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Korea has the highest number of deaths among middle-aged white-collar men (induced by overwork and years of unceasing work demands). These men are symbols (both as heroes and victims) of Korea's rapid development, and the attention accorded them is a public acknowledgment of their sacrifices in South Korea's economic success. Lee shows that women and blue-collar men have made quite substantial contributions to Korea's success and suffer equally high rates of illness but have been sidelined by the South Korean narrative of the national body.

Seungsook Moon examines the structures of male hegemony in contemporary South Korea (namely, compulsory military service and the state’s designation of men as household heads) as the basis of Korean masculinity. Military service furnishes men with a “privileged” position because they are the only ones entitled to “fight for the nation to their deaths” (p. 102). When job openings or other opportunities arise, it is veterans who have priority. Roger Janelli and Dawnhee Yim examine how male privilege is perpetuated within Korean corporate recruitment, job assignments, rewards, and social activities in one of Korea’s four largest chaebol. It is most troubling that women are recruited and retired from the company before they are ever allowed to compete with, much less challenge, male recruits. And even when corporate policy seeks to promote gender harmony, male employees find ways to subvert it.

Using a rich corpus of film, television drama, and literature as the basis of her analysis, So-hee Lee exposes recent challenges to the Korean double standard (which enables Korean men—but not women—to have extramarital affairs while maintaining their status as husbands and fathers). Married Korean women are clearly having affairs, and this is ever apparent in the media—albeit accompanied by a commensurate patriarchal backlash. However, the extent to which this newly gained sexual independence signals true independence for Korean women remains to be seen.

Cho Hyejoang presents a most compelling account of the evolution of Korean womanhood over the last three generations. These generations consist of “motherly grandmothers,” who are self-sacrificing and undemanding and have little personal identity; “aggressive mothers,” who are empowered by monopolizing child rearing, emotional resources, and services to husbands; and daughters who reject their mother’s lives and demand that their own “private feelings” be satisfied by their heterosexual partners. She attributes these differences to political and sociocultural changes over the last eighty years.

All of the authors lead us to the troubling conclusion that, as each new generation of women vows not to be like their mothers, the generation gap (and sense of unity) widens among Korean women. Under Construction provides an engaging examination of both progress (such as changes in family law and women’s employment rights) and new troubles (such as the large number of virtually absentee fathers, teens engaged in unprotected sex, and the growing tension between different generations). In so doing, it puts Korean scholarship on gender, class, and consumption on even footing with that of China and Japan. It is highly recommended for all students and scholars in these fields, as well as anyone interested in contemporary Korea.

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The Korean Alphabet: Its History and Structure. Edited by Young-Key Kim-Renaud. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997. xii, 317 pp. $68.00 (cloth); $39.85 (paper).

Perhaps the most noteworthy product of Korean civilization, han’gul is a source of pride among Koreans: not only does it embody a sense of national uniqueness, but it is also a valuable tool against illiteracy. While this great cultural achievement has merited considerable attention in Korea, detailed English-language accounts of han’gul are scarce. Most prominent among this small body of work is Gari Ledyard’s 1966 dissertation, “The Korean Language Reform of 1446,” since republished (with modest revisions) in 1998. Two recent volumes about the Korean script are now looking to claim space alongside Ledyard’s text: The Korean Alphabet of 1446, by Sek Yen Kim-Cho, and The Korean Alphabet, edited by Young-Key Kim-Renaud. Although both books seek to further our understanding of what makes han’gul unique, only Kim-Renaud’s edition merits the attention of serious Korean language scholars; Kim-Cho’s contribution, in contrast, falls short of what one would expect of a sound academic inquiry.

Kim-Cho’s primary objective is to settle disputes about the origins of han’gul by “completely justify[ing]” the “physiological-phonological rationale” (p. 16) underlying its creation by King Sejong. Kim-Cho pursues this ambitious goal by two means: text analysis and phonetic experimentation. In chapter 1, she reexamines the original texts that promulgated and explicated the orthography: the Hunmin Ch‘ong’um and Hwunmin Ch‘ong’um Haerye. In chapter 2, she supplies “evidence in support of the design principle of the script through cineradiographic sampling” taken from a single speaker of contemporary Korean (p. 21). In chapter 3, she presents new annotated translations of the two primary source documents. In chapter 4, Kim-Cho extrapolates beyond the Korean context by arguing that an extended version of han’gul (orthophonic alphabet) may prove humanity’s best hope for reducing global illiteracy; saving endangered languages; and streamlining computer-mediated communication, thereby fostering globalization. Underlying her prose is a constant (if not persistent) appeal to the superiority of her (putatively) scientific approach, an appeal that often comes across as a tad smug: “One can surmise that [Ledyard’s] failure to pursue [speech-organ] theory in depth, as had other origin-searchers before him, is attributable to his treatment of the subject from the perspective of a historian or philologist, rather than as a phonetic scientist” (p. 16). Given such efforts to emphasize the need for more scientific methods in the study of han’gul, it is ironic that Kim-Cho’s account ultimately proves unscientific.

The most troubling characteristic of the text is the extent to which the author indulges in unsupported generalizations. For example, one finds claims such as “[m]any American and European scholars agree on the point that the phonetic principles underlying the design of Ch‘ong’um qualify it as the best instrument for human efforts against illiteracy” (p. 83). Unfortunately, the identity of these scholars is not revealed. At the bottom of the same page, one reads, “without a writing system, language cannot fully function as the vehicle of culture.” Such a contentious claim demands backing. None exists.

The text is likewise unsuccessful in its support of linguistic phenomena, be they matters of fact or argument. Central to Kim-Cho’s thesis is the well-established idea that the graphic shape of each series of consonants has transparent phonetic correlates, which she asserts is “scientifically demonstrated through cineradiographic
visualization of the pertaining data" (p. 192). Yet, the arguments made for each place of articulation are not consistent. Velars and linguals, for example, take their basic orthographic forms from the shape of the tongue in the oral cavity. The graphs associated with laryngeals and incisors, on the other hand, represent not the active articulator but, rather, the articulation's location. Similar inconsistent arguments are maintained for the relationship among the manner/phonation variants of the five basic graphemes. Among these is Kim-Cho's procrustean attempt to justify the grouping of the velar nasal grapheme (round and laryngeal shaped) with those of the other velars, which are angled to represent the tongue dorsum making contact with the soft palate. The multiple cineradiographic tracings that she provides throughout chapter 2 notwithstanding, the explanations advanced leave the reader unsatisfied, if not outright perplexed. By molding her facts in the service of extolling the genius of King Sejong, Kim-Cho seeks to preempt any claim that han'gul might be less than perfect. Yet such is hardly the case. As Ledyard points out in the volume edited by Kim-Renaud (p. 61), the authors of the Haerye found it necessary (if not difficult) to justify several of the more oblique relationships between graph and articulation, an indication that orthography was never a completely transparent graphic rendering of phonetic events. In the end, Kim-Cho betrays the source documents by attempting to make the facts fit the framework.

Further weakening the text are infelicities of style and editing, including multiple redundancies: core concepts appear time and again, either in the cloak of minimally different prose or verbatim. Other inconsistencies include the unsystematic use of both footnotes and endnotes, some of which are "misplaced" (e.g., the footnote labeled “1” on p. 54 actually appears at the bottom of p. 59), frequent typographical errors, and lapses in rhetorical style. Such weak editorial control proves more than distracting: it seriously undermines the reader's confidence.

For those seeking a more substantive discussion about Korean orthography, the essays in The Korean Alphabet should prove satisfying. Written by some of the most recognized leaders in Korean linguistics, each of the book's core chapters (2 through 11) addresses a different facet of han'gul's richness, including the character of its inventor (chap. 2, Ki-Moon Lee), its relation to other orthographic and linguistic systems (chap. 3, Ledyard, and chap. 6, Sinhang Kang), its graphemic representation (chap. 4, Pyong-Hi Ahn, and chap. 5, Sang-Oak Lee), and its underlying phonological structure (chap. 8, Chin W. Kim, and chap. 9, Kim-Renaud). In each case, the authors skillfully address questions that are inherently interesting by constructing arguments grounded in topically appropriate facts or theories. Relevant notes and citations abound.

Three chapters present material that came across as particularly refreshing. In chapter 7, S. Robert Ramsey situates the creation of han'gul in the context of the development of the language, both descriptively and theoretically. He notes, for example, that several of the structural characteristics of mid-fifteenth-century Korean (e.g., word-initial consonant clusters) were encoded in the new orthography but "were short-lived" (p. 131). He then goes on to document the relationship between orthographic development and language change (giving particular emphasis to the technique of internal reconstruction), arguing that his analysis supports a "punctuated model of language change" (p. 142). In chapter 11, Ross King presents historical evidence of two heretofore obscure (if not unknown) language reform attempts in Korean-language communities located in Russia. The first involves a failed pre-Soviet movement to linearize the positioning of Korean text on the page (karo p'urō ssugi). The second addresses various Soviet-era attempts to establish an official orthography,
with an eye toward serving the USSR’s broader goal of eradicating local-language illiteracy. In a painstakingly detailed analysis of both government-produced readers and subsequent intellectual debate, King catalogues the ways in which Soviet-backed reformers sought to revise and regularize han’gŭl. Finally, in chapter 10, Ho-min Sohn explains both the source and substance of orthographic discrepancies between the two Koreas. Citing sources from both pre- and postdivision Korean history, Sohn argues that observed discrepancies are not just a matter of sociopolitical ideology but are also representative of “linguistically intriguing” issues for which both sides have arrived at different solutions. Eventual national unification, he adds, will require informed orthographic compromise.

The main text closes with a commentary, in which Samuel E. Martin offers his insights on each essay and poses many thought-provoking questions. Following Martin’s commentary are four appendices and a detailed index. Of the appendices, most noteworthy is a brief yet marvelously clear description of the Korean alphabet, well suited for students enrolled in introductory courses about Korean language and culture.

Both The Korean Alphabet of 1446 and The Korean Alphabet seek to further our appreciation of the uniqueness of han’gŭl and, by extension, pay tribute to the genius of its creator. The approaches taken, however, yield vastly different effects. In the former, Kim-Cho’s somewhat fawning and contorted attempts to capture the putative phonetic precision of han’gŭl fall flat; one might imagine that the Great King himself would not only balk at the notion that his system was so utterly perfect but also question the methodology employed to arrive at such a conclusion. In the latter case, however, Kim-Renaud’s efforts to organize a chorus of informed intellectual voices contribute much to the discussion regarding the richness and complexities of han’gŭl’s history and structure. It will surely be cited frequently in future research.

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Historians have been very busy during recent years revising previous judgments about the Korean War in response to the release of selected Soviet documents. This third volume of South Korea’s official history of the conflict will not come close to having the same interpretive impact. The Korea Institute of Military History wrote this trilogy to provide a more accessible replacement for the eleven-volume chronicle that the War History Compilation Committee of the Ministry of National Defense for the Republic of Korea (ROK) prepared over a ten-year span starting in 1967. Respected military historian Allan R. Millett, in his introduction, identifies the main value of this account when he describes it as “essentially the combat history of the South Korean army in the last two years of the war, with some mention of the air force, navy, and marine corps” (p. x). There is also coverage of events at the truce talks, first at Kaesong and later Panmunjom, but this narrative summary repeats an outdated traditional description on the negotiations. Condemning North Korea for malevolence and duplicity throughout, the authors also assert that Soviet leader Josef Stalin “not only masterminded the plan to attack South Korea, coached the war, but also played a primary role in the cease-fire negotiations” (pp. 49–50).