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Studying Drugs from a Korean Perspective: The Importance of East Asian Genealogies

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Abstract: Informed by the counterfactual question, “what would the study of drugs look like if Western histories didn’t exist?” this paper offers a story of manufactured substances “made strange” by assuming that position. Juxtaposing twentieth-century Korean narratives of miwôn (MSG), and hiropon (hiroppong; methamphetamines) against regulatory discourses of opium and morphine reveals surprising continuities across the aesthetics of consumption for these seemingly disparate substances. As 19th century inventions, miwôn (monosodium glutamate, a food additive) and hiropon have circulated at the ends of social reception, alternately characterized as miraculous and reviled substances. 20th century advertisements cheerfully heralded miwôn for fostering childrens’ health and domestic happiness while hiropon was seen as a wonder drug that increased national productivity; public advocates later condemned both for harming the family and the health of the body politic. As products of Japanese origin that were introduced under imperial aegis (1910-1945), miwôn and hiropon also index a problematic colonial modernity, operating as technological answers that address failings of (Korean) nature.

Dr. Saeyoung Park works on political subjecthood, financialization, and warfare in East Asia (1600-present). A concern that unifies her work is a desire to excavate plural, non-Eurocentric genealogies of political theory, thought, and practice in order to expand and diversify the range of possible futures that we can currently theorize. She is the editor for a forthcoming special issue in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies (Winter/March 2016) on the resurrection of the East Asian tribute system and its challenges. Currently she is a University Lecturer/Asst. Prof in Modern Korean Studies at Leiden University.