The Han’gŭl Crisis and Language Standardization: Clashing Orthographic Identities and the Politics of Cultural Construction

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The first attempt at spelling reform in South Korea took place in the early 1950s as the Korean War (1950–53) drew to a close. The subsequent Han’gŭl Crisis is often interpreted as an example of the authoritarianism of President Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭngman), yet the event also represents a clash of generations between the supporters of the Unified Orthography of 1933 and the previous spelling standard. During the han’gŭl simplification debates, the legacies of Chu Sigyŏng (1876–1914) and Pak Súngbin (1880–1943) reemerged as their followers continued a contentious linguistic debate that stretched back into the colonial period. The event ended as a victory for the Unified Orthography of 1933, but several ambiguous questions remain for further investigation. Ultimately, behind the claims of “scientific rationalism” in the current han’gŭl spelling are the forgotten memories of linguistic activism and the difficulties in uniting divergent linguistic practices in post-Liberation Korean society.