

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

*Michael Kim*

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 Sŭngbin (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.