

# Colonial Modernity and the Social History of Chemical Seasoning in Korea

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## Abstract

**Ajinomoto**, an artificial food ingredient, was a symbolic commodity of modernity in colonial Korea, which created an image of new and exotic taste and built an empire of taste all over East Asia and the west coast of America. Ajinomoto’s marketing strategy emphasized “taste,” “economy,” and “science.” While appropriating traditional authority, they also connected the modernization of dietary life with the consumption of **Ajinomoto**.

Ajinomoto transformed not only the taste of food and the palates of people but also people’s attitudes toward food. This can be seen as the invention and maximization of desire for modern tastes. This invented taste and desire functioned as the deep structure of the **artificial food ingredient market competition** during Korea’s modernization period.

Miwon, a Korean chemical food company, recreated and dominated this market, which shrunk after the 1950s, by using the marketing strategy of alluding to Ajinomoto. Mipung, the next comer, adopted a strategy of direct imitation and borrowing of colonial memories and technology-oriented advertisement in order to re-divide and obtain market share. However, Miwon succeeded in staying in first place in the market by reconstructing their image as a national company pitted against a pro-Japanese company.

This study illustrates how the dualism and complexity of colonial modernity functioned in the embodied world of taste. The successful strategy of drawing upon colonial memories while maintaining a certain distance shows the complex relations **between modernity, colonialism and nationalism**.

**Keywords:** empire of taste, chemical flavor, implication, copying, borrowing, embodiment, colonial modernity.

## Introduction

In March 1970 when the “modernization” project was in full swing in Korea, advertisements with headlines such as “taste Ajinomoto with Mipung” and “World’s flavor, Ajinomoto’s flavor, Mipung’s flavor” appeared in one of the daily newspapers. A leading seasoning company under Japanese colonialism, Ajinomoto reemerged in the Korean advertising market through joint advertisements with Mipung. At the time, it was emphasized that “Mipung is produced in collaboration with Ajinomoto, its quality is guaranteed by Ajinomoto, its crystals are even, and there are no impurities” (Kim J. 1993, 209). Mipung, a latecomer to the chemical seasoning (hereafter MSG) market, strategically produced this advertisement in the process of a so-called “eight year seasoning war,” by calling directly on the image of Ajinomoto that had remained in the minds of Koreans.

Considering the strong nationalistic atmosphere that continued after liberation, it might have been a big risk to put a “Japanese company” at the forefront of the advertisement. However, it is apparent that the owner of the advertisement felt that there was more to be gained in spite of any potential risk. In response, Miwon, a leading MSG company at the time, filed a suit to “stop actions for illegal competition,” and established a strategy to reconstruct its image as a “national company” in order to defend itself from the challenge. This was an attempt to brand the competitor as something other than “national,” and this strategy proved to be quite successful.

However, when we consider that Miwon’s Chinese characters 味元 are read as *ajinomoto* in Japanese, and that Miwon was in fact aware of this when they were deciding the name of the company (Im 1988), we come to understand that this strategy to reconstruct the company image was not based simply on a national or anti-national dichotomy. Here we face questions concerning firstly the different advertisement strategies between Mipung, which chose to directly reference Ajinomoto, and Miwon, which drew on and used its association with Ajinomoto, and secondly how to conceptualize their basic similarities that go beyond differences.

A number of researchers have been examining social changes under Japanese colonization based on the concept of colonial modernity in order to overcome the dichotomous framework of analysis such as modernization/exploitation and national/anti-national that has been dominant in colonial studies for a long time.

They have been quite successful so far (Barlow 1997; Robinson 1998; Shin and Robinson 1999), yet one issue that has been raised concerning their research is that they have been using this concept without a clear theoretical conceptualization. I have also

explained the hegemonic competition between imperial powers through the politics of body under Japanese colony (Jung 1996) and the formation of a modern subject through disciplinary power (Kim and Jung 1997) in relation to the concept of colonial modernity. However, as the discussions were limited to the operation of **national authority of the colony**, the market was not considered sufficiently. The issue of colonial modernity is also an issue of **national authority** and is simultaneously related to the spread of capitalist market principles. Therefore, there is a need not only in the expansion of the scope of research, but also in the diversification of the ways to approach this issue. In particular, the status of Japanese empire that “existed within” the West-centered **world capitalist system** at the early twentieth century needs to be examined,<sup>1</sup> and the gap between the production and satisfaction of desire or the “delayed realization” of desire in the modernization project should be observed. The modernization of market under Japanese colonization comprises problems such as devices to generate new desires, experiences of materialistic culture inherent in people, or the progression of unrealized desires. If we limit the discussion to the area of food culture, the essential items for modernization would be nutrition, taste and manner, and the modernization of taste<sup>2</sup> was pushed forward by “**MSG**,” a symbol of modern science. In this sense, “natural” foods that are gaining importance in the recent postmodern era signify the end of the era of MSG that symbolized the modern era.

It is safe to say that MSG in Korea was dominated by **Ajinomoto** (味の素) during colonial times and by Miwon in the 1960s and 1970s after liberation. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ajinomoto established an “empire of taste” that comprised the entirety of East Asia as their market. What made this possible were broad ranged sales operations and various advertisements. An “empire of taste” is a phenomenon that assimilated tastes by forming a wide area beyond the boundary of one country into one market. Simultaneously, the colonization of advertisement signifies a cultural strategy that operates in order to create a new market, that is, a strategy to degrade and discriminate indigenous culture by advocating one country’s culture as superior. In the world of taste, colonial legacy means the continuation of embodied taste and idealized desire.

The expansion of the MSG market and the intense competition between Miwon and Mipung symbolized changes in food culture during the industrialization era

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Japanese imperialism, unlike that of Great Britain that ruled India and that of France that colonized Vietnam, was in a fierce hegemonic competition with Western missionaries within the socio-cultural field.

<sup>2</sup> Sugar and spices are important elements that have changed food culture in the modern era, and the expansion of imperialism was partly driven by a motivation to secure these elements.

between the 1960s and 1970s in Korea.<sup>3</sup> During this process, the memory of and desire for MSG, which had been formed in the past but could not be actualized and which had thus remained subconscious, reemerged. Former strategies to open up new markets and advertise products were imitated and reused. Such patterns are an index that shows the operating mechanism of colonial modernity that links the colonial legacy and the modernization project.

The history of MSG has so far mostly been dealt with in the context of social history under Japanese colonization. Research carried out by Sin (1986) and the Korea Federation of Advertising Associations (1996) was important and drew great attention in the social history of advertisement. If their research remained at a descriptive level, Yi Gi-ri (2001) used Bhabha's postcolonial theory when conducting his research on "advertisement and imperialism." However, as the research on the history of advertisement selects particular advertisements of various products, it is easy to overlook the production of each good or the relationship with the market. In order to research advertisements more deeply, it is necessary to clarify the target group of the advertisements. Under Japanese colonization, Ajinomoto's advertisements were produced according to different ethnic groups. *The Gyeongseong Ilbo*, a Japanese paper issued by the Japanese Government-General, was the most important medium of advertisement and targeted Japanese who had immigrated to Korea. *The Maeil Sinbo*, which was also issued by the Government-General, papers in Korean such as *Dong-a Ilbo*, *Chosun Ilbo*, *Joseon Jungang Ilbo*, and magazines such as *Samcheolli* and *Jogwang* mostly targeted the Korean market.

Previous research has neglected the continuation and rupture between colonial times and after liberation. Therefore, it is necessary to carry out simultaneous research on the background and the social effect of certain advertisements in the context of the history of enterprises, and explain their connection by comparing the times before and after liberation. Ajinomoto published its company history in 1951, 1971 and in 1989. The first publication in 1951 describes in detail specific cases of advertisement and company management during the colonial era, whereas the one in 1971 contains a more generalized company history. Both publications only give brief descriptions of the advertisements that contained militaristic content after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. In the case of Miwon, which occupies the biggest place in the history of MSG in Korea after liberation, there is only a brief history in the company magazine (Im 1988) while Mipung has a relatively well-accounted company history in *Forty Years*

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<sup>3</sup> Other characteristics of this era are the improvement of rice crops, called the green revolution, and the formation of the ramen market that announced the emergence of fast food.

of *Cheil Jedang* (Kim 1993).

## The Empire of Taste

### *History of Ajinomoto*

The MSG Ajinomoto is a glutamine acid soda that enhances palatability.<sup>4</sup> A Japanese person named Ikeda invented it in 1908, and its patent was later transferred to Suzuki who had been manufacturing iodine in Tokyo. Suzuki succeeded in industrializing it and began selling it in 1909. He named the product *Misei* (Essence of Taste) based on its ingredients: alcohol, saccharine, and dextrin. However, the name was found to be inappropriate for sales, and after a few other names, *Ajinomoto* (味の元) was selected, of which *moto* (元) was again deemed inappropriate. *Ajinomoto* (味の素) was finally chosen as the name of the brand (Ajinomoto Co. 1971, 49).<sup>5</sup> The word *moto* (素) is related to the analytical spirit of modern chemistry and also signifies the color white.

Suzuki fully industrialized the production of Ajinomoto in 1917 and, upon founding a corporation, began its production, sales and advertisement. The sales of Ajinomoto employed unique methods in installing distributors, formation of sales operation and promotional advertisement, and developing various ways to promote sales. The company headquarters thought that the successful sales were based on increased demand generated by spreading the benefits of the new seasoning, and on the expansion of the sales network from distributors to the smallest retail shops. At the beginning of the establishment, they depended on expensive newspaper advertisements but gradually moved to take direct measures with which they could promote sales at a lower cost. They utilized specialized ideas in each region, launched street advertisements and actively secured distributors. They also consigned the product to other agents.

At the initial stage, Ajinomoto's promotion and advertisement began with the description of the product itself. Under the heading, "Ideal seasoning, a true revolution in food," the newspaper advertisement explained the ingredients, inventor, usage, and effects of the product. It also added that Ajinomoto was the first MSG in the world. In particular, it emphasized the product's economy and harmlessness compared to previous

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<sup>4</sup> The substance that enhances palatability was defined as glutamine acid, which Ikeda extracted from kelp in 1908. This was the beginning of chemical seasoning. Glutamine acid was originally disintegrated and extracted from wheat, but dehydrated soybeans began to be used in 1934. In 1956, fermentation replaced the disintegration and extraction method.

products.

Trams, signboards, posters, and lights were used as advertisement mediums but the biggest was daily newspapers. Ajinomoto developed revolutionary newspaper advertisement techniques that were often recorded in the history of advertisements. The very first newspaper advertisement was in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* on May 26, 1909, followed by the first prize advertisement in *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun* in 1911. In 1914, they publicized the winning of golden plates at an invention exhibition in a three-column advertisement, and the promotion of a plant in Kawasaki that was constructed in 1914 was featured in a full-page advertisement in 1915. An advertisement published in a quiz format in 1916 caused submitted answers to flood in not only from Japan, but also from Taiwan and China. Besides these methods, they also put up advertisements on the façade of the headquarters building and in trams, on signboards, and on sample bottles.

Ajinomoto began their sales in Korea through the **Sujimoto** Shop in Seoul and the Fukunaga Trading Company in Busan, choosing these as their special agents at the end of 1910. They also made the same special contract in Taipei and Tainan in Taiwan around this time. After the establishment of the Kawasaki plant in 1914, they installed distributors in Taiwan and China, and began developing the market by creating demand. They also established a branch office in Shanghai in 1918, but it stagnated due to a fierce anti-Japanese campaign.

After overcoming the crisis in 1920, Ajinomoto advocated a solid business and began to change the product image from a luxury article or a special-use product to an everyday food article. At the same time, they strengthened and restructured the sales network, actively promoted the product to people working in food and nutrition-related fields, developed large-quantity and business sales, and gave favors to special agents. From that time on, Ajinomoto came to be regarded as an everyday necessity.

From the fall of 1922, Ajinomoto began overseas market development once again from its Osaka branch. They drastically increased their newspaper advertisements that targeted Taiwan, China, Korea, and Manchuria. They also launched extensive sales activities including the dispatch of resident managers, establishment of special agents and dealers, setting up signs and posters, distribution of sample bottles, and launching street promotion and sales. Hong Kong and Southeast Asia were also the targets of such market development. By January 1923, the Osaka branch was responsible for sales and promotion in Taiwan, Korea, China and the region in Southeast Asia where the sales had just begun. The expansion of the international market went through temporary stagnation due to the Great Kanto Earthquake but was again pushed on systematically from 1925 as the name Ajinomoto took root nationwide in Japan. From 1925,

Ajinomoto actively promoted advertisements in collaboration with special agents in Taiwan and China. Resident managers were dispatched to Dailian, Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and so on in 1927, and a resident manager arrived in Korea in February 1929.<sup>6</sup> Offices were established in Taiwan and Korea in 1929 and 1931 respectively. Sales figures in Taiwan and Korea reached 1,160,000 yen in 1925 and 1,640,000 yen in 1927. In Taiwan, Ajinomoto was used even by the lower class as an everyday necessity.

Such expansion was challenged both internally and externally. Besides discounted sales by the agents, problems such as counterfeit products or imitations appeared as well as false rumors. One of the criticisms of Ajinomoto concerned its ingredients. In their magazine, *Akahata*, socialists claimed that snake meat was the main ingredient of Ajinomoto, which forced Ajinomoto to advertise repeatedly that soybean was actually their main ingredient. In the overseas market, it was faced with ethnic resistance. Particularly in China, Ajinomoto was marked out as a representative Japanese product along with *Jintan*. Due to this categorization, Ajinomoto became the target of an anti-Japanese campaign in 1927, and when Japan invaded Manchuria in 1931 and the Shanghai Incident broke out in 1932, the shops that dealt with Ajinomoto were attacked, which consequently decreased sales in these areas. As a result, Ajinomoto in China switched to Chinese-styled packaging and also changed its name to Weihua. The market in China spread from the mid-1930s, and by 1937 when the Sino-Japanese War broke out, the market included Inner Mongolia, Sichuan and Yunnan, while in Southeast Asia, a successful market was created based on the overseas Chinese. The Sino-Japanese War brought about a temporary rupture in sales but it soon recovered as the territory under Japanese occupation expanded.

The sales in the United States started with the establishment of the New York Office in 1917. The New York Office was closed from 1922 to 1926 but was reopened, while the Seattle Office, which opened in 1922, was closed permanently in 1926. In 1930, the United States was marked as the biggest overseas market outside Asia, and advertisements that described the benefits of the product were primarily used. The Food and Drugs Act was being enforced in the United States at the time, and Ajinomoto became subject to this Act in 1931. In response, Ajinomoto advertised itself as a MSG made from vegetable protein, and was widely used as a canned product in 1933. The main market in the United States was California, which means that market expansion in the United States was largely based on overseas Japanese.

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<sup>6</sup> On December 1, 1929, before the establishment of the Joseon Office, Asai was first appointed a resident manager, who was succeeded by Suzuki with the opening of the Joseon Office on August 20, 1931, and later by Watanabe.

### *Organization of Sales in Korea*

The first foothold for the sales of Ajinomoto in Korea was Sujimoto Shop in Seoul and Fukunaga Trading Company in Busan. When the latter faced financial difficulties in 1920, the contract for special agent was cancelled and Atsumaya Shop in Busan was entrusted with sales. In 1922, Ajinomoto signed an official contract with Fukunaga and Atsumaya.<sup>7</sup> The takeover of Sujimoto Shop cost 150,000 yen per year and Atsumaya Shop cost 120,000 yen. The two shops divided the sales area into middle, northwest and southern regions. Sujimoto Shop handled goods such as seafood, canned products, liquor, groceries, and miscellaneous goods while Atsumaya Shop focused on mail-order sales and tours around the regions. Atsumaya dealt mostly with liquor, canned products, groceries, and miscellaneous goods. Before the opening of the railway, goods were delivered to Hamgyeong-do province by ship from Busan under Atsumaya's supervision, but the shop in charge was changed after the opening of the railway.

From 1925, advertisements in newspapers and magazines were reinforced and the campaign to increase distributors was implemented in corporation with special agents. Yoshigawa Shop, which was in competition with Sujimoto Shop in Seoul, became a secondary special agent in 1926, and when it became a special agent in 1928, three special agent systems were established. When the number of distributors skyrocketed, they were divided into regions and formed Ajinomoto Associations. Between 1928 and 1929, four secondary special agents were opened and lower distributors gathered to form Ajinomoto Association. By 1929, there were Ajinomoto Associations in the west, south and Gyeonggi-Incheon area, with 11, 15 and 15 chain stores respectively. Facing the limits of the market with the three special agent systems, Ajinomoto established the Joseon Office in Seoul in August 1932, thus changing the strategy to actively create a Korean market. When the second president Suzuki came to Korea in 1932, the national sales network had already been structured. The North Ajinomoto Association was formed in 1933 with nine shops, and in 1934, seven shops from the South Association separated and formed the Honam Ajinomoto Association (Ajinomoto Co. 1971, 355). Japanese shops occupied the upper stratum of Ajinomoto's sales organization while a few Korean shops were placed at a lower level.

A unique aspect in the change of sales organization in Korea was the installment of the Joseon Office. The Joseon Office opened at Seosomun in August

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<sup>7</sup> Within the Ajinomoto sales organization, a special agent was used for Korea while an agency was used for Taiwan.



1931, and Suzuki was appointed as the manager. In September 1933, the office moved to a new four-story building on former Sujimoto Shop property in Namdaemun. The Joseon Office had six Japanese and nine Korean employees under the manager, and focused on unique national promotions and advertisements that targeted Koreans. They began to devise sales strategies that suited Koreans' lifestyle, preferences and the state of transaction. They adopted five methods that were unique to advertisements in Korea: first, promotional sales of sample bottles at five-day markets; second, street advertisement and the use of **touters** such as magicians; third, signboard advertisement that had started in 1934; fourth, gift sales at cold noodle shops and rice and soup restaurants; and fifth, production and distribution of calendars and posters of Korean design.

As a result of these activities, sales in Korea soared after 1929. What is worth noting is that the promotion and sales of Ajinomoto varied in different regions. The main regions for sales were **Seoul, Busan and Pyeongyang and its vicinities**. In other words, sales were centered on big cities that were linked by the Gyeongbu (Seoul-Busan) railway and Gyeongui (Seoul-Pyeongyang-Sinuiju) railway. Pyeongyang was the home of noodle dishes and had a number of cold noodle shops that used meat-based stock, so it naturally became a center of attention for Ajinomoto. They used cases that had Ajinomoto written on it in Korean and gave away gold-colored cans as gifts. Ajinomoto was also used at *seolleongtang* (a thick soup made from beef stock) restaurants (Ajinomoto Co. 1951, 441). Thirty-two cold noodle shops were gathered to form Myeonmihoe (Cold Noodle Shop Association) in Pyeongyang, and noodle shops in other cities were clustered as members of the Ajinomoto Association.<sup>8</sup> In 1936, a second Ajinomoto Association in the Gyeongin area was formed along with Hamgyeong Association, followed by Ajinomoto Associations of retailers in Hwangpyeong, Hamgyeong, Busan and Pyeongyang. The organization of wholesalers took a more concrete form with the establishment of Pyeongyang Cold Noodle Shop Association (32 shops) in 1932, Hamheung Ajinomoto Association (6 shops), Wonsan Cold Noodle Shop Association (7 shops), Incheon Cold Noodle Shop Association (5 shops) in 1937, and Pyeongyang Cold Noodle Shop Ajinomoto Association (19 shops) in 1938. Noodle shops in Incheon and Wonsan, as well as small noodle shops in Pyeongyang, were now drawn into the Ajinomoto sales network.

It is not clear exactly what role the Japanese Government-General played in the

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<sup>8</sup> Thirty-two cold noodle shop owners in Pyeongyang formed the Cold Noodle Shop Association. Jo Jaegap was responsible for the sales of Ajinomoto to these shops, and Kim Chi-sam was hired as a sales person to sell gold-colored cans. Kim received a commission of ten *jeon* per can (Ajinomoto Co. 1951, 440-441).

expansion of the Ajinomoto market in Korea, but it is believed that there existed a certain support system.<sup>9</sup> The competitor to Ajinomoto sales in Korea was a corporate giant, Joseon Nitrogenous Fertilizer Corporation (hereafter Joseon Nitrogen). This company manufactured the MSG Asahi-Aji in 1936 and began its sales through the existing sales network for fertilizer and grocery shops. This caused fierce competition between Ajinomoto and Joseon Nitrogen between 1936 and 1937. Around the time of the Sino-Japanese War, Ajinomoto's market expanded greatly, which provided the foundation for the company to advance into a synthetic chemical company. However, after the outbreak of the war, production was tied up due to the application of the regulation on wartime control.

After the war, under the restriction of daily necessities, Ajinomoto founded the Southern and Northern Manchuria Sales Co., which had the capacity to control sales independently in 1939. In order to have self-regulated control over the special agents in the vicinities of Pyeongyang that faced intense competition, Western Ajinomoto Sales Co. was established in March 1939. However, the special agent system was maintained in other areas. In September 1939, there were 60 special agents in Korea.

The production of Ajinomoto began to decrease in the fall of 1939, mainly due to wartime food control during the Pacific War. Fertilizer production increased as the preferential policy on food production came into effect. As a result, however, the wheat allocations that were needed to produce Ajinomoto began to decrease. In response, Ajinomoto made plans to expand local plants in the regions that produced dehydrated soybeans, which were its main ingredient. When the rationing of raw materials stopped in 1943, the company turned to full-scale production of war supplies, and changed its name to Dai Nippon Chemical Co. under the order of the Department of the Army. Sales organizations in Taiwan, Korea, China and Manchuria were rearranged. Taiwan and Korea were initially the supply regions for the Kawasaki plant but in December 1939, the production of golden-colored cans were stopped. By 1940, only 50-gram paper containers were allowed for sales. Supplies to Taiwan were stopped in 1943 and the Taiwan Ajinomoto Sales Co. was liquidated. By 1940, the product was reduced to one type of paper container packaging in Korea, and Ajinomoto Associations in each region became autonomous organizations with their goods supplied by the Joseon Office. In 1943, product allocation itself became impossible, which caused Western Ajinomoto Sales Co. to disband, followed by the closure of the Joseon Office in July.

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<sup>9</sup> President Suzuki of Ajinomoto was a school friend of governor-general Yamanashi, and they met at the 20<sup>th</sup> year commemoration of sales in 1929 (Ajinomoto Co. 1951, 434).

## Colonization through Advertisement

### *Strategies of Advertisement*

Advertisement and promotion by Ajinomoto are important not only in Japan's but also in Korea's history of modern advertisement (Sin 1986). Ajinomoto's advertisements are divided into two big categories, i.e. newspaper ads and general ads, and various methods were used according to different markets. Designs used for newspaper ads in Japan were either modified or separately produced for overseas markets. Apart from general ads, they devised unique advertising methods that suited local customs of transaction or cultural preferences. In the newspaper, there were advertisements about prizes and prize winning, pictures of factories, raw materials, and cartoons, as well as ad designs and joint ads that were developed and utilized. Sometimes, by calling for designs and slogans to be submitted by consumers themselves, they were able to mutually interact with consumers. The content of advertisements included lifestyle and culture as well as politics, and they changed seasonally. Diverse methods were also used for general advertisements such as notices in trams, Ajinomoto *udon* (wheat noodle), distribution of sample bottles, promotions at elementary and girls' schools, signboards, ad balloons, theaters, radio commercials, decoration and design competitions, cooking classes, writing new family diaries, song lyrics, invitations to various trips and theatrical plays, gift events, etc. (Ajinomoto Co. 1951, 631-720). The strategy Ajinomoto chose for the increase in sales was promotions in the cooking and nutrition field, at elementary and girls' schools, signboard teams, promotions and advertisements at exhibitions, commercials during movie previews, etc.

In newspaper ads in 1918, **Jintan** was the most advertised product in *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun* with 179,360 columns, while Ajinomoto ranked 10<sup>th</sup> with 46,489 columns. In 1924, *Hosiseiyaku* ranked at the top with 2,357,310 columns and Ajinomoto ranked 7<sup>th</sup> with 788,010 columns in 30 Japanese newspapers.

Ajinomoto's catchphrases at the beginning of the enterprise included: "the invention of Dr. Ikeda," "exclusive patent in Japan, the Great Britain, the United States, and France," "the seasoning of civilization," "the latest seasoning," "ideal seasoning," and "all-purpose seasoning." In the mid-1920s, phrases such as "worldwide seasoning," "seasoning of the new era," "kitchen consultant," "kitchen necessity," "king's use at royal court," "beautiful taste, economic use, priceless treasure," "easy to borrow, safe to give," "improves all the taste of food," "good taste is the essence of food," etc. were used. From the 1920s, targeting homemakers, Ajinomoto characterized its product as

“beautiful taste, economic use, priceless treasure.” In other words, the taste, economy and nutrition of the product were emphasized. They also put prize advertisements for recipes that used Ajinomoto and ads that described seasonal dishes using Ajinomoto. Concerning design, they placed full-page cartoon advertisements from 1928. The packaging came in various bottles and cans, and they gave privileges to special agents and allowed them special sales.

Limiting the scope to advertisements in Korea, newspaper and magazine ads were under the charge of the advertisement section at the headquarters and Osaka branch. Special sales or the production of promotional goods were designed and launched by the headquarters, and the Joseon Office led promotions that targeted Koreans. Sample bottles were frequently distributed at grocery stores or sold by wandering entertainers on market days. The entertainers would play popular songs on gramophones to draw in people, and they would sell sample-size bottles for 2 *jeon* and full-size bottles for 5 or 10 *jeon* on the spot. The second most common method was the use of marching bands. As in Japan, a band with 10 or so banners would march down the streets promoting the product, usually with a big model of an Ajinomoto bottle. A “magician” from the band would gather people, promote the product and sell the bottles. A Korean employee, Yi Gan-nyeon, and an orator named Song worked professionally with the band.

The third method was the use of calendars and posters. Posters were created and used as advertisements according to particular regions and featured well-known models. In 1936, actress Mun Ye-bong<sup>10</sup> appeared on a calendar as a beautiful woman serving food. Later, posters modeling a geisha named Kim and Choe Seung-hi, a famous dancer, were produced. These posters were very popular among Koreans Ajinomoto Co. (1951, 439).

The fourth method was the use of a signboard team. Signboards were designed in various ways from 1929 with Jo Jae-gap in charge. Fifth was the use of Japanese lanterns. At the **Joseon Exhibition** in 1929, some 20 lanterns were made and set up around Gyeonghoeru pavilion where the exhibition was being held. They were then moved to spas in Dongnae and were lit every night for promotion. Photos of these lanterns were also used in newspapers. The sixth method was neon signs. A neon sign was placed on the roof of the Joseon Office along with others on the rooftop of a pharmacy on Jongno 4-ga, and at **Atsumaya** in Busan, in the grocery section of the Minakai department store.

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<sup>10</sup> In the *Company History of Ajinomoto* (1951), she is described as a *geisha*.

## *Newspaper Advertisements in Korea*

An advertisement can be analyzed by such categories as design, copy, illustration and photograph. An advertisement published in *Maeil Sinbo*, a daily newspaper, in 1915 is a good example of early advertisement. At the time, Ajinomoto was written as “味の素” using a Korean character in the middle. However, this was later changed to “味の素”, which was also used as a logo. Eleven newspapers printed Ajinomoto advertisements in Korea including *Gyeongseong Ilbo* and *Dong-a Ilbo*. Magazines such as *Donggwang*, *Jogwang*, *Yeoseong*, *Singajeong*, *Jungang* and *Samcheolli* published Ajinomoto advertisements under long-term contracts.

Although the yearly data is unclear, when Ajinomoto recorded its highest sales in 1937, it had advertisements in more than 36 newspapers. *Asahi Shimbun* and *Mainichi Shimbun* of Osaka printed the most number of Ajinomoto ads followed by *Yomiuri Shimbun* and *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun*. As for the number of advertisements in foreign newspaper companies, *Taiwan Daily* ranked 7<sup>th</sup> and *Gyeongseong Ilbo* ranked 9<sup>th</sup>, which showed that newspaper advertisements in the colonies were also important (Ajinomoto Co. 1951, 624; 1971, 343).

Until the late 1920s, most advertisements were adaptations, whereas in the 1930s, many actively reflected the reality in Korea. They used cartoons and models, and also made good use of illustrations depicting certain episodes. Some of the words for advertisements were public submissions. These advertisements showed how they chose such focuses as eating habits and gender role divisions in economic life, as well as their specific target groups, such as modern women, upper and lower classes. “New women” who represented modernity, students, children and the elderly were included in the advertisements, and modernity and the use of Ajinomoto were given equal value. These ads produced desire regardless of actual consumption, and were effective in making those who did not use Ajinomoto feel as though they were behind the times. Such effects were reinforced by calling on Koreans through advertisements.

Japanese writers who were Korea experts, Japanese who had been living in Korea for a long time, and Korean designers were in charge of designs and sketches targeting Koreans. These Korean designers, namely Sin Yeong-gyun, Ko Jae-seon and Keol Yeong-chang, were selected based on recommendations from the Joseon Office, the Osaka branch of *the Chosun Ilbo*, and *Joseon Jungang Ilbo*. Each month, they either came up with an outline, which was sent to the advertising department at the Osaka branch, or produced one upon request. The advertisement department received the outline, reviewed it and made a papier-mache mold. As they did not have Korean fonts,

they carved the copy onto an irregular plate by hand (Ajinomoto Co. 1951, 625-626).

## Colonial Legacy

### *Reemergence of the MSG Market*

Up to approximately 10 years after liberation, most industrial products either decreased in number or stopped being manufactured. Due to difficulties in securing raw materials or the lack of technicians, not only Korean-owned factories, but also factories previously owned by Japanese could not be operated properly. MSG was circulated in small quantity as smuggled goods at black markets. To be exact, Ajinomoto existed in Koreans' minds during this time as "an ambiguous desire that is good to have but since it is not there anymore nothing can be done about it."

It was only in the mid-1950s that such potential desire changed into something that could be actualized: Koreans were able to produce MSG themselves. The beginning of the history of MSG in Korea after liberation is recorded slightly differently by each company. In *Forty Years of Cheil Jedang*, it is written as follows:

When looking at the initial conditions of the production of MSG in Korea, Daeseong Industry first started producing Mimiso in 1955 followed by Donga Hwaseong (predecessor of Miwon) in 1956. Donga Hwaseong succeeded in industrializing Miwon and in a short time secured its position in the MSG market, which was being represented by Ajinomoto at the time. Afterwards until 1963 when we entered the MSG industry, small manufacturers continued to be established (Kim J. 1993, 185).

According to Im Hyeong-sun's (1988) article in Miwon's company newsletter, Miwon was born when the founder, Im Dae-hong, established the Donga Hwaseong Industry Co. in January 1956 after returning from his trip to Japan where he researched the recipe for MSG.

The actual production of MSG in Korea stayed at 70 tons in 1956. In 1963, the demand for chemical flavoring by ordinary families was very low and only some wealthy families were using it, while the majority of consumption occurred at restaurants and enterprises for processed foods. Annual consumption per person was 1/7 and 1/4 of that in Japan and Taiwan respectively, which meant that consumption had not

yet been popularized (Kim J. 1993, 186).

However, the MSG industry began to change dramatically from 1963. Actual production reached 621 tons in 1962 and soared to 1,043 tons in 1963. Products similar to Miwon, called Miwang, Ilmi, Seonmiso, Miyeong and Mipung, poured out, and excessive competition and dumping created great losses. Three major companies, namely Miwon, Sinhan Milling, and Wonhyeong Industry, and 7 to 8 small companies, such as Hanyang Industry and Jeil Mulsan, were in a fierce competition over the MSG market in 1963. What added to the complication was that the best restaurants in major cities were using Ajinomoto, smuggled from Japan. Despite complex circumstances, three major companies led annual production with 463 tons (Miwon), 216 tons (Sinhan Milling) and 154 tons (Jeil Mulsan).

The year 1963 was a time when the manufacturing method was changing from the disintegration of gluten to the fermentation of molasses, and investment in infrastructure brought about financial difficulties. In addition, due to the so-called three powder--flour, cement, and sugar--crisis, it was difficult to purchase raw materials, which caused many companies to go bankrupt or change owners. Miwang Industry Co. went through great hardship before it was merged and changed its name to Seoul Miwon Co. on December 5, 1965. By changing quickly to new techniques, and with the construction of its own factory at Banghak-dong, Miwon recorded growth that went well over the average of overall industrial growth between 1964 and 1968.

Mipung, which became Miwon's competitor, can be traced back to a medium-sized company called Wonhyeong Industry. Wonhyeong Industry began producing "Lady's Mipung" in 1957 but faced difficulties in management after switching to the fermentation method in 1963. **Jeiljedang** took over Wonhyeong at the end of 1963, changed the name to Mipung Industry Co. and began managing it as an affiliated company.

When the "modernization of the nation" was in full swing in the 1960s, the expansion of the MSG market became distinct and competition was intense. And as was the case with Japan's MSG market before the war, the problem of counterfeit or imitation products became a serious issue in post-liberation Korea. Until the mid-1960s, establishment and merger were frequent in the MSG market. After 1966 though, the MSG market was rearranged into six companies including Seoul Miwon and Miwon with "Miwon," Sinhan Milling with "Dakpyo Matnani" (Chicken Flavored Seasoning) and Mipung's "Mipung." By the 1970s, however, Miwon and Mipung had a monopoly over the market.

### *Indirect Implication*

In a market that recorded dramatic growth of 1,286 percent in 1966, 93 percent in 1967 and 60 percent in 1968, Miwon Co. and Seoul Miwon Co. occupied the top two places. Miwon, after reaching 55 percent of market share in 1967, again achieved 53 percent in 1968, thereby securing its unparalleled position in the MSG market. Where then did Miwon's competitiveness come from? The assessment at the time of Miwon's overwhelming market share was first, the technical revolution of the fermentation method, and second, the product power it possessed. I believe that within this "product power" operates a certain symbolic power that cannot be denied in the history of MSG. As mentioned earlier, it is important to focus on the product name Miwon.

People often say that Miwon succeeded "because of its name." However, there were endless controversies in deciding the trademark combined with letter of Miwon and design of *sinseollo* (a traditional Korean eating tool). Those who wanted to use Chinese characters favored Misegye (味世界: World of Taste), Miwon (味源: Origin of Taste) and Miwang (味王: King of Taste), while those who preferred Korean suggested Matdopgi (Flavor Helper), Matjeil (Best Flavor) and Saemat (New Taste). However, none of them seemed good enough. Then it was suggested that we use 味元 (Miwon) instead of 味源 (Miwon). Although the two meanings, origin or best of taste, were essentially the same, the former was easier to read and write as well as being better and simpler for design. However, there was an even more important reason behind this decision. Ajinomoto of Japan was deeply engrained in Koreans' mind at the time, and *Miwon's Japanese pronunciation was also Ajinomoto. Therefore, we wanted to express our will that Miwon, a product borne of our power and technique, would become the world's best seasoning, and we decided on the name. . . . In order to highlight the image of Miwon, we changed the company name to Miwon Corporation on December 31, 1962. (Im 1988; emphasis mine)*

Strictly speaking, the "therefore" emphasized above is neither grammatically natural nor logical but suggests a rather paradoxical aspect. As a potential desire, the name Miwon was the result of a naming strategy that utilized the embedded memory of Ajinomoto. Such utilization can be called indirect implication.

What is interesting about the history of Miwon is not only its name, but also the fact that its popular image and the advertising technique repeated what Ajinomoto experienced or tried during Japanese colonization. A classic example is the controversy over the main ingredient. The "snake powder crisis" Ajinomoto underwent before



liberation was reenacted in the process of intense competition during the 1960s. People's understanding and misunderstanding of Miwon was also very similar to that toward Ajinomoto in Japan, and concentrated advertisement on female students was also that of Ajinomoto.

### *Copying and Borrowing*

Although the Korean MSG market expanded greatly in the mid-1960s, Mipung was still in deficit. CJ Corporation, which entered the MSG market under the name of Mipung Industry after taking over Wonhyeong Industry's factory at Gayang-dong in 1963, finally occupied the second place in the industry in 1968 as a result of continuous growth, stepping over Sinhan Milling. However, when sales did not increase, even when production was boosted with the operation of a second factory in Gayang-dong in September 1968, it went through considerable difficulties. With aggravated deficit, existence itself became an issue. CJ Corporation (Cheil Jedang) took over Mipung and with "Mipung No. 100" began a genuine competition. This triggered a bloody drama in what was called the "eight-year MSG war." Some products, such as *Dakpyo Matnani* (Chicken Flavored Seasoning), *Miyeong* and *Ilmi*, were merged into Mipung, thus disappearing from the market. Although CJ Corporation concentrated on advertisements to infiltrate the market for domestic use by focusing on cost competition, the market share did not change much and the company remained in the red. This was because Miwon actively responded to the challenge by establishing the Miwon Sales Co. Mipung then tried to raise its market share by cooperating with Ajinomoto and importing inosinic acid. Miwon pressed charges concerning the illegality of this import, which further intensified the war on advertisement and market share. Mipung Sales Co. was established in 1969, and the struggle for the market for domestic use led to the "eight-year MSG war."

From the mid-1960s to mid-1970s, the violent competition between Miwon and Mipung unfolded in a way that revived various advertisement sales tactics invented by Ajinomoto during the colonial times. Gift giveaway events and the dispute over advertisement concerning the joint technology development with Ajinomoto all took place during this time. Miwon armed itself with the development of domestic expertise; and CJ Corporation, with the imported product. The advertisement war was also fought intensely; free gifts with purchases were representative examples of this war. With gift giveaway events such as thank-you festivals, Miwon and Mipung initiated an advertisement war of sweaters and gold rings. Between March and April 1970, Mipung

published a number of advertisements in newspapers that focused on gift giveaway events and the joint technology development with Ajinomoto. In response, Miwon filed suit “to stop actions for illegal competition.”<sup>11</sup> In 1969, CJ Corporation brought in Sinhan Milling, Hanyang Industry, and Jeil Mulsan to found Mipung Sales Co. in order to compete against Miwon. However, their market share of 43 percent in 1969 dropped to 34 percent in 1971, and the three companies were forced to stop their operation. The sales competition between Miwon and Mipung therefore progressed into a full-fledged confrontation between only two companies from 1972 onwards. The MSG market at this time in Korea can thus be described by four stages: 1) the formation of the two heads system of Miwon and Mipung; 2) the implementation of marketing strategy in earnest and the increase in consumer protection; 3) an acute awareness of the need to open up the overseas market; and 4) the settling of a 7:3 market share percentage basis.

The focus of image reconstruction that emerged in this process was nationalism and science technology. Whereas Miwon continuously used the national/anti-national dichotomy as its corporate image, Mipung tried to base its superiority on the introduction of advanced technology. Both strategies were clearly dependent on copying and borrowing. What is interesting is that an anticommunist ideology from a divided nation was deeply embedded in the history of MSG production, and Mipung in particular used this anticommunist ideology when they launched their attacks in what is called the “gift set stamps incident.”

In late September 1968, articles appeared in newspapers that Miwon had attached the stamps of enemy states on their packaging of gift sets of canned goods, and was now undergoing investigation. Miwon had color printed beautiful postal stamps of the world on their cans, an idea that was considered very timely, as collecting stamps was very popular at the time. However, among the printed stamps were those from East European countries such as Romania and Hungary. Consequently, the person in charge was subpoenaed to the police agency, was interrogated, and later had to recall and remake the gift sets already in circulation (Im 1988).

A public law dispute began between the two companies in 1976, and in 1977, a newspaper article titled “Mipung sales of seasoning mocks consumers” was published. On April 21, 1977, *Dong-a Ilbo* summarized the competition between Miwon and

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<sup>11</sup> *Forty Years of CJ Corporation* records the social consequence of this incident as follows: “We wasted the company’s strength on something useless by causing an unanticipated misunderstanding of our company from the consumers of good will, and gave rise to anti-Japanese sentiments in parts of the society” (Kim J. 1993, 210).

Mipung as an “eight year MSG war,” and reported that CJ Corporation was launching an indiscriminate attack on Miwon with “Japanese reinforcement.”

In 1975, when Mipung produced the all-purpose seasoning, “Dasida,”<sup>12</sup> MSG moved into the era of all-purpose seasoning. At the same time, the production of MSG based on nucleic acid was carried out in earnest. Nucleic acid was first found in 1913 and was industrialized in Japan for the first time in 1962. In Korea, CJ Corporation was the first to succeed in producing nucleic acid seasoning and produced “*Aimi*” in 1977, followed by Miwon’s “*Manna*,” with which Miwon also advanced into the phase of all-purpose seasoning. Their competition thus continued as an all-purpose seasoning competition between *Dasida* and *Matna* at the beginning of the 1980s.

The difference in competition between the 1970s and 1980s is that, first, CJ Corporation moved away from names that started with “*Mi*” by introducing *Dasida* as the name of their new product, and second, their competition was subdued not by voluntary efforts but by consumer intervention. When the harmfulness of MSG was raised by the Citizens’ Alliance for Consumer Protection of Korea (CACPK) and spread throughout society, the two companies acknowledged that their advertising disputes had caused damages to both sides, and decided to restrain excessive competition.

## Conclusion

Ajinomoto was a product that symbolized modernity under Japanese colonization, and was seen as a “new and mysterious taste.” The supply area of Ajinomoto was extensive, covering East Asia and the West Coast of the United States. The factors that were commonly emphasized in Ajinomoto advertisements at the time were “taste,” “economy,” and “science.” The use of Ajinomoto was supposed to signify the modernization of dietary habits and cultural lifestyle. The fact that newspapers and magazines were important media in this process means that it was related to the formation of a modern class of readers. Furthermore, that Ajinomoto’s advertisements targeted restaurants reflect the increase in paid meals. However, it is important to point out that until the mid-1930s, Ajinomoto’s advertisements always emphasized that it was used by the royal family. In this sense, one can say that Ajinomoto’s advertisements were the result of a dual strategy that depended on both modernity and traditional authority simultaneously.

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<sup>12</sup> The name *Dasida* also demands consideration. It is a verb derived from a mimesis that expresses the quickening of appetite. However, considering that *dasi* also signifies taste in Japanese (*dashi*), choosing

Ajinomoto changed the taste of food and its palatability, as well as the desire for food and people's attitudes toward food. While its product advertisements mainly targeted city markets, Ajinomoto as a company used not only city markets, but also five-day markets in the country. In Korea, Ajinomoto established itself firmly in the cities and countryside, especially in the northwest region. In fact, although Ajinomoto was used mostly by middle class and higher and existed only as a sign that symbolized modernity to the general public, it created potential markets in the countryside and among the city's lower class. Such constructed taste and desire were profound criteria that formed the MSG market in Korea after the mid-1950s.

What was the significance of Ajinomoto in Korean society after liberation? In a word, it was dualistic contradiction. Ajinomoto still exercised great power in the underground black market in the 1950s. However, the reality was a little more complicated in the formal world. Ajinomoto was an embedded residue left in Koreans' memories from Japanese colonization, and in the postcolonial circumstances, nationalistic discourse forbade it to be openly liked or used. This can be confirmed in the tone of argument in *Dong-a Ilbo* and in people's response toward Mipung's collaboration with Ajinomoto. In the process of constructing its brand image, Miwon made appropriate use of the taste of Ajinomoto that was left in Koreans' mind, or the desire that was desired yet not realized. However, the sales competition between Miwon and Mipung systematically revived Ajinomoto's marketing strategies and turned around its methods of image use. On one hand, they copied or borrowed the past methods of brand imaging, free gifts with purchases, systematization of sales, etc., while actively using nationalistic sentiments in the reconstruction of image on the other.

In the social history of MSG in Korea, the contradiction that lies in the process of transition from Ajinomoto to Miwon is what represents the dualism of colonial modernity. Ideologically, Ajinomoto was an object to be rejected as it symbolized Japanese colonization, but in the world of taste already embedded in the body, it was maintained as an unconscious inclination and desire. As a result, in the consumption of Miwon that occupied the MSG market in Korea was an aspect of delayed realization of desire that had been produced in the past. This was what decided the aspect of competition in the MSG market during the period when the modernization project was in full swing. As long as Miwon and Mipung continued their competition within the framework Ajinomoto created, this aspect was not to be changed. This means that change to the existing structure could only occur when the competition was moved to another level. In other words, only when the MSG market advanced to the production of

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| this term could also have been the result of a dual linguistic use strategy.

all-purpose seasoning after the mid-1970s, and only when the names moved away from the use of “*mi*” and became newly imaginative, could such an arena where historical legacies of the past were in operation be restricted or disappear.

Why then, was the contradiction between ideological negation of and unconscious affinity to changes that occurred under Japanese rule not recognized so much? This reflects, as Leo Ching suggested, the lack of a postcolonization process found in former Japanese colonies including Korea.<sup>13</sup> According to Ching, it was not the unique quality of the Japanese Empire but the sudden and simple collapse of the empire and the new world order that was formed after World War II that stopped and delayed the exploration and inquiry into the experiences of Japanese colonization. The modernization project under the divided system between the two Koreas helped adjust the dealing of colonial legacy to the level of citizen mobilization, but not to the point where in-depth and internal question of postcolonization could be examined.

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<sup>13</sup> Ching (2001, 20). He points out that whereas the relationship between France and Algeria and Britain and India, and their processes of postcolonization, are included in the theoretical origins of postcolonialism, Japanese colonization and the postcolonization of Korea or Taiwan are considered only within regional studies of northeast Asia.

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## GLOSSARY

- Ajinomoto (J.) 味の素  
 Akahata (J.) 赤旗  
 Asahi-Aji (J.) 旭味  
 Dasida 다시다  
 Hosiseiyaku (J.) 星製藥  
 Ilmi 一味  
 jeon 錢  
 Jintan (J.) 仁丹  
 Matdopgi 맛돕기  
 Matjeil 맛제일  
 Matna 맛나  
 Mimiso 美味素  
 Mipung 味豊  
 Misegye 味世界  
 Misei (J.) 味精  
 Miwang 味王  
 Miwon 味元  
 Miwon 味源  
 Miyeong 味榮  
 moto (J.) 元  
 Saemat 새맛  
 Seonmiso 仙味素  
 sinseollo 神仙爐  
 Weihua (Ch.) 味華