was good for him so his wife, Mr. Song's mother, used to diligently brew it even though it was tough work.

Mr. Song unexpectedly experienced difficulties when he applied for the designation of intangible cultural property with the knowledge and skill of making Jukryeokgo. He was supposed to present evidence proving that the knowledge and skill associated with making Jukryeokgo as a traditional liquor was transmitted from generation to generation, and that it had value as folk medicine as well. There were only a few people who knew about Jukryeokgo. What he did was to first publicize it. He had collected oral tradition and data regarding Jukryeokgo for many years. He discovered some good evidence demonstrating that the bamboo *sul* was once famous as a medicinal liquor in the area of Honam. Jukryeokgo was finally recognized as intangible cultural property by the local government of Jeolla Bukto.

Baekhwaju (Hundred Flowers Sul)

The family of Kim Jong Hoe (53) has a long tradition of making a special home-made liquor called Baekhwaju. Mr. Kim is proud of his family's history in brewing which goes

⁴ The old books that have a record of the bamboo groves are Seo Yu Gu's *Imwon Gyeongjeji* (a. 1840) and Yu Jung Rim's *Jeungbo Sallim Gyeongje* (1766).

back 13 generations, from when his ancestors started to brew *sul* with hundreds of different kinds of flowers that blossomed nearby. His house is located in Gimje, Jeolla-bukto, which has been famous as a granary of Korea because of the vast acreage of rice plains. His ancestors cultivated a large amount of rice, barley, and other grains and brewed rice wine at a large scale at home for the use in ancestor worship, and to treat guests and laborers. During the season of rice cultivating many agricultural laborers were hired and served food and liquor. It was customary for Korean landlords to provide food and liquor to their tenants and laborers. The consumption of rice wine was high during the seasons of planting and weeding. Rice wine made workers more energetic in body and mind. In addition, on the basis of old literature and oral tradition, Kim's ancestors developed medicinal *sul* by collecting many different kinds of wild flowers blossoming in near-by fields and mountains. Glutinous rice was, and is still, used as one of the bases which sweetens *sul*. Some flowers have a sweet smell and pretty colors but when the flowers are mixed together, the mixture can turn bitter and black. According to traditional knowledge, Baekhwaju is considered a medicine, not just a simple alcoholic beverage. Mothers-in law in Kim's family have taught their daughters-in-law how to make it. Yet, in the contemporary society we can see that the pattern of female succession has changed. Mr. Kim rather than his wife learned the home brewing from his mother. Mr. Kim explained his personal concerns for its extinction and his special interest in keeping the recipe and skill of brewing as his family's treasure. In 2016 Baekhwaju was designated as a regional intangible cultural property of the provincial government, Jeolla Bukto and Mr. Kim attained the mastership of Baekhwaju brewing.

Concluding Remarks: from sacred food to profane liquor

Igangju, Jukreokgo and Baekhwaju were considered as medicinal liquor by the families who brewed these *sul*. They were regarded as sacred food, and home brewing was a very special activity for them. Whenever housewives brewed *sul*, they used to perform a series of rituals for purification of *sul*, good fermentation, and family health. The rituals were carefully protected and only brewers performed them without the inclusion of other family members. Such sanctity and secrecy was transmitted through the women in a family. It was customary in traditional Korean society that the succession line of *sul*-making was female to female, specifically mother-in-law to daughter-in-law. Korean society is based on the patrilineal

principle of family organization so that the women's status is lower than that of men. Women moved to their husbands' homes when they were married. Drawing upon the Confucius ethical code, in a traditional society, a woman of high morality was required to be loyal to three men - her father, her husband and her son. Her status and role were determined by these three men's control. Because of such patrilineal family system, daughters generally would not learn how to brew and perform rituals from their mothers before getting married. After marriage, they would soon learn their in-laws' custom, etiquette and lifestyle in general.

One of the important household tasks for women was making *sul* for ancestor worship and as a treat for guests. As noted above, mothers-in-law used to teach their daughters-in-law how to brew *sul*. The women in a family would work together sharing recipes, skills and other important knowledge of *sul*-making. This kind of activity was customary for transmission of knowledge associated with making *sul*. Women attempted to preserve their own *sul*-making as sacred activities.

It is interesting to note, however, that the women-centered transmission has changed. As illustrated above in the three case studies, the brewers of *sul* are all men. These men have inherited the recipes, skills and knowledge regarding *sul*-making from their mothers. From the perspective of traditional customs, this is quite an odd practice. During the revival of home-made medicinal *sul*, these practices have been publicized by their brewers while traditionally, the home brewing of *sul* used to be a home-bound practice of women. Igangju, Jukryeokgo and Baekhwaju have drawn people's attention and been recognized as 'good' or qualified medicinal *sul*. Igangju has been successful commercially as well. In addition, these three *sul* were finally selected as intangible cultural properties by local governments. Tasks which were traditionally associated with females and considered to be sacred and secret, performed for the sake of ancestors and family health are now taken over by the focus on what can be considered more masculine attributes such as receiving public esteem and attention and increasing commercial activities under the name of brewing medicinal *sul*.

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