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Han'gŭl Orthography in Pre-Colonial Korea

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2011

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Pamela Haley, and to my other half, Alexis Delgado. Their unquestionable support and love made everything possible.

I would like to thank Professor Robert Oppenheim. It has been one of my greatest privileges to work with Dr. Oppenheim, and I will always be grateful for the opportunities that he worked so hard to make available for me.

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This thesis will explore in detail how orthographic efforts to consider Han'gŭl, the Korean vernacular alphabet, in the realm of sensuous perception distinguished the Korean script from mere written orality and made it into an autonomous object fit for nationalist appreciation.

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Introduction

It is of no surprise that Korea's native alphabet, Han'gŭl, assumed a symbolic relationship with nationalism during a period when nationhood and national culture started to become immediately meaningful (1876 to 1910).¹ The story of Han'gŭl in modern times is usually replete with nationalist sentiment, thereby explaining its current popular usage as contingent on the formation of a nation-state. Han'gŭl was, after all, the vernacular script, and therefore it represented an indigenous culture in response to foreign influences. To the effect of imposing national meanings associated with a particular nation, it has been argued that Han'gŭl was “a cathartic elimination of Chinese cultural forms from the peninsula” and thus it sought only to establish cultural purity by “decentering China” and forging new relationships between national culture and sovereignty.² Writing and politics are never exclusive from one another, but the glaring difficulty of using Chinese characters in Korea created an unbridgeable chasm between the elite and non-elite; this was essentially a divide between those who can read and write in the characters and those who were illiterate, or else stuck writing in the alphabet. For centuries, the Korean court had maintained that the only proper path to knowledge was through the exclusive use of *hanmun*, a fossilized set of characters in Literary Chinese, although this eventually went on to encompass another set of characters called *hanja*, which were made to represent Korean pronunciations.

To understand the value of *hanmun* we must bracket the perception of reading and writing in terms of everyday practicality, since it would be a glaring overstatement to think that this was a concern in Korea prior to the late nineteenth century. Chinese characters prelude Korea's Sino-centric civilization, in some sense, they exist before the social body, and was the element around which the social body could be constituted. To

¹ Korean words are transcribed in McCune–Reischauer Romanization. For well-known titles, locations, or names, a more commonplace Romanization may be used. For purposes of consistency, the word “Han'gŭl”

² Schmid, Andre. *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919*. (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 2002.), 62.

adopt Chinese characters was to enter into a social contract. Once one enters this social relation, they cease to be a savage. Han'gŭl, on the other hand, is barbarous — “It is not right to introduce phonetic letters, discarding the ideograms, to discard Chinese characters is to return to a state of barbarism.”³ On the other hand, Han'gŭl made it obvious that the privileges of the Korean nobility and their exclusive knowledge of the Chinese character that placed them against the common people was granted to them in some obscure way. Han'gŭl, unlike Chinese characters, does not emerge from an unknown past to which society already belonged; it is bound up within peninsular history and has the potential to articulate itself by producing a higher level of understanding, cooperation, and equilibrium, all while making the nobility look like an artificial creation themselves. By promoting the mass acquisition of Han'gŭl while simultaneously presenting it as a socially equalizing force, the vernacular script gained prestige and obscured the arbitrary rule of the elite literati.

When the newspaper *Tongnip Sinmun* “The Independent” (1896) came off the press without one Chinese character on it, Yu Cho Young-mee exclaims that there was “a reaction to (and radical departure from) the long-held tradition of using, almost exclusively, the Chinese script for official literary purposes during the Chosen period and in earlier times.”⁴ In this way, the iconic relationship Han'gŭl had with modernity was given to it by substitution, and once again it was valued in terms of not being *hanmun*, since neither newspapers nor literature owe their existence to the vernacular. In fact, in the case of the former, it was Japan's own Fukuzawa Yukichi who was “instrumental in the founding of Korea's first modern newspaper, the *Hansong Sunbo* (Seoul Trimonthly) in October, 1883”, a newspaper that had intended to use the mixed-script, but ultimately was printed in Chinese characters only.⁵ Dr. In K. Hwang argues that Fukuzawa enlisted

³ Letter to King Sejong in 1444 from a group of Confucian scholars in the royal court. Korean National Commission for UNESCO (compiled). *UNESCO Korean Survey*. Seoul: Dong-a Publishing Co., 1960.

⁴ Cho, Young-mee Yu. “Diglossia in Korean Language and Literature: A Historical Perspective.” *East Asia: An International Quarterly* 20:1 (Spring 2002), 6.

⁵ Hwang, In K.. *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*. (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1978), 103.

Japanese technicians in the “typography, printing, and casting” of Han’gŭl characters (presumably with each type piece having one full syllable on it), and then recruited Keino graduate Ushiba Takuzo to found a newspaper with the purpose of spreading Western knowledge, somewhat paradoxically, to the glory of Japan’s national power. Ultimately Ushiba failed, citing that he “had to abandon the idea of using the Hangeul-Chinese, mixed-writing style in the paper *because no one in the ruling class would be interested in reading it.*”⁶ As an aside, Fukuzawa had also advised the use of printed illustrations “so that it would appear fresh and impressive to the Koreans.”⁷ In any case, the distribution of an all-Han’gŭl newspaper, argues Yu Cho, was sufficient to claim Han’gŭl’s modern arrival. But all that had really changed was the political atmosphere, since Han’gŭl was still being debated on phenomenal terms at the level of the signifier.

However, this popular interpretation assumes that the vernacular script was only held in abeyance until the wellspring of modern nationalism could articulate and express the values that are supposedly inherent to it, which is tantamount to saying that Han’gŭl, one of Korea’s most treasured cultural resources, owes its current elevated status to the imposition of foreign ideology and Western international relations. Indeed, it was Japan’s slow encroachment towards Korea that came in direct opposition to the hegemony of Sino-centric knowledge on the peninsula, leading to two successful wars against Tsarist Russia and Qing China. Eventually, Japanese colonialism de-centered Chinese characters through the imposition of bourgeois ideology and Western international law, which put the modern nation-state as a locus of sovereignty that mediates human relations over an equivalent ‘homogeneous space’ marked off by political borders. The new order demanded by capitalist modernity transcended Korea’s social order without annihilating it, because it too was just another abstract and ideological force imposed from the top-down. The nobility’s claim to privilege was then scrutinized not against philosophically conceived standards, but against their adequacy in serving the purposes for which those in power want and need to use them. So when the Japanese colonial government oversaw

⁶ Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 105. (Italics added).

⁷ Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 107.

advancements in government and education, it was a part of its overall strategy to produce subjects capable of providing labor in the new industrialized commercial order.

This will hardly do, for it implies the evacuation of all agency on part of the Korean reformers. At this point we must look at that which is residual to pre-colonial nationalist thought, so that rather than recursively locating Han'gŭl's significance in externally imposed systems of political and social doctrine, we may instead turn to the changing structures of emotional feeling, intuition, and perception that orthographic reform gave to the script. Within the discourse of orthography, the rationalized and systematic structure of Han'gŭl bespoke modernity. Those orthographic features of Han'gŭl that are descriptive of modernity were made apparent by the pre-colonial situation and nationalist reaction to it. But Han'gŭl was furthermore made to exhibit attributes that were not present in the inherent structure of its form; notions of its practicality and cultural signification, while similarly describable in the conventional terms of modernity, do not define its internal constitution, rather they rely purely on nationalist discourse to articulate meanings that lay exterior to Han'gŭl itself. Therefore, the conditions necessary for the modern appearance of Han'gŭl's internal structure were also responsible for its re-appropriation into ideologically foreign systems of meaning.

The degree to which the historical situation of pre-colonial Korea affected the use of Han'gŭl is not something that can be determined by assertion, but needs to be tested by locating in the realms of historical particularity and contingency something of the specialness of its form. The orthographic effort was in response to the noticeable interplay between Han'gŭl's practicality and its functional design. For it was within the play of its structure that the emergence of another reason was possible. And like any great achievement, the form of Han'gŭl is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture. By calling attention to how Han'gŭl's form can mediate the meanings that surround it, we may grasp more sensitively the consequences of its changing social presence. Remaining self-conscious of the separation between historical events in Han'gŭl's form and the historical events in its content keeps us alert to the question of how exactly Han'gŭl works, or does not work as evidence that may

comment on or reflect influences of culture. This retains a firm sense of written language as a distinct activity, even as it participates in a culture-wide system of signs and thus always implicated in other discourses. The distinctive nature of Han'gŭl as a vernacular script is an indispensable aspect that serves to draw our attention to the distinctions between the aesthetic and instrumental functions of written language. When the value of Han'gŭl is subordinated to some other value-system — usually religious or political or moral — we leave the realms that are natural to its form.

Since Han'gŭl's creation there have been two dominant types of orthography, one centered on the effectiveness of reading and one centered on the effectiveness of writing. This point of contention arises from certain sound adjustments that are carried out in the pronunciation of spoken Korean. The sound of a word can be modified depending on the phonetic nature of neighboring words, so that the same word can sometimes be pronounced in different ways, depending on whether it is followed by a consonant-initial or vowel-initial syllable. If words are constantly written in their original abstract form without regard to such changes in pronunciation then it is considered a morphophonemic orthography. If the underlying base of a word changes in accord with how it would be pronounced then it is a purely phonetic orthography.

The original morphophonemic orthography was only used twice before being replaced, and both instances were under the command of its inventor, the scholar King Sejong. After that the script fell into complete disuse for several centuries until nationalists of the reform era recognized the modern appropriateness of King Sejong's orthography. The change in orthography thus represented a different concept of writing, and reflected a particular way of thinking in Chosŏn society that saw the letters as either mere notational devices to aid in the pronunciation of Literary Chinese, or as a rather clumsy one-to-one communicative tool for court women and children devoid of classical training. Moreover, because this laissez-faire writer-friendly orthography basically gave free reign to the transcription functions of Han'gŭl, there was no need felt to dignify it with norms or standards that would be capable of promoting or sustaining effective

widespread use.⁸ And this has led to what we will call ‘orthographic sabotage’: the indifference and contempt that the elite classes felt toward Han’gŭl were undoubtedly an important factor in the several centuries of chaos and disarray that Han’gŭl writing habits fell into. This unfortunate situation was a result of how a script like Han’gŭl allows one to just record speech idiosyncratically the way it is pronounced and without regard to an orthography, and yet still manage to express meaning in a precise manner. Presented as such, the script took on a series of pejorative names — *Eonmun* (“vernacular or vulgar script”), *Achimgŭl* (“writing you can learn within a morning”), *Amgŭl* (“women’s script”), and *Ahaegŭl* (“children’s script”), to name a few.

What at first seems like banal changes in spelling rules will be shown to have long lasting effects even in those spheres of everyday life that are at a total remove from the presence of written language. Han’gŭl, then, may be said to indicate two different objects. On one hand there is a Han’gŭl systematically formed by nationalist discourse and meant to present itself as an object of cultural admiration, and on the other an orthographically systematic Han’gŭl whose form bespeaks modernity in its generative structure. A history of the first object is therefore a history of Korean nationalism in particular and the discourse of modernity in general. The theoretical detour of cultural nationalism re-imagined Han’gŭl as just another elaboration of their ideological goals. They extrapolated the universally recognizable features of Han’gŭl, namely its phonetic basis and native origin, to construct the kind of ideological solidarity required by Western international norms. The latter object existed prior to nationalism. Even if the notions of modernity that pre-colonial (cultural) nationalism had as its background made the appearance of Han’gŭl’s modern form possible, this second object of Han’gŭl was nonetheless autonomous from the given reality. Nationalist orthography encountered Han’gŭl as a unique object to be reflected on, perfected, and taught, and in doing so the very form of Han’gŭl could give rise to a certain community of feeling linked by shared cognitive and aesthetic capacities. Han’gŭl thus came to constitute a certain mode of

⁸ Kim, Jeongsu. *The History and Future of Hangeul: Korea's Indigenous Script*. Trans. Ross King. (Kent, CT: Global Oriental, 2005), 56.

knowledge that late nineteenth century Koreans and non-Koreans privileged for reasons both exterior and interior to it.

The dual concept of Han'gŭl as two different objects is not productive for historical analysis. Cultural and orthographic nationalists encountered, worked with, and promoted the same object; therefore we must recognize Han'gŭl in its singularity. This will hopefully illustrate how the unique features of Han'gŭl's form allowed it to become an aesthetic object, and how the content given to Han'gŭl was that of an acculturated class entitling itself to speak for the national collective. During the 1890s reformers began to use Han'gŭl in their anti-colonial propaganda. Greater literacy in the vernacular script was one reason, but the novelty of its use in printed material was also an explicit political statement against the elite's exclusive use of Chinese characters. However, rather than attributing Han'gŭl's national identity to the exclusion of Chinese culture, which, again, would initiate the script as an approximation of some different identity, we should see it as the site where subject-hood emerges from self-realization. Its autonomous status prior to the assumption of nationalist positions precedes and exceeds the moral approximations enacted by political and cultural discourse. The form of Han'gŭl becomes the origin of nationalist subjectivity, not its approximation.

To conclude, Han'gŭl is often interpreted in two ways: (1) as a manifestation of Korean national consciousness and a declaration of cultural independence from China, and (2) as an efficient medium of attaining enlightenment knowledge against the difficult and burdensome Chinese character (*hanja*). But the first interpretation is a historical result of the *munmyong kaehwa* ("civilization and enlightenment") program that started to gain strength in the early 1880s as Koreans sought to replicate the success Japan was enjoying after its own Western modernization campaign. As for the second, it is not inconceivable that if Han'gŭl failed at first from being promoted as a practical writing system, then denouncing *hanja* for its ineffable characters would be no less productive.

For Korean reformers, Han'gŭl laid claim to the right to nationhood, not as a superior means of attaining knowledge or disseminating information, and not simply because it can be arbitrarily re-conceptualized as part of a national history, but rather as

an undeniable expression of cultural and intellectual autonomy, the chief criterion for sovereignty. As an object of aesthetic appreciation, Han'gŭl contains the richness and wealth of human creative capacities. This is how it came to represent a historical shift in the Korean consciousness, one in which the script, once a bearer of content made available to the masses, become something else all-together. When the use-value of Han'gŭl became suspended after almost five centuries of abeyance, it re-emerged as an offering from the past where what matters most is not the content, which was proven superfluous in its accessibility, but the link established between the script and its receiver. As an object of sensuous appreciation, Han'gŭl must not be a purely instrumental means of communication, despite our commonsense notion of it.

Borrowings. Glossograms and Phonograms.

The writing systems in Korea prior to the invention of the vernacular alphabet, and even for centuries after its creation, revolved around two distinct ways of using and understanding Chinese characters. The first method used the characters as semantic glosses, whereby readers would look at the graph and silently associate its purely visual representation of meaning to an equivalent Korean word in their head, using what was called a *hun* 'explanation' reading.⁹ Transcription involved using characters as glossograms, whereby characters would be selected by a 'gloss' of the meanings associated to them in classical Literary Chinese.¹⁰ This fossilized the characters' historical meaning and completely ignored its pronunciation. Ramsey explains that this content-only method of transcription is similar to the English use of the Roman numeral III, which is pronounced by what it represents, the word three.¹¹ This mute form of the Chinese character signified meaning without referring to sound. If a character retained its original meaning, the semantic equivalent of how it was understood in China at one point in time, then it could be used to represent indigenous Korean words without any recourse to how it was pronounced. "Hun associations linking Chinese characters with native words [...]" notes Lee Ki-moon, "are still used today."¹² Although, in Korea, "Chinese characters were (and are) not read in the same way they were (and are) in Chinese."¹³ These characters refer to Literary Chinese, or what is sometimes called Classical Chinese writing, and they are known today as *hanmun*. *Hanmun* existed only as a written language; any understanding of Chinese in its spoken form was impossible through it alone (although one reason for the creation of Han'gŭl as a notational tool was meant to rectify this divergence).

⁹ Lee, Ki-moon, and Robert S. Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*. (Cambridge: UP, 2011), 62.

¹⁰ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*. (Albany: State University of New York, 2000), 51.

¹¹ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 47.

¹² Lee, Ki-moon, and Robert S. Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 62.

¹³ Song, Jae Jung. *The Korean Language: Structure, Use and Context*. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 47.

By contrast, the second type of Chinese characters were based on Korean approximations of the characters' Chinese sounds, and employed as phonograms. Used solely for their sound values, these characters transcribed Korean vernacular words and grammatical particles. Glossograms, the characters of Literary Chinese that corresponded to Korean morphemes, were integrated into Korean syntax by phonograms that acted as grammatical markers by producing certain sounds that were equivalent to how Korean was spoken. As phonograms, Chinese characters only represented sounds, and in such cases they had nothing to do with the literary meaning of the word being transcribed. Most phonograms represented a syllable since their sound values were close to that of the indicated Korean word or particle. Some characters operated like letters in an alphabet, these non-syllabic phonograms were used to "indicate the sounds of a syllable-final consonant, and they usually occurred together with a meaning indicator, a gloss (a *hun* reading) for the word."¹⁴ The addition of a non-syllabic phonogram made it clear as to exactly what Korean word was meant to be understood by the preceding glossogram. Lee Ki-moon points out how "characters used as indicators of syllable-final consonants" might have led to Han'gŭl's consonant-vowel-consonant structure.¹⁵ "Still more suggestive is the fact that the characters used to transcribe syllable codas were the same," adds Lee, implying that if there is a connection between Han'gŭl and *hanmun* in their use of final-syllable characters, it could not have been premised on phonological considerations alone, since the older method relied on a symbolic 'indicator' to fill syllable-final positions.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the use of characters to write words phonetically was widespread in East Asia, including within China itself where the method was used to record foreign sounds, although they were never exclusively used for this purpose alone. However, "by utilizing Chinese characters to render specific phonetic values for Korean, diverging at the same time from the meaning of the original Chinese lexical item" the

¹⁴ Lee, Ki-moon, and Robert S. Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 60-61.

¹⁵ Lee, Ki-moon, and Robert S. Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 61.

¹⁶ Lee, Ki-moon, and Robert S. Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 87.

graphs came to acquire a uniquely Korean form.¹⁷ In fact, regular phonogram usage formed a kind of elementary syllabary, and we can imagine that the same habit took place in Japan also.¹⁸

Transcription was done with phonograms, *hun* readings (i.e. semantic glosses), or a mixture of the two in different combinations, so that, for example, the reading of a phonogram stayed within the general semantic range of what the character semantically meant, but rarely is the character is glossed for semantic information and then rendered phonetically.¹⁹ Semantic glosses could also become pure phonograms for sounds similar to those of the meaning of the word being glossed. It was a way to transcribe any syllable pronounced with that derived sound.²⁰ For the most part, “nouns and verbs were written with characters used for their meanings and read as Korean words, while native particles and verb endings were transcribed with phonograms.”²¹ There were two basic modes of writing, pure *hanmun* and systems of modifying *hanmun* to suit the requirements of the Korean language, but the modification of *hanmun* took other varieties over the course of time: (1) *kugyol* used Chinese characters in fixed ways to express Korean grammatical functions; (2) *hyangch'al* had certain characters for their sound and others for their meaning to come as close as possible to Korean usage.²²

Semantic and phonetic characters had been used in conjunction with each other under a series of writing systems that began to evolve during Korea's Silla kingdom in the fifth century A.D.. At that time all written documents used Chinese characters purely for their semantic value, with no provision made for Korean grammar particles.²³ However, the applicability of any one-to-one correlation between Chinese and Korean proved to be

¹⁷ Haarmann, Harald. “The Emergence of Korean Script as a Symbol of Korean Identity.” *The Earliest Stage of Language Planning: the "First Congress" Phenomenon*. Ed. Joshua A. Fishman. (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1993), 145.

¹⁸ Lee, Ki-moon, and Robert S. Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 87.

¹⁹ Lee and Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 87.

²⁰ Lee and Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 88.

²¹ Lee and Ramsey. *A History of the Korean Language*, 63.

²² Hyun, Theresa. *Writing Women in Korea: Translation and Feminism in the Colonial Period*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2004), 3.

²³ Hannas, Wm C. *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1997), 55.

impossible due to the clearly distinct nature of how both languages operate. Chinese is an isolating language full of monosyllabic lexical items, and its application to Korean, “an agglutinative language with inflectional endings and a multisyllabic word structure,” as Haarmann points out, had “posed serious problems.”²⁴ Ho Sohn explains how in Chinese “there is one symbol per morpheme. Due to the virtual lack of grammatical affixes and nominal particles... there are no symbols to represent such grammatical concepts.”²⁵ Words may stand alone in Chinese writing and their grammatical function depends on the position they take in a sentence. In contrast, grammatical functions are inflectional and brought to the surface by suffixes in Korean. Moreover, Korean’s subject-object-verb sentence order, polysyllabic words, and irregular conjugations make it all the more unfit for the use of static, place-bound characters. “Thus, the grammatical meanings carried by a wide variety of Korean affixes and particles cannot be represented by Chinese characters”, that is, if they were only to be understood in the *hun* readings.²⁶

In response to these structural differences, a practice known as *idu* ("official readings" or "clerk readings") became dominant. This is when phonetic readings of Chinese characters emerged to accommodate Korean grammatical forms, and they were primarily intended to aid Korean readers as they moved between understandings of the silent Literary Chinese "content" words. Therefore, phonetic Sinographs were used syntactically in a system that "rearranged Chinese morphemes to fit Korean grammar and alternated between the two usages of Chinese characters according to the nature of the text."²⁷ The semantic domination of Chinese vocabulary words was thereby made slightly less awkward by the phonetic provision some characters had made for Korean grammar particles. At this point, we should note that the confusion this created acted as a social barrier for much of Korea's history, and if you have a hard time understanding the various and historically evolving interrelationships that existed between semantically meaningful

²⁴ Haarmann, Harald. “The Emergence of Korean Script as a Symbol of Korean Identity,” 145.

²⁵ Sohn, Ho. *The Korean Language*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 121.

²⁶ Sohn, Ho. *The Korean Language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 121.

²⁷ Hannas, Wm C. *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma*, 55.

Sinographs that produced a silent reading acquired from a visual/mental lexicon, and those Sinographs that supplied phonetic/syntactic signification for no purpose other than maintaining some degree of composition and grammatical order, then you have good company; the most respected linguistic scholar in Korean history, King Sejong, being one of them. David Silva explains how “a Chinese character might be read for its meaning, its sound (in either Chinese or Korean), or as a loanword. Because writers were not necessarily consistent in how they chose to map their intent onto *Hanja*, interpreting those texts proved difficult.”²⁸ The impact of Chinese characters, notes Young-mee Yu Cho, “was pervasive to the extent that Chinese replaced all indigenous proper names, contributed to more than half of the Korean lexicon with a highly abstract vocabulary, and significantly reduced the native morphological power of word-formation.”²⁹ Moreover, many of these words that the characters let into the language “never had to stand on their own phonetically.”³⁰

Already we have seen how content becomes divorced of form by the grammatical differences between two different linguistic systems. “In an effort to improve this predicament,” early scholars in Korea “devised writing systems using Chinese characters for the pronunciation and transcription of native Korean affixes, words, and sentences” that had no correspondence beyond their own imaginative correlations.³¹ And by examining both glossograms and phonograms, it is clear that the Korean literati, also known as the *yangban*, had no moral argument against the blatantly arbitrary associations being made between signifier and signified. But this solution, which rested on a community of readers who knew the rules for its use, had not only revealed how meaning may be represented in various forms, but also how meaning may be given to representation, just as long as a degree of conventional similarity was maintained.

²⁸ Silva, David J. “Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of *Han’geul* in Late 19th Century Korea.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*. 192 (2008), 59.

²⁹ Cho, Young-mee Yu. “Diglossia in Korean Language and Literature: A Historical Perspective,” 4.

³⁰ Hannas, Wm C. *Asia’s Orthographic Dilemma*, 89.

³¹ Sohn, Ho. *The Korean Language*, 124.

If signification was achieved by nothing more than a gradient of difference among signifiers, then where did the actual meaning reside? A question on the logic of language quickly became a question of meaning in its totality. It was no longer about the empty sign, its arbitrariness was resolved through social conventions, and the rules were made explicit by the disjoined nature of using Chinese characters for so long and in so many different fashions. The long process of matching those distant characters to their meanings was undeniably cumbersome and likely one of the reasons that King Sejong had raised the question of by what means could this move from sign towards signification be made more attainable.

But when this led to phonetic notation, whereby the Korean vernacular, understood as it was spoken, was visually mapped out onto phonetic signs, then suddenly the whole logic of literacy came into question. Phonological Chinese characters held the Korean language as an outlier that could be reached in steps (and only to be reached by those erudite few) once the tricks of reading Chinese characters could be understood. To a class that predicated its high status on texts, this was obviously disturbing, since ‘pure’ phonetic signs can only take their destination to be the sound of speech rather than meaning. For them, the written sign was never to be anything more than “a particular case of representation”, as had been the case with the silent glossograms.³² There was no formal mechanism in Chinese characters that produced meaning, their “content is indicated only in a representation that posits itself as such, and that which is signified resides, without residuum and without opacity, within the representation of the sign.”³³ Phonetic signs had their meaning in a more vulgar notion of functionality, since they transcribed and were read in a spoken vernacular Korean, and all they hold as their meaning was yet more spoken Korean, it was a recursive translation between two of the same kind.

³² Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 43.

³³ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 64.

The awareness of spoken Chinese “existing well apart from Literary Sinitic as a written and unsayable language” and further ensured “the Confucian tradition of attaching almost mythic importance to the written language over the imperfect transient spoken language.”³⁴ Young-mee Yu Cho explains that even though the acquisition of Literary Chinese ensured the positions of the ruling class, “very little attention was paid to spoken Chinese except for training a small group of interpreters whose status could not compare with scholar-bureaucrats.”³⁵ But “For Sejong, by contrast, sound mattered very much, with international and domestic implications” such as the “chaotic state of the pronunciation of Sinographs among Korean Confucian scholars” that would only grow worse over time since it effected the training of the future literati classes; and insofar as international relations are concerned, those “Korean literati who visited China could only have unmediated exchanges with their counterparts through writing in Literary Sinitic, in so-called ‘writing brush dialogues.’”³⁶

To continue we must first explore how even after the Chinese characters had been arbitrarily fixed onto the sound of the vernacular, the *yangban's* preoccupation with Literary Sinitic was still able to exclude the Korean alphabetic script on the basis of it being nothing more than a supplementary technology. Dubbed ‘the Confucian Paradox’ by Gregory Evon, this led to a situation that “By the time the Korean alphabetic script was invented, educated Koreans had become habituated to Literary Sinitic and the written word as sounds that could be orally articulated but which were otherwise wholly unrelated to speech as a natural, sound-based medium of communication.”³⁷ This meant that the Sinograph did not depend on difference for meaning, since it never had to enter into the natural and differential creation of meaning that communicative language has as

³⁴ Evon, Gregory N. “Chinese Contexts, Korean Realities: The Politics of Literary Genres in Late-Choson Korea.” *East Asian History* 32-33 (June 2006-December 2007): 13.

Cho, Young-mee Yu. “Diglossia in Korean Language and Literature: A Historical Perspective,” 3.

³⁵ Cho, Young-mee Yu. “Diglossia in Korean Language and Literature: A Historical Perspective,” 4.

³⁶ Evon. “Chinese contexts, Korean realities: The politics of literary genre in late-Choson,” 13, 7.

³⁷ Evon. “Chinese contexts, Korean realities: The politics of literary genre in late-Choson,” 9.

its system. By assigning sounds to Chinese characters on a one-to-one basis, the logic of representation on the whole would be maintained.

For the *yangban*, writing did not come into existence first and foremost as a technology, it was a central tenant upon which the Confucian order in Korea was founded, Chosŏn civilization was unthinkable without reading and writing, and therefore the over-extended use of Chinese characters to represent vernacular speech was not a paradox for the elite, it was just a contrivance. Unless approached from the perspective that assumes all writing has an underlining evolutionary guise that leads from “primitive picture-writing” to “alphabetic writing proper,” we must be careful to not “misrepresent non-alphabetical writing as a failure in the teleological march towards phoneticization.”³⁸

Insofar as the question of a writing system's efficiency was being inextricably associated with the maintenance of bureaucratic power and civil order, we find within the symbolic function of Chinese characters in Chosŏn Korea a reevaluation of the concept of civilization itself, along with the representative functions of language in particular. Differences in opinion about the function or purpose of writing are often about differences in how its principles appear from two different and separated perspectives. A contradiction in opinion is not the same as a contradiction that is thought to be inherent in the properties of the object itself. The modernist bias that presupposes all writing to function as technology has implicated our understanding of the language situation in Korea to such a degree that the all investigations must begin from the central question and concern for efficiency. However, as it will be shown below, if we take this question far enough and use the concept of efficiency as a starting point without recourse to writing as a technology, it can be productive yardstick from which a power unrelated to efficiency may be measured.

³⁸ Liu, Lydia. "Writing." *Critical Terms for Media Studies*. By W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 318.

A play of resemblances; the creation of Korea's vernacular script.

The origin of Han'gŭl often reads like a remarkable creation myth with King Sejong and his invention of the vernacular script at the center. Indeed, the story conveys many profound symbolic truths and establishes 'Han'gŭl' as the central framework from which a new national identity for pre-colonial Korea may be constructed. As it relates to the actual formation of a completely new alphabetic script, this story is far from being a myth. Later on we may find mythical accounts of Han'gŭl, fabulous stories about an alphabet of "mysterious providences" that arose from death, defeating a burdensome ideograph to spread enlightened knowledge and ultimately leading not to just one but two independent states. But for now our focus should remain of Han'gŭl's structure, which has been meticulously formulated from the very beginning as an artifact of the Korean language.

Phonological discriminations in Chinese linguistic theory stopped at the point when the speech syllable had been divided into smaller "initial" and "final" parts. Essentially, syllables were segmented according to both their pronunciation and a system of rules for their reconstruction, a method used in Chinese rhyme dictionaries called *fanqie* "turning and cutting."³⁹ Chinese characters may have one or two particular pronunciations that can be identified and then made to be used in a "formalized procedure for 'spelling' the sounds of characters by the method of 'turn and cut' (*panjo'l*)."⁴⁰ However, King Sejong found there to be a general economy of constituent sounds by dissociating their occurrences from the rhythmic boundaries of a speech syllable, rather than discriminating sounds as they appeared within a particular syllable, as Chinese theory had served to do. Believing the smallest elements of language were not to be found in their shortest successive segments, the briefest moments of speech, but, rather

³⁹ Ramsey, Robert. "The Invention of the Alphabet and the History of the Korean Language." *The Korean Alphabet Its History and Structure*. Ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1997.), 132.

⁴⁰ Ledyard, Gari. "The Korean Language Reform of 1446: The Origin, Background, and Early History of the Korean Alphabet." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Berkeley, 1966)., 36.

on the economy of how sounds were distributed within the language at broad, allowed King Sejong to create what is now called ‘letters,’ the atoms of verbalized speech that retain sound in separation. “This paved the way for segmental analysis,” writes Coulmas, and yet the importance of this “segmental analysis” has received little attention outside of the realm of phonology.⁴¹ Coulmas adds that King Sejong “understood that articulation... can be analyzed in terms of features that combine to form sound segments. But [Sejong] also understood that analyticity does not imply sequentially. Features that combine to form a larger unit do not necessarily occur in linear succession, but often simultaneously.”⁴²

At a time when phonological operations were defined by linearity (“turning and cutting”), it had become clear to King Sejong that in order to arrive at something like a ‘phoneme’ certain terms of contrast would have to be determined on the basis of distribution. Similar sounds would be grouped together, and if their distribution were complementary, as in one group of sounds that were all found in the same instances, then a letter would be given to the group on a whole. In other words, the most basic elements of language were to be found on the criteria of distribution, a method of investigation set in terms of regularity and generality, rather than identifying the particular linear arrangements of sounds as presented in the movement of speech. Bruce Nevin explains that “these ‘very simple elements’ are set up,’ not in any arbitrary way, but in the very process of identifying points of contrast between utterances... It is these differential elements, the contrasts, are [...] thereby given a convenient and manipulatable representation.”⁴³ The “splitting of the syllabic atom” revealed how it was possible for a multitude of consonants to encircle the inviolable presence of a vowel nucleus, which is perfectly illustrated by the stacking or grouping of letters together in syllable blocks. However, this block of letters does not simply illustrate syllable boundaries, indeed it is

⁴¹ Coulmas, Florian, S. R. Anderson, J. Bresnan, B. Comrie, W. Dressler, and C. J. Ewen. *Writing Systems an Introduction to Their Linguistic Analysis*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156.

⁴² Coulmas, Florian. *Writing Systems an Introduction to Their Linguistic Analysis*, 161-162.

⁴³ Nevin, Bruce. “Noam and Zellig.” *Chomskyan (R)evolutions*. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Company, 2010), 115-6.

difficult to determine a simple phonetic correlate that will identify syllable boundaries, instead it frames morpheme boundaries. Such a frame was only possible due to King Sejong discovering that the initial sounds of a syllable could be equated to the sounds that ended the syllable, therefore it was possible to name three distinct parts in one unit of sound.⁴⁴

According to the *Annals of King Sejong*, Han'gŭl was first invented in 1443. But it was not until 1446 that the new script was promulgated along with a document that would bear its original name, *Hunminjŏngŭm* "The Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People," which was written by King Sejong himself. This was accompanied by a longer work entitled *Hunminjŏngŭm haerye* "Explanations and Examples of the Correct Sounds for the Instruction of the People." The *Hunminjŏngŭm haerye* (henceforth *Haerye*) was a scholarly commentary that provides the linguistic and philosophical principles behind the invention of the alphabet and its usage; but a copy of this document was not even known to have existed until a private collector had found it in 1940. In any case, the *Haerye* was not written by the King, but by a group of court scholars known as the *Chiphyonjon* (Academy of Worthies). In sum, both a promulgation document and a handbook for learning the new alphabet therefore accompanied the release of Han'gŭl to the public; however, in regard to spelling procedures, there was a fundamental difference between the two documents. This came from the "Explanation of the Terminal Consonants" section of the *Hunminjŏngŭm haerye*, where two contrasting orthographic principles are examined, and the easier court devised version was chosen. According to the *Haerye*, the only consonants that may be in final-syllable position are the ones actually pronounced. This "Rule of Eight" included the letters (k, ng, t, n, p, m, s, l). As a result, shortly after its promulgation Han'gŭl "orthography gradually became phonemic

⁴⁴ Ramsey, Robert. "The Invention of the Alphabet and the History of the Korean Language." *The Korean Alphabet Its History and Structure*. Ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1997.), 132.

and phonetic,” explains Kim, “presumably because a phonemic spelling is easier to write and read than a morphemic one.”⁴⁵

Lee Ki-Moon writes that “...Sejong stuck stubbornly to his position against that of the ministers responsible for editing the Haerye (who advocated a method of orthography for the “foolish common people”)...”⁴⁶ And for a short time, texts published subsequent to the Haerye during King Sejong’s reign had ignored the Haerye’s orthographic rules. However, after only two more instances of the King’s spelling principles, the script soon fell back into the Haerye’s simpler methods, which was used for all Middle Korean translation materials and beyond. This “concession to convenience,” as Kim describes it, “whereby a simplified (phonemic) repertoire of just eight consonants could be written in syllable-final position... continued right up to the announcement of Han’gŭl Unified Orthography, in 1933.”⁴⁷ It should also be made clear that King Sejong did not intend for his script to replace the use of Chinese Characters, in fact, the letters were frequently used as notation devices to assist the continued reading of Literary Chinese. “The creators of the system hence included several signs unnecessary for writing Korean including tone marks, which were more useful for Chinese than for Korean” adds Coulmas.⁴⁸ But King Sejong did lend the script some prestige by using it in poetry, and the letters eventually opened a new avenue for Korean literature, although this was extremely limited.⁴⁹ The orthography seen in the classical poetry of *Yongbiöch’ön’ga* (1445–47; “Songs of Flying Dragons”) was similar to Sejong’s since it uses more than eight letters in the final terminal position. Notably, the document was compiled on Sejong’s command. The orthographic system seen in *Yongbiöch’ön’ga* is also found in the *Wörin chon’gang chi kok* (“Songs of the Moon’s Reflection on a Thousand Rivers”). There, examples also

⁴⁵ Kim, Chin, Samuel Elmo Martin, Ho Sohn, and Seok Choong Song. *Papers in Korean linguistics: proceedings of the Symposium on Korean Linguistics, August 18-20, 1977, University of Hawaii*. [1st ed. Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press, 1978.], 249.

⁴⁶ Lee, Ki-moon. "The Inventor of the Korean Alphabet." *The Korean Alphabet Its History and Structure*. Ed. Young-Key Kim-Renaud. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 1997.), 23.

⁴⁷ Kim, Jeongsu. *The History and Future of Hangeul: Korea's Indigenous Script*, 29.

⁴⁸ Coulmas, *Writing Systems an Introduction to Their Linguistic Analysis*, 161.

⁴⁹ Lee, Ki-moon. "The Inventor of the Korean Alphabet," 27.

exist of ‘t’ being used as terminal, something not seen in *Yongbiŏch’ŏn’ga*. This was printed with movable type, but scholars have found that many of the syllable-final positions had been effaced and replaced with new letters, suggesting that the terminal consonants were altered by King Sejong to his own standards once it was shown to him. The *Wŏrin chon`gang chi kok* was the first and last before 1933 “to represent grammatical distinctions through the use of syllable constructions.”⁵⁰

On one hand there was the “theoretical” orthography of King Sejong, and on the other hand, the “actual spoken usage” orthography of his court minister’s design. Here, it will be argued that the phonological realism of the latter orthography was a major source of Han’gŭl’s fall into centuries of official disuse, and, alternatively, that the former orthography based on the King’s attention to quintessential word shapes had allowed for Han’gŭl’s rapid late nineteenth-century ascent. Han’gŭl documents written by King Sejong followed a morphophonemic orthography, whereby “underlying forms were written as syllable units,” and the presence of a syllable-final consonant before a vowel “was not resyllabified into a syllable initial consonant” but kept as part of the preceding morpheme.⁵¹ Thus, any single consonant that may be used in the initial-syllable position may also be used in the final-syllable position.

Since King Sejong’s orthographic theory is basically the same as modern Han’gŭl orthography, it may be countered that those orthographic principles had suddenly become attractive due to the precarious situation of Korea at the time, hence ‘pre-colonial’ orthography. However, keep in mind that it took ‘a good ten years’ for the *Han’gŭl Hakhoe* [Korean Language Society] to finish their first orthographic treatise; to take on this arduous task for no other purpose than the minor addition that such a distant, purely conceptual claim could add to the overall nationalist assemblage of ‘cultural particularities’ would be extremely unlikely. Moreover, Imperial Japan had already

⁵⁰ Lee, Ki-moon. "The Inventor of the Korean Alphabet," 24.

⁵¹ Kim, Chin, Samuel Elmo Martin, Ho Sohn, and Seok Choong Song. *Papers in Korean linguistics: proceedings of the Symposium on Korean Linguistics, August 18-20, 1977, University of Hawaii*. 1st ed. (Columbia, S.C.: Hornbeam Press, 1978), 249.

advocated Han'gŭl-only usage well before the King's orthography had been analyzed and praised during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Knowing what is similar. Western missionaries and the messianic script.

One inherent problem that has been associated with Han'gŭl since its invention, and yet all too easily dismissed by Western and native reformers alike, is the predominant tendency to describe the vernacular script in terms of its almost excessive practicality. For a writing system that had taken on the prefixes- “Am” (*women's*),⁵² “Ahae” (*children's*), and “Achim” (*learn-within-a-morning*), the continuous praise for its elementary nature could only draw more attention to the degraded status Han'gŭl traditionally held. Perhaps Kang Man-gil (1977) makes this point clear when he remarks — “had [the Chosŏn court] invented a new writing system only for its national prestige, it would have invented one suitable only for intellectuals and nobility.”⁵³

Easy to learn and use on the one hand, banal and meaningless on the other, it is within the representative regime of logocentric thought that Han'gŭl's extraordinary ability to transcribe spoken language received the most lavish praise and scathing denouncements. Han'gŭl “was created to facilitate the literacy of women and men of the lower classes” but “men of the upper class looked down upon Han'gŭl as an easy, vulgar, and ‘female system of letters’” explains Choi Hyaeweol.⁵⁴ It was “the common person’s tool for writing personal letters, bills, in short ‘all areas of everyday life matters’” adds Hannas.⁵⁵ David Silva shows more of the same: “For Han'gŭl, however, the cost of ease was its social debasement. The French Fathers comment on the fact that Korean-style writing was reserved exclusively for women, making it less respectable than the Chinese-

⁵² In reality this may have been accurate since court women in pre-modern Korea most frequently used it. Nonetheless, it was an explicit derogatory remark.

⁵³ Kang, Man-gil. "The Historical Significance of the Invention of Han'gul." *Korea Journal* 17:10 (October 1977), 49.

⁵⁴ Choi, Hyaeweol. *Gender and Mission Encounters in Korea: New Women, Old Ways*. (Berkeley: University of California, 2009), 111.

⁵⁵ Hannas, Wm C. *Asia's Orthographic Dilemma*, 60.

based system. Elizabeth M. Campbell explains how ‘the native writing is despised by the men, who have a great admiration of the Chinese character.’”⁵⁶

The common explanation for Han’gŭl’s extended latent period is that a Sinocentric bureaucracy, itself centered on the study of written language, dismissed the vernacular script as too trivial for scholarly attention, too vulgar for official state use, and too easy to require any codification of its spelling practices. The common reaction to this: more simplification and more phoneticization. “While Koreans exhibited the utmost respect for Chinese characters,” explains Silva, “Western observers were far less willing to accept *hanja* as a reasonable means of written expression, particularly in light of the more readily acquired Han’gŭl. Campbell [a missionary] specifically indicts Chinese characters as a serious barrier to advancement, both spiritual and otherwise...”⁵⁷ When Derrida writes, “It is not by chance that the exclusive consideration of phonetic writing permits a response to the urgent demands of the ‘internal system’ of the language,” he is referring to the habitual praise given onto alphabetic systems, but only because they represent that prized anchor of referential stability in the West, the ‘internal system’ i.e., the true presence of speech; therefore, “The basic functional principle of phonetic writing is precisely to respect and protect the integrity of the ‘internal system’ of the language, even if in fact it does not succeed in doing so.”⁵⁸ It may be said that the opinion held by the Confucian literati in Korea was similar, although it is precisely that ‘even if in fact it does not succeed in doing so’ that caused so much anxiety; whereas the failures of representation meant the loss of a one-to-one relationship with speech for the Westerners, it could mean a collapse in the distribution of what was perceptible, and thereby how knowledge and society itself had been ordered, if representation per se was made contingent by ‘vulgar,’ phonemic writing. In Benedict Anderson’s seminal work

⁵⁶ Silva, David J. "Western Attitudes toward the Korean Language: An Overview of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Mission Literature." *Korean Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003), 276-7.

⁵⁷ Silva, David J. "Western Attitudes toward the Korean Language: An Overview of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Mission Literature." *Korean Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003), 276.

⁵⁸ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), 33-34.

Imagined Communities, he proposes that along with Latin and Arabic, Chinese characters transcended the vulgarity (i.e. multiplicity) of vernacular speech in order to become “emanations of reality, not randomly fabricated representations of it.”⁵⁹ Confident in their singularity, these sacred scripts were seen as a ‘truth language.’ According to Anderson, it was the appearance of incomparable plurality that brought on a total loss of confidence in the unique role of one sacred script and all the attendant conceptions of truth that were associated with inarguable particularity. In this way, *when a system, be it linguistic or political, becomes interchangeable it becomes arbitrary*. It is not hard to imagine how fear of the ‘internal system’ becoming arbitrary can incite such a charged backlash from the ancient regime of representation.

“By all accounts,” Silva adds, “the use of *Hanja* was inappropriate to the graphic representation of Korean”, and yet, “...although Han’gŭl was easy to learn and use, it lacked the prestige associated with *Hanja*, thereby creating a sociolinguistic dilemma.”⁶⁰ In other words, “*Han’gŭl was not Hanja*.” And this would be its determining flaw, since Korea was “Under the *sadae* system,” as a “vassalage to imperial China” it had to be the case whereby Sinocentric influence bestowed “upon *Hanja* a status that was not accorded to King Sejong’s orthographic innovation.”⁶¹ For missionaries this dilemma was met in two successive ways. First, they would attempt to have Korea’s literati read aloud the already refined Scriptures from China. Silva produces a letter from 1891 that expresses how this was a less-than-optimal fix: “It is very peculiar. They see the Chinese character and understand it but they do not pronounce it as a Chinaman would. They pronounce the Korean word for the same thing. As a result every one hearing, whether educated or not, can understand what is read, though perhaps they could not read it themselves.”⁶² The last part is what discouraged missionaries, that the primacy of Chinese characters in “defining

⁵⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. (London: Verso, 1991), 14.

⁶⁰ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea." (2008), 59, 58.

⁶¹ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea." (2008), 60. (*italics added*.)

⁶² Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea." (2008), 64.

which Koreans could serve as intermediaries between the text and the people” still remained even if those characters were read aloud in the native tongue.⁶³ Yet once again vertically linked to transcendental knowledge, the elite would remain in power if the exclusivity of Chinese characters continued. Missionaries could either “increase the accessibility of *Hanja*... or increase the prestige of Hangeul” by way of expanding social equivalence to the point that the very division between high society and low would blur.⁶⁴ This blurring of social barriers would be attempted by promoting Han’gŭl as a credible medium for “serious” literature, and conveniently enough, the Bible was thought to fulfill this role.

The usurpation of Sejong’s script by way of prestige is the most commonly provided trope for Han’gŭl’s centuries of unpopularity, in fact, in many accounts it is the only reason given. Since the “only proper way to write required the use of *Hanja*”, the arguments against Han’gŭl “were not based on linguistic principles, but rather, social conservatism.”⁶⁵ However, as these various accounts have by now hopefully demonstrated, it seems that a separation of “linguistic principles” and “social conservatism” may not be entirely accurate. Perhaps it is the case that the two are in tandem, and certain ‘linguistic principles’ present values that come to be seen as deeply opposed to socially conservative norms. If the case had been that Han’gŭl and *hanja* were of the same origin, even with the alphabet still arriving as late as it did, would the issue of ‘prestige’ still hold its explanatory power? The overvalued efficiency of Han’gŭl, which is certainly a perspective unique to modern sensibilities, presupposes the inherent adeptness of Han’gŭl to the spoken vernacular as a positive trait. Any ability on behalf of the letters to evoke meaning without sound was occluded under the same prescribed notions of phonocentric thought that had been used to describe the patronizing attitude of

⁶³ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 65.

⁶⁴ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 65.

⁶⁵ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 59-60.

Korea's elite. When the issue of alphabetic transcription comes up, “even if it implies other divisions,” notes Derrida, once “one poses the question of the relationships between speech and writing in the light of the indivisible units of the ‘thought-sound,’ there will always be the ready response. Writing will be ‘phonetic,’ it will be the outside, the exterior representation of language.”⁶⁶

In the case of Western missionary accounts on Han’gŭl, the “majority of their reactions explicitly reference the writing system’s ease of acquisition and use by Koreans and foreigners alike...”⁶⁷ Silva provides multiple passages that illustrate how Western missionaries’ described the correlation between Han’gŭl’s simplicity and low status: Documents printed in the script were found to be limited to “a comparatively few cheap, trashy, and miserably printed novelettes and books of songs”, and as “For literature, if we search for books in their own native script, we shall find practically none (Underwood 1908: 71–72).”⁶⁸

Han’gŭl was held in contempt owing to the ease with which the common people could learn it. In this way, one could be literate and yet still ‘uneducated’ and ‘unrefined.’ A positive reevaluation of Han’gŭl required not only the promotion for its wider use among the Korean people, but the association of its use to a broader range of contexts, such as in political affairs and, unabashedly, its use in spiritual terms. The latter was put into action in 1882, with the publication of a Han’gŭl only New Testament, and the former a bit later in 1894, when all government records would also be written in the native script. Han’gŭl’s nascent ability to cross social boundaries was therefore a result of its spiritual reactivation by the West. Silva shows how one missionary, James Gale, “attributed the resurrection of Hangeul to divine providence”:

Korea’s native script has come quietly down the dusty ages, waiting for, who

⁶⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*, 31.

⁶⁷ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Reevaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 62.

⁶⁸ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Reevaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 63.

Silva, “Western Attitudes toward the Korean Language: An Overview of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Mission Literature,” 276-277.

knew what? Never used, it was looked on with contempt as being so easy. [...] By one of those mysterious providences it was made ready and kept waiting for the New Testament and other Christian literature. [...] This perhaps is the most remarkable providence of all, this language sleeping its long sleep of four hundred years, waiting till the hour should strike on the clock, that it might rise and tell of all Christ's wondrous works. [...] God surely loves the humble things of life. (James Gale 1909: 137-8).⁶⁹

In this way, Han'gŭl was promoted by "Christian missionaries as a means of fostering universal literacy," ostensibly de-centering the prestige of Confucian knowledge and, according to Silva, having a far-reaching effect on the social structure of Korea.⁷⁰ This is frequently met with claims that the reason Korea's struggle against the Japanese was able to persist was due to the missionaries re-evaluation of Han'gŭl as a viable expression of national identity.

All too frequently the situation has been explained in terms of diglossia and digraphia, and both are relative to the description of pre-modern attitudes towards the two writing systems in Korea, but somehow the argument is lost once the relationship between speech and writing is employed. First, the question of digraphia (two writing systems used for the same language) in Korea depends on how we view Han'gŭl; from a recursive 'reading over the shoulders' perspective, the system of writing in the Korean vernacular should not be made equivalent to the logic of using Chinese characters, since the two only came into coexistence when the former had been marginalized (excuse the pun) as a technic of notation. But from a synchronic perspective, which would allow our current understanding of writing as part of language on the whole to efface the more literal ways that it had been employed in pre-modern Korea, then a state of coexistence between two scripts may be imagined. Diglossia (the use of two different language systems) is a more interesting question because it requires the coexistence of two native but dissimilar systems of language. Here it may be posited from a more stable synchronic

⁶⁹ Cited in: Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 66.

⁷⁰ Silva, David. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea," 71.

perspective that there was at once a system of language operating through the similitude of signs (Han'gŭl), and, at the same time, there was another system that took the representative role of signs *proper* as its function (Chinese characters).

If diglossia and digraphia are the terms on which we must predicate the comparison of Han'gŭl to Sinitic graphs (and we must since it appears too often to be ignored), then the question of speech and writing should be bracketed, otherwise those two categories of phenomenal experience will inevitably override the dichotomies of logic that may exist between two mutual systems of language. “Noteworthy in Underwood’s description” writes Silva, “is his mention of specific types of language users (‘the merchants, the middle classes, and the coolies’ versus ‘officials’),” which he finds to be “representative of distinct social classes and, one presumes, participants in distinct functionally defined speech networks — evidence of diglossia.”⁷¹ By “laying the groundwork for the establishment of a digraphic community of practice” in which “Han'gŭl served as the vernacular, or low (‘L’), script and *Hanja* (or a mix of *Hanja* and Han'gŭl) functioned as the high (‘H’) script,” we encounter the second most popular conventional explanation, the sociolinguistic tension caused by stratifying two or more languages according to their ‘domain-driven’ use.⁷²

The more elite script, or ‘H’ language, “is perceived as more prestigious, more beautiful, more logical, and more advanced. Hence, this language is exclusively reserved for education, ‘high’ literature, official religion, and other formal public functions” explains Young-mee Yu Cho; in “contrast, the ‘low’ language is devalued as vulgar, informal, and not worthy of study even though it is often the native language of the population for all colloquial purposes.”⁷³ The trope of competition, if insisted upon too literally, calls into question the modernist assumption of a hidden structural reality existing behind the metaphor of High and Low languages, but it can also at the same time

⁷¹ Silva, David. “Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea,” 61.

⁷² Silva, David. “Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of Hangeul in Late Nineteenth-century Korea,” 60.

⁷³ Cho, Young-mee Yu. “Diglossia in Korean Language and Literature: A Historical Perspective,” 3.

bring to light the influences and biases that were strategically deployed in one direction or the other. The most interesting example comes from George Gilmore's *Korea from its Capital* (1892). David Silva paraphrases a sentence from Gilmore, who makes "Perhaps the boldest statement" when at the beginning of a chapter simply entitled "The Languages" there is the line "Korea is bilingual"; afterwards it reads that "On the one extreme, the Korean power structure employed a variety of Chinese as the 'High' language for official purposes. On the opposite extreme was Korean per se, 'the vernacular spoken by everybody from the king down,' which served as the 'Low' language."⁷⁴ The dichotomy between 'H' and 'L' that assumed language to be proprietary of social class, at least in the vivid language of Yu Cho, becomes something else when Gilmore finds the King to be of an 'L' variety. If the King of Korea is not apart of the High category, then the next question for our investigation is not 'who else' (for who could be above the King) but 'what else' could be seen to exist above the throne? And here we find a refreshingly literal answer to a question that takes language as its object: "the Korean power structure" i.e., the varied deployment of Chinese as the 'H' language that *operates independently* of "everybody from the king down."

For Ross King, it was also a situation of "digraphia (*ǒnmun ich'i*)" whereby "the H variety, or official written language, was *hanmun*, or Classical Chinese in its Korean guise, while the L variety, [...] was a series of related, unstandardized dialects of Korean, the most prestigious being that of the capital, Seoul."⁷⁵ Use of the 'low' Han'gŭl and 'high' *hanja* in specified spheres of activity is on the whole said to persist into the late nineteenth century, presumably because at that time the all-Han'gŭl John Ross Bible was introduced to the effect of obscuring domain-dependent distinctions in reading habits.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Silva, David J. "Western Attitudes toward the Korean Language: An Overview of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Mission Literature," 274.

⁷⁵ Ross, King. "Nationalism and Language Reform in Korea: The *Questione Della Lingua* in Precolonial Korea." *Nationalism and the Construction of Korean Identity*. Ed. Hyung Il Pai and Timothy R. Tangherlini. (Berkeley Calif.: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2001), 35.

⁷⁶ Silva, David J. "Missionary Contributions toward the Revaluation of *Han'geul* in Late 19th Century Korea," 60.

The honor that missionaries conferred on the most banal aspects of Han'gŭl was not on the level of sensuous form, but rather determined by the content that, on grounds of its technological nature, Han'gŭl was best suited to convey. As long as the faculty of human rationality is considered as the *raison d'etre* for Han'gŭl's interference with living speech, then phonological fears of some higher faculty of rationality that could possibly be at play within the structure of language itself were rendered 'mute.' Han'gŭl spoke what it was told, nothing more and nothing less. To counter claims of Han'gŭl's meaninglessness all the Christian missionaries could do was bolster the content it carried. This new content, however, was no longer a transcription of what had been spoken in the vernacular; on the contrary it was a translation of that which had never been spoken before. For the first time Han'gŭl held meaning prior to living speech, and the mediation required of Han'gŭl to translate such extreme linguistic difference had incidentally elevated it to a degree of literariness. If letters once thought only capable of mirroring the sounds of the vernacular could now hold meaning far beyond whatever had been said or written before in Korean, then what else might the combination of letters reveal? What did this uncanny ability to give name and reference to everything, in preface of it being known, mean?

Dissemination of similitudes. Chu Sigiŏng's orthography.

Andre Schmid writes that nationalist reformers "attacked the idea that [Chinese] characters had a special nature, containing exclusive meanings."⁷⁷ In the case of Han'gŭl, Schmid adds that as the "new knowledge [enlightenment] intruded into Korea," both systems of written language were "No longer special, they were now judged merely in terms of their merits as a communicative tool."⁷⁸ But we must remain diligent to keep our eyes on the relational power Han'gŭl exerts; and remember that, as a force of *domination*, Han'gŭl's real purpose was to universalize knowledge among the masses while simultaneously humiliating the nobility, who were the prior guardians and mediators of increasingly irrelevant knowledge.

If degrading the cultural essence of Chinese characters refused written language the possibility of cultural articulation, then an alternate path would be found in the story of Chu Sigiŏng. Ross King defines a language entrepreneur as "a person who innovates linguistically in order to create and manipulate linguistic symbols for the promotion of political interests", and he identifies Chu Sigiŏng as one of the main 'language entrepreneurs' during the pre-colonial period.⁷⁹ Perhaps due to the very invented-ness of Han'gŭl, most linguistic studies before the enlightenment period looked to discover and describe the intrinsic properties of individual letters and what sounds they represented. Yoon explains that, "what little study of Korean there was by native scholars was limited to a discussion of the alphabet."⁸⁰ Syntax and word form was believed to consist mostly in the convenience and mutual correspondence of those properties. Letters came together in their rhythm as syllables, and syllables were bound or delineated in words by the very nature of how one spoke or heard them. Grammar only held that words and phrases

⁷⁷ Schmid, Andre. *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919*, 66.

⁷⁸ Schmid, Andre. *Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919*, 67.

⁷⁹ Ross, King. "Nationalism and Language Reform in Korea: The *Questione Della Lingua* in Precolonial Korea," 35.

⁸⁰ Yoon, Sukmoon. "The Contribution of Cu Sikyong to the Study of Korean Grammar." (M.A. dissertation, University of Washington, 1968), 10.

express themselves as they did in everyday speech acts, as strings of pre-composed sentences. Nam Ki-sim notes how “Grammatical controversy took place rather over the classification of parts of speech within the eclectic framework. And since it was a conflict within a system, it did not go beyond the boundary of a revisionary debate.”⁸¹

Chu Sigyŏng, arguably the most famous grammarian during the nationalist period and perhaps the most responsible for the modern appearance of Han’gŭl, credits the *Hunminjŏngŭm* as the source for his ideas on standardization. Described as “the intermediary ancestor - after King Sejong- of Han’gŭl” he held that the goal of unifying Han’gŭl orthography in the “same way,” or in a consistent, unified fashion, was to be done on the basis of his research on the *Hunminjŏngŭm*, where he had discovered a greater variance of letters in the syllable-final position.⁸² His introduction of morphophonemic orthography (although he never used this term himself) came from the unique spelling rules of King Sejong. Moreover, by resurrecting the orthography that had only occurred briefly in King Sejong’s time, Chu found an indispensable link to the past.

Kim Jeongsu explains how the “the Korean orthographic conventions that Koreans observe today were worked out and promulgated in 1933 during the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea, but the morphophonemic impulse behind them — the idea that Korean words should be written in such a way as to reveal their underlying morpheme structure, as opposed to writing them ‘the way they sound’ — had already been hinted at during the time of King Sejong.”⁸³

One might suppose that all the elements of a language signify something different: letter to sound, word to thing, and sentence to thought. Let us first assume that the human imagination is capable of a limitless range of thought, and that this results in an endless flow of new words to express that thought; after all, dictionaries of a living language never shrink, they are only suspect to entropy once the language itself is no longer used as the dominant medium of expression. But what about letters? How can a

⁸¹ Nam, Ki-sim. “Linguistic Theory and the Study of Korean Grammar.” *Korea Journal*. Vol. 22:10 (October 1982), 23.

⁸² Kim, Jeongsu. *The History and Future of Hangeul: Korea's Indigenous Script*, 41.

⁸³ Kim, Jeongsu. *The History and Future of Hangeul: Korea's Indigenous Script*, 27.

limited set of letters express a limitless range of significations? There is no real equivalent in the physical world of using a finite means for an infinite purpose. The presence of allophones among letter sets and homonyms among word vocabularies proves that the phonological one-to-one relationship between sound and meaning must depend on conventionalized associations for any degree of stability. Letters are associated with words according to sounds, but each step required a different determination on what elements were similar enough to be joined by the same unit of representation. The meaning of any word, written or spoken, must therefore be determined by contrast. It is grammar, then, that generates meaning by way of arrangement. “This analysis reminds one of one generative approach to analyzing complex sentences as a result of transformational operations on underlying simple sentences,” adds Yoon Sukmoon while describing Chu Sigyǒng’s linguistic procedures.⁸⁴

Chu Sigyǒng opens his “The Way of Spelling Korean” (or “Korean Grammar”) (1898) by explaining how in the *Hunminjǒngŭm* “it was noted that the syllable-initial consonants are identical with those in syllable final position.”⁸⁵ This would create an expanded syllable-final index, and Chu’s theory of “new patch’im” (syllable-final consonants) was a simple way to refer to the newly allotted letters. Since these letters would act as visual markers of difference rather than sound, he had reintroduced morphophonemic orthography for the first time since King Sejong’s time. This orthography allows one to adhere to it through the understanding of a few guiding principles, instead of forcing one to learn spellings by rote. Chu laments how “restricting the number of consonants used in syllable final position to eight” was for so long such a “source of sickness.”⁸⁶

It is assumed that an alphabet is based on the simple correspondence between letters and phonemes, usually with one letter representing a narrow range of possible sounds, called allophones. To compare, Jaffre notes that in French orthography there are

⁸⁴ Yoon, Sukmoon. “Cu Sikyǒng and His Works.” *Journal of Korean Studies*. 1.2 (1971), 102.

⁸⁵ Yoon, Sukmoon. “The Contribution of Cu Sikyǒng to the Study of Korean Grammar,” 49.

⁸⁶ Yoon, Sukmoon. “The Contribution of Cu Sikyǒng to the Study of Korean Grammar,” 50.

currently 26 letters to represent approximately 36 phonemes in the language; the heavy polyvalence meant that each letter had to play different roles and functions depending on the phonological environment, i.e., the letters that surrounded it.⁸⁷ However, in Han'gŭl, the letters represent far more basic phonemic units: all of this gives Han'gŭl letters a high degree of phonological transparency. As a consequence, the threat of a one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound, the dangerous presumption of a sign of a sign that “obeys the confused law of similitudes, and causes language to slip out of the forms of reflective thought,” continually haunts the interior of Han'gŭl.⁸⁸ Indeed, this threat manifested itself at the surface from very early on in the phonological orthography practiced by King Sejong's court scholars, and henceforth went uncontrolled for much of Han'gŭl's short history. Sampson adds that, “one of the consequences of the choice of the 'surface' approach to writing was that orthographic syllable-boundaries represented phonetic rather than morphological divisions.”⁸⁹

If the syllable block is not allowed to provide alternations between allophones, as had been the case during Han'gŭl's four centuries of latency, then words will “hug the phonetic ground quite closely,” and as a result, the vagueness of syllable boundaries and inevitability of homonyms would require a higher level of context-dependency.⁹⁰ This point will be described in detail below, but for now it should be noted that the assembling of phoneme-symbols into a syllable block determines one of two outcomes: First, if letters and phonemes maintain an invariant one-to-one relationship and their ordering in the syllable block is determined by pronunciation, then it may be said that Han'gŭl is vulgar (the epithet given at that time), since it is unrefined by the form natural to it — the syllable block. Of course, in contrast to this result, if the principles of the syllable structure are strengthened to include rules for governing allophonic variation in certain phonemes, whereby new distinctions are made among the letters outside of pronunciation

⁸⁷ Jaffre, Jean-Pierre. “Hangul and French Orthography: Differences and Similarities.” *Pathways into Korean Language and Culture: Essays in Honor of Young-key Kim-Renaud*. (Seoul: Pagijong, 2002), 128

⁸⁸ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, 112.

⁸⁹ Sampson, Geoffrey. *Writing systems: A Linguistic Introduction*. (London: Hutchinson, 1985), 138.

⁹⁰ Sampson, Geoffrey. *Writing systems: A Linguistic Introduction*, 138.

but inside the frame of the syllable block, then Han’gŭl may rightly be called what Chu Sigyŏng had recognized it to be— the ‘great script.’

The syllable block decides the correspondence among individual letters and radically alters the linear distribution of relatively static letter shapes to reveal a more detailed composition of letters with varying proportions within a frame. This additional framing function, which in the current orthography is wholly determined by morphophonemic considerations, acts to preserve the canonical square shape of what may be called a syllable block— the multidimensional arrangement of letters in mimesis of speech, "with caustic cues for consonants and vowels overlapping in complex ways."⁹¹ The segmenting of sound into syllables is fundamentally different than the more abstract isolation of sound into letters; we find that the correspondence between the elements of an alphabet is often contradicted by the rhythm of syllables. The spelling of a syllable is unlike the spelling of a word. Unlike the rules of language per se, or what we call grammar, the rules of the letter block are not approximated in any way.

All Han’gŭl letters must morph in size and shape to accommodate for the inevitable presence of other letters within the boundaries of the frame. In this way, letters do not determine the form of a block, as we would expect in the case of an actual ‘syllable’ block, but rather the block determines the form of the letters. A mere cluster of phonemes would not break the alphabetic correspondence between letters, although it may complicate it by opening up new possibilities of arrangement. What is significant, and what modern orthography recognized, is the degree to which the framing device of a letter block exercises control over semantic meaning, so much so that even once phonemes acquire their shape in a letter they must still change yet again to fully compose themselves; this correspondence in form is unique to the Han’gŭl letter block, the correspondence in phonetic content is ubiquitous to all alphabets (including Han’gŭl).

In spoken Korean, syllable-final consonants “must be articulated with complete closure and stoppage of airflow”; to repeat, when a syllable ends in one of the seven

⁹¹ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 44.

possible final consonant sounds (k, ng, t, n, p, m, l) there is no release of air like that of *-t* at the end of *belt*.”⁹² These seven sounds [“s” has been excluded but it is phonologically realized in polysyllabic words] are the only consonants that retain their phonemic representative sound in the syllable-final position, “all the other consonants *merge* with these seven in that position” and the “neutralization of these distinctions can result in the creation of homonyms.”⁹³ At this point, our attention should be brought to Lee and Ramsey’s use of the word ‘merge,’ a visual-spatial metaphor that is only meaningful within the context of literacy and text. In spoken Korean there is no merge between syllable-final sounds that have been presupposed ahead of time as categorically related. Seven consonant sounds, or noises produced by a contraction in the vocal tract, occur at the end of a syllable and their relation to all the other consonant sounds that are realized elsewhere is an abstraction. What merges are the other letters in Han’gŭl, or those letters that are the other half of the consonant set that, when placed at the end of a syllable block, are neutralized, i.e., their letter-phoneme link is broken, thereby leaving an empty glyph as a place-holder. As readers and writers we know that when Korean linguists describe speech sounds as being merged with dissimilar sounds that it is in reference to our imagining of them as allophones being dispersed by the alphabet rather than the mouth. The point, here, is that along with the phonemes of Han’gŭl, speakers and readers of Korean have also been conditioned by the form of the syllable block, which merges and neutralizes to create signs of difference where in the aural/oral world none are to be found.

The empty syllable-final letter that must go unpronounced is therein a pure sign of difference. To the rest of the letters still pulling the double-duty that sound has placed on them, it is nothing less than a farce. A system of rules foreign to sound has now been realized; or, rather ‘put in place’ as it might seem, since the syllable block has come to account for their meaning in a way that is phonologically ‘unnatural.’ At this point let us step back for a moment to be clear- this system of rules should be understood literally;

⁹² Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 68.

⁹³ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 69. (Italics added.)

here we are describing the actual procedure that was undertaken for the standardization and codification of Han'gŭl spelling practices during and before Korea's colonization by Japan. A period preceded by Western missionary attempts to have Han'gŭl as a duplicate of speech (because in its ease of use even the women *may read it*), and, of course, before that was the centuries of official contempt (because of its ease of use the women *read it*). Let us return to the discussion at hand, but do not forget that there is an orthographic history to Han'gŭl suggestive to claims of ideological manipulation.

Morphophonemic orthography delegitimizes the one-to-one relationship between sound and letter to reveal that the myth of any direct correspondence between signifier-signified is a hoax. After all, what do those other seven consonant letters in the syllable-final position signify if not sound? If a particular sound or value is not inherent to these signs anymore, even if it was only obtained to them by convention in the first place, and, rather, their value is constituted by the difference they create from other signs in the system as a whole, then we come to find where there had once been a given 'presence' of meaning is something that now has no purpose other than to tell us what it is not. Derrida does not take this lightly, nor do the political conservative language reformers in Korea, for that presupposed 'presence' meant to underlie the signs of language, if denied, must surely have repercussions beyond the rules of orthography.

Han'gŭl operated by means of grammatical transformations that do not in themselves possess any representative value. Han'gŭl's letters had a relationship with sound, not meaning, and any attempt to go from one to the other would be sabotaged by inconsistencies in their spelling pattern. However, by privileging form over content, we meet phonocentrism at its most ethnocentric tendencies. Here, form is defined as the orthographic appearance of words. And, in the case of Han'gŭl, orthography determines the frame of the syllable boundary.

As Lee and Ramsey have explained, while "the pronunciation of any given syllable can change depending on the phonological environment in which it appears..." the syllable block, in contrast, is "a representation of the basic forms of the morphemes,

not their isolated pronunciation.”⁹⁴ Syllable blocks can be artificially ‘overloaded’ or ‘emptied out,’ in order to more accurately represent either phonological or lexical concerns. In the case of an ‘overloaded’ syllable’, the use of consonant clusters (two different letters sharing the syllable-final position), for instance, is a purely formal concern meant to represent the underlying shape of a morpheme or word within a single syllable block. If an overloaded syllable stands alone then only the first letter of the cluster is recognized, but “when the syllable occurs before a vowel, the last consonant spills over the syllable boundary and is pronounced as part of the following syllable.”⁹⁵ The purpose of form is undeniable, it retains the trace of the underlying morpheme even as phonological assimilation flattens nouns and affixes into linear speech. Opposed to this crowding of consonants is a practice frequently reserved for transcribing English words, where the emptying or dispersion of consonants in between vowels is meant to more accurately reflect the more complex nature consonant sequences in spoken English (such as -spr or -kl-).⁹⁶ Once again, when form comes into context it highlights difference; out of context, or better put, when not strung together with other words, it maintains difference through the irregularity of its composition. In each case, identity is dependent upon the trace of letters that are never themselves present in speech. The constructed nature of a syllable block also serves as an orthographic distinction between nouns and following particles.

The question of ambiguity in Han’gŭl texts is central, and an expanded repertoire of syllable-final consonants would help distinguish homonyms graphically. But for Korean, which even in everyday speech utilizes a vast amount of syllables, the issue of homonymy was not an unsurpassable obstacle for simplified (phonemic) spelling habits. Moreover, since the economy of graphemes (letters) in Han’gŭl were parsed from a more basic, and it may be said, underlying set, the problem of allophones being represented by the same grapheme was relative minimal. Indeed, without the mediation of the syllable

⁹⁴ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 68, 67.

⁹⁵ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 67.

⁹⁶ Lee, Iksop, and S. Robert Ramsey. *The Korean Language*, 67.

block's frame, there would be a near one-to-one correspondence between the sounds and the graphemes (letters) that represent them. But even the syllable block attributes to phonemic orthography's efficiency; alphabets often face the problem of representing unique word or morpheme boundaries, but in a syllabary the phonemes are for the most part already group bound, and since many words in Korean are within one to three syllables, boundaries appear effortlessly through the visual stacking of sound units in syllable blocks. If all the problems that usually sabotage phonological expression - homonymy, allomorphs, and segmentation - are weakened by properties already inherent in Han'gŭl's structure, how can the centuries of contention that has plagued orthography in Korea be explained? Could it be that a more abstract and difficult orthography posed a threat, not by countering the more convoluted system of *hanmun* but rather by revealing some hidden structure of meaning, or the absence of meaning?

In an indirect reference to Derrida, Walter Ong states that language, i.e., speech, has “no trace” since it is “a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing.”⁹⁷ Ong's prominence on the materiality of written words betrays the difference between symbolic signs and linguistic acts. By arguing, “Without writing, words as such have no visual presence,” he inevitably creates a dichotomy between two modes of phenomenal cognition — hearing and reading.⁹⁸ Here, language in all of its articulations has been reduced to the effects of representation. Without considering the referential functions of language, “its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition” can only be viewed (or heard) as self-evident.⁹⁹ Language in all its forms must thereby acknowledge something other than itself, there must be a ‘reality’ to it; even when language speaks to us in lies or presents itself in literature as fiction, it is all the more recognized to operate within reality — the distinction between what is true and false that language provides is arguably its most important function. So long as it remains certain that language “functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the

⁹⁷ Ong, Walter J.. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. (London: Methuen, 1982), 31.

⁹⁸ Ong, Walter J.. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 31.

⁹⁹ De, Man Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*. Trans. Wlad Godzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 11.

phenomenal world”, then the distinction between language’s inner logic, its constant referential instability, and that of a stable, meaningful ‘reality’ remains firmly established.¹⁰⁰ This is how the form of language, becomes an object of such furious debate. But this is always a debate over representation, and in the case of written language it is on the degree to which it represents reality; whether that proximity is praised, as it may be in the West, or seen as vulgar, the view of Korea’s elite, we nonetheless may detect in both views a sense of an auspicious desire to control how the inner logic of language is viewed.

For instance, Jaffre explains two accounts of equally ethnocentric criticisms of the increasing morphophonemic orthography in France when he quotes the Secretary of the French Academie during his preparation of the first edition of the *Dictionnaire* (1694), who stated: “The company is of the opinion that we shall follow the ancient orthography... which distinguishes men of letters from ignoramuses and simple women.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, this time from the linguist M. Cohen (1963): “I don’t believe like other people that all these (orthographic) exercises give agility to the mind... We have to put ourselves on the same level as the average person and even lower, and look for efficiency.”¹⁰²

Since an alphabet is made of the phonic elements found in speech, it is somehow less natural, a “sign of a sign,” whose coincidence with spoken language is not only conventional but also required. Overconfidence in the signifier has deeper implications when we look how the divisions this dichotomy creates frequently extend beyond linguistic concerns and become categories for the identification of social classes. Seen as a benchmark of social progress or intellectual capabilities, these oppositions divide groups into exclusive categories based on the order of what script they use. It should be no surprise, then, that such a dichotomy of scripts based on opposed categories of

¹⁰⁰ De, Man Paul. *The Resistance to Theory*. Trans. Wlad Godzich. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), 11.

¹⁰¹ Jaffre, Jean-Pierre. "Hangul and French Orthography: Differences and Similarities," 127.

¹⁰² Jaffre, Jean-Pierre. "Hangul and French Orthography: Differences and Similarities," 130. (Italics added.)

intellectual development has a long history in Western ethnocentric thought, where the tendency has been to value phonetic scripts for their connection to the ‘natural’ motivations of spoken language; but the bias that holds verbal language to be more authentic than writing is rarely discussed along these phonocentric lines when it comes to the case of Korea. This is not surprising because the situation appears to be the inverse of phonocentrism- how could a ‘logical’ phonetic script that imitates the internal workings of speech be obscured by the ‘pre-logical’ ideograph? This denies what Walter Ong had claimed to be a “sense of the word as necessarily spoken, sounded, and hence power-driven”, along with more the sweeping axiom that only a completely phonetic alphabet could “foster abstract, analytic thought.”¹⁰³

By describing consistent, predictable principles for the variations (transformations) of parts of speech as a syntactic function, such as the transformation of noun stems into adjectives, Chu discovered that words with no obvious connection had degrees of relatedness that could account for a wider range of phenomena within the language on the whole. When Chu completed the manuscript for *Grammar of Korean Language* in 1898 (not published until 1906), he began by writing that “A society is a group composed of people whose lives and existence are dependent on each other...”¹⁰⁴ This has obvious connections to what he found in morphophonemic analysis- delineating the fundamental elements that form the whole, which had been hidden by the assumption that the most basic of things had no intrinsic significance, and connecting these elements to understand the system at large, had shown that meaning is dependent on what it is related to. In a more eloquent statement, Joanna Radwanska-Williams adds that “meaning, being a mental entity, is abstract and not inherently similar to anything that is physically existent”, and while “elements of language which in and of themselves, taken

¹⁰³ Ong, Walter J.. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, 32, 89.

¹⁰⁴ Kim, Kyōng-il. *Pioneers of Korean Studies*. (Sōngnam-si, Kyōnggi-do, R.O.K.: Academy of Korean Studies, 2004), 128.

as discrete lexical items, may be considered arbitrary,” they nonetheless “acquire a non-arbitrariness in their mutual relational patterning.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Radwanska-Williams, Joanna. “Chomsky’s Paradigm.” Ed. Kibbee, Douglas A. *Chomskyan (R)evolutions*. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Company, 2010), 54.

Conclusion

To conclude, my use of the term “nationalist orthography” refers to a whole register of how the formal practices of linguistic orthography evoked a symbolic politics of nationalist sentiment. In other words, changes in Han’gǔl’s form went hand in hand with changes in politics. Notions of Han’gǔl’s form referred to prevailing notions of the political environment, and vice-versa. In this way we must decipher the ideological mystifications given to Han’gǔl by way of continuous reference to its form.

The orthographic foregrounding of Han’gǔl’s structure was not merely meant to increase its communicative function, but was recognition that the script’s distinctive power and potential ethical force resides in a testing and unsettling of deeply held assumptions about the transparency, instrumentality, and direct referentiality of language. Moreover, this orthography functions to provide spaces and strategies for exploring the possibility of conciliations between the idiosyncratic and the communal. It is therefore an aesthetic take on the inner-logic of Han’gǔl’s visible form.

However thoroughly absorbed into dominant ideological formations, I find it very hard to believe that the energizing moment for Han’gǔl’s re-emergence was nothing more than an ideological construction. We frequently find in Han’gǔl’s formal devices a resistance to such broad ideological conclusions. The syllable block, for instance, has a unique semantic underpinning, but is visually constructed to resemble the square boundaries of Chinese characters. Therefore, we need to see Han’gǔl’s form in ways other than those described by the so-called “nationalist ideology,” and we need to see how form can be involved in processes of ideological critique — and how, in fact, attention to the aesthetic formation of Han’gǔl can be generated out of the very criticism that has emerged in antithesis to it.

In this way, my argument still holds Han’gǔl’s pre-colonial promotion as being informed by changing definitions of knowledge, but rather than attributing it as a

declaration of cultural independence, I wish to argue that Han'gŭl marked its re-emergence into the public consciousness as an aesthetic object from which the nationalist goal of constructing a sovereign community may be derived through the unique aspects of its form.

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