

BOOK REVIEW

Tae-Ho Kim 김태호, *Hangul and Typewriters: Technology, Aesthetics, and the History of the Mechanization of Korean Language* 한글과 타자기: 한글 기계화의 기술, 미학, 역사 (Seoul: Yeoksabipyongsa, 2023), 320 pp.

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How did the Korean keyboard layout come to have its current arrangement? Tae-Ho Kim's *Hangul and Typewriters* seeks to answer this question by historicizing the standard Hangul (한글) typing system through a series of debates over the mechanization of the Korean language. From the obstacles faced by early inventors during the colonial era to the most recent controversy between the two-set (두벌식) and the three-set (세벌식) typing methods, Kim depicts a contingent and convoluted trajectory of Korean typewriting technology. One of the primary merits of this book is its examination of the competing values in realizing a Korean typewriter—including speed, accuracy, durability, and aesthetics—and how historical actors navigated the challenges of what to prioritize. Kim illuminates this history to show that it was not the “scientific nature” of the Korean language system, but the efforts of many individuals that made it easy to implement in typing.

Hangul and Typewriters appeals to a broad audience of historians of technology by positioning the invention and commercialization of Korean typewriters within multiple contexts, both spatial and temporal. The first chapter compares the adoption of the Western technology in Japan and China, articulating that distinct social, cultural, and technological conditions posed different challenges to each nation in inventing typewriters for their own languages. Starting the book in this way helps decentralize the invention of typewriters and shift our focus towards local practitioners who coordinated the nature of the machine and their linguistic culture. The following five chapters examine the postwar history of Korean typewriters, highlighting Byeong-woo Gong (공병우), a remarkable inventor who devised the three-set typewriting system. While following the early success and later failure of Gong's typewriters, Kim illustrates the politics of standardization by creatively weaving Gong's personal story with everyday typewriting practices, state authority, and the identity of the national language. The last chapter further explores typography to discuss amateur cultures in information technology. As this book covers a wide range of

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significant topics in the history of technology, readers, even those not interested in typewriters or the Korean language, would gain valuable insights.

To delve a bit deeper, the beginning of the book challenges the prevailing narrative of technology transfer, or the diffusionist model, which assumes that technological practices move from Western centers of innovation to peripheral regions where they are adopted. Although it is true that the typewriter was first invented in the West, local engineers, technical experts, and policy-makers in East Asia adjusted the Roman alphabet-based typewriting technology according to their own language traditions. The close examination of the transformation, or re-invention, of typewriters provides a fruitful discussion as the process contains national identity building through linguistic practices. According to Kim's interpretation, unlike their Japanese and Chinese counterparts, Korean inventors designed typewriters that did not use Chinese characters to pioneer the nation's own path away from the influence of its two neighbors while pursuing the Western ideal of modernization. In this vein, the making of Korean typewriters was more than simply embracing Western technology. It was "part of the big task of establishing the entire culture of writing in Korean" (60).

The invention and use of the typewriter manifested cultural change as it impacted the conventions of writing. The most striking example is the debate over the mismatch of the writing direction between Western typewriters and traditional Korean writing. In East Asia, conventional Chinese characters were written vertically, but the core mechanism of Romanized typewriters was horizontal writing, where the typing device moves to the next cell with the press of a key to make room for the following character. For advocates of horizontal writing, a typewriter was a means to emancipate the nation from the shadow of Chinese influence and formulate its own culture. Some radicals even promoted disassembled writing (풀어쓰기), which refers to the method of writing Korean characters by separating consonants and vowels instead of combining them into syllabic blocks. This disassembled writing would result in a linear sequence of characters in the same manner as writing the Roman alphabet. Kim beautifully unfolds the technical problems of inventing a Korean typewriter, showing that these challenges led to political debates over national identity.

The final chapter seems to address a different story about the computer keyboard and typography, but it reinforces the book's main argument that typewriting activity is not just a technological process but also social, cultural, and political one. Kim shows that after Gong's typewriter was sidelined by the government-led standardization process, his three-set fonts became symbols of resistance against authority and old customs. This last chapter elucidates that the legacy of typewriter technology continues to shape the contemporary mechanization of Korean writing.

Hangul and Typewriter is essential reading for anyone interested in the global history of technology, typewriters, and linguistic culture. I believe the book also serves as invaluable teaching material for the history of technology. I hope this book can reach a broader audience, transcending language barriers.