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“Grow Stars with Z-POP DREAM: Idols, Transnationalism, and the Rhetoric of Technology”

Abstract. Z-POP DREAM is a business project inspired by K-pop’s global success, founded by a pan-Asian team of entrepreneurs and blockchain technology specialists. Treating K-pop as a business model, Z-POP DREAM takes transnationalism seriously; its “Z-pop” idols (two groups have so far come out of their effort, tentatively named “Z-boys” and “Z-girls”) hail from Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, India, and the Philippines; the fan consumer base it seeks to cater to are also pan-Asian, with the locus of its corporate presence spread out in the Southeast Asia. Z-POP DREAM boasts to have invented a new business ecosystem for creating, circulating and consuming global pop idols, bringing together the fan-voting system (made famous by M.net’s “Produce 101” television series) and cryptocurrency. The project also prides on transparency as its core technological innovation, arguing how its use of blockchain allows fans to “confirm whether their voting power has been exercised correctly and their votes indeed have had effect” (<http://z-popdream.io>). My talk explores this venture and its embedded rhetoric of utopian techno-transnationalism, democratic capitalism, and the political economy of the idol.

So-Rim Lee is the 2019-20 Moon Family Postdoctoral Fellow in Korean Studies at the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania. So-Rim’s research investigates the intersections of embodiment, everyday performance, and visual culture in contemporary Korea. Her doctoral dissertation, *Performing the Self: Cosmetic Surgery and the Political Economy of Beauty in Korea*, explores how cosmetic surgery became a mode of performing the self and subjectivity in South Korea post-1997 Asian Financial Crisis.