

## Trends and Challenges in Korean Digital Humanities

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The application of digital technology to humanities research has been taking place in South Korea for the past two decades. The building of the “Joseon Culture Electronic Atlas” in 2004 and “The Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty DB” in 2006, which aimed to expand the outreach of Korean studies using web technology, are the representative examples of Korean Digital Humanities in its seminal stage. Computer technology had been used in South Korea since the 1980s to support humanities research, but, ironically, it was the financial crisis of 1997 that provided the impetus for the “digital turn in the humanities.” Faced with the task of rebuilding a tattered economy and providing a new strategy for economic development, the Kim Dae Jung government initiated large-scale public employment schemes and promoted a strategy of nurturing Cultural Technology (CT). The former provided the human resources that helped lay the foundation for Digital Humanities in South Korea. The latter supported the establishment of a new research trend that paved the way for “digital content” production in the field of the humanities.

It is against this historical backdrop that the distinctive trajectory of Korean Digital Humanities must be understood. In South Korea, the discourse on Digital Humanities began in the 2010s, but discussions were mainly focused on the production of digital content. It is only more recently, with the active introduction of overseas case

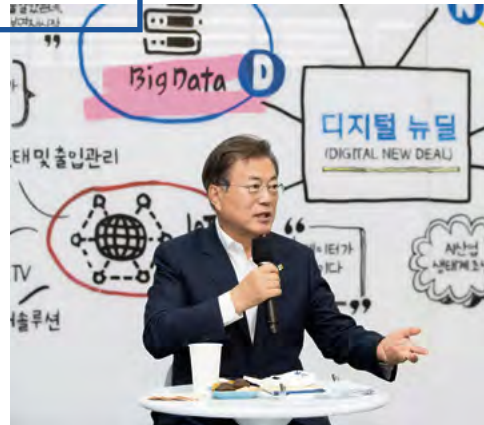


Fig. 1: South Korean President Moon Jae In speaking about the “Digital New Deal” initiative. Image courtesy of the Presidential Security Service, Republic of Korea.

studies and the accumulation of domestic case studies, that the wider community of humanities-based researchers (and not just those involved in producing digital content) has begun to show greater interest in Digital Humanities.

More recently, the “Digital New Deal” initiative of the current Moon Jae In government (represented by the “Digital Dam” project) has played a significant role in escalating interest on Digital Humanities amongst researchers. The government agenda for the transition to a data-centered society has influenced humanities research policies as well as the research environment. For example, the funding scheme outlines of the National Research Foundation (NRF) of Korea, the main funding body for humanities research, have begun to place importance on the application of digital technologies or data related methodologies. From the standpoint of researchers who depend on

state funding, such a government stance cannot be ignored.

The importance placed on coding and programming within South Korean society has also played an important role in ushering in the digital turn in the humanities. The new generation of researchers, well-versed in computer and web technology, has adapted well to the digital environment, actively applying digital approaches to humanities-related research. In fact, there is a growing perception among young researchers that academic activities should expand to include data construction, analysis, and visualization, which require interdisciplinary and convergent approaches, rather than being limited to traditional methods of publication. Such a trend can also be consistently observed in the workshops, colloquiums, and seminars of recent years.

The transition from “Humanities” to “Digital Humanities” should not be regarded simply as a change in research methodology. In terms of the technological environment, it entails a transition from analog to digital; in terms of communication media, it entails a transition from books to data; in terms of the actor, it entails a transition from an approach dominated by a human actor to one involving collaboration with non-human actors. In this sense, the expansion of interest in digital humanities can be understood as part of a greater cultural movement, in which changes in the technological environment have brought about social, economic, and political changes, which in turn have transformed the academic environment. Just as a typhoon cannot be recognized when standing amidst the deceptive calm of its eye, we may unknowingly be in the midst of a great turning point.

The disciplines of the humanities are also experiencing a crucial period of transition in South Korea, and currently there is more bad news than good news. The merging of humanities-related departments due to a decrease in the university population, the reduction of government financial

support, a decrease in academic posts, and society’s general lack of interest in the humanities are collectively seen to represent a “crises in the humanities.” Fortunately, Digital Humanities can play a crucial role in fostering a new humanities research culture by absorbing the social changes caused by the technological environment, which may also act to increase the resilience of the current academic environment. As such, it is hoped that South Korea will also witness, in the near future, the establishment of an institution similar to that of the Office of Digital Humanities (ODH) under the National Humanities Foundation (NEH) of the USA, which can take charge of the management and development of the field of Digital Humanities.

Indeed, although the Korean Association for Digital Humanities (KADH), established in 2015, has spearheaded the dissemination of Digital Humanities research through various activities, it is nearly impossible to expect such a research organization to undertake a more active role when long-term government assistance is absent. In particular, a government-sponsored institution that can support and centrally manage the numerous small-scale Digital Humanities projects that are centered around universities, institutions, and research groups across the country, and which can also be consulted when developing the results of Digital Humanities research for educational or commercial purposes, is urgently required. It is only when the government implements policies that represent a full-fledged move to improve the overall situation of humanities research in South Korea – rather than those merely focused on supporting a small number of digital humanities research groups – that Korean Digital Humanities can hope for a sustainable future.

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## Recent Developments in Digital Japanese Studies

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Over the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has invigorated discussions of the so-called “digital shift,” bringing new visibility to the significance of online and open-access resources for research and teaching. Though Digital Humanities (DH) as a field has been active and evolving over the last several decades, its intersections with conventional modes of scholarly engagement and pedagogy are still occurring in fits and starts across different disciplines and geographic specializations. In North America, which hosts the vast majority of Asian Studies programs, we are still seeing that East Asian languages, including Japanese, have been slow to gain representation in digital educational and research offerings despite an overall growth in interest and demand.

Though occasional presentations on digital Japanese Studies have been held at the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) and other conferences over the last decade, a 2016 University of Chicago workshop – *The Impact of the Digital in Japanese Studies* – was among the first to explicitly address the topic. While in attendance, the 13 presenters and the audience of scholars, librarians, and data science professionals emphasized the need to centralize efforts to build a digital Japan community, leading to a Japanese Language Text Mining Workshop held at Emory University in 2017. This event was attended by 25–30 participants and funded by the Japan Foundation. The original 2016 presenters subsequently met again at a 2018 workshop to discuss the progress of their work and brainstorm future directions for digital Japan scholarship.

These gatherings underscored the need to actively create community spaces for digital scholarship in Japanese Studies, particularly in more accessible and inclusive ways. This led to the creation of the Digital Humanities Japan initiative, which hosts a scholars’ database, a mailing list, and a wiki on Japanese digital tools, tutorials, and publications. The DH Japan project will hopefully continue to grow.

In 2019, AAS held its first “Digital Expo” to highlight advances in digitally-inflected Asian Studies research and teaching; the event included work by five scholars of Japan. In June of 2019, six Japanese scholars made a special effort to bring their knowledge to the Digital Humanities Summer Institute (DHSI) at the University of Victoria, one of the premier digital humanities training venues. They offered a week-long course, “Digital Humanities for Japanese Culture: Resources & Methods,” which was attended by 11 participants, including graduate students, tenured faculty, and librarians. The course covered topics such as the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF), the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI), crowdsourced transcriptions, and more, helping to fill instructional and networking gaps keenly felt in North America and other areas outside of Japan.

Although AAS 2020 was canceled, the 2021 conference saw a significant increase in the number of Japanese DH-related presentations, with six on-demand sessions and at least five panels in which a digital Japan-specific topic was presented. The virtual DH Japan Meeting-in-Conjunction was attended by over 30 people.

In June 2021, Paul Vierthaler (a specialist in Chinese literature at William & Mary)

and myself were invited to run a four-day virtual course, *East Asian Studies and Digital Humanities*, for the University of Pennsylvania’s Dream Lab program in DH training. We covered a wide range of subjects at the introductory level from the perspective of East Asian Studies. We explicitly stated that we would prioritize graduate students and contingent faculty applicants. Nevertheless, our applicant pool was still nearly three times larger than the 25 participants we could accept, and over one-third were Japan-focused. Because we held the course virtually, we had participants from as far as Korea, the Czech Republic, and Chile. The great international demand for East Asia-focused digital education, particularly at the introductory level, signals the growing relevance of this field and the gap students and faculty face between demand and supply. We will hold another introduction to EAS DH course in June 2022. Given the incredible number of applicants from overseas, we will continue to offer it virtually. Also on the horizon is another Japanese-language text mining workshop from Digital Humanities Japan collaborators, which will be conducted at the University of Chicago in June 2022.

Despite challenges for obtaining training in Digital Humanities through East Asian Studies, a large number of academic job advertisements list digital studies as a desired field. Thus far in the 2021–2022 academic job cycle (July 2021–March 2022), among postings specifically seeking specialists in some aspect of East Asia, a total of 56 positions have included the term “digital,” with 26 specifying a desire for “digital humanities.” Other relevant phrases include “digital technologies,” “digital pedagogy,” and “digital media,” among many others. Of these 56 posts, 18 ads seek a specialization in Japan and the digital, with 20 such ads for generalist East Asia positions (that could include Japan). With four months remaining in the annual job market cycle, these numbers already exceed the 2020–2021 academic year,

which featured 33 “digital” ads, eight of which were Japan-focused. Harvard University’s Japan Digital Research Center and Reischauer Institute of Japanese Studies have previously hosted a digital Japan postdoctoral researcher, with two fellows taking up the role over the past several years. This year, the University of Texas at Austin is offering two postdoctoral positions at their newly-established Japan Lab, specializing in history and literature, respectively. The creation of the Japan Lab marks new institutional investment in Japan-centric digital studies in the Anglophone world, the first of its kind at a public university.

As for digital resource development, in partnership with Michael Emmerich of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), work is currently underway to build a new online platform for resources in Japanese Studies known as Japan Past & Present (JPP). This is a collaborative venture with UCLA and Waseda University, sponsored by the Yanai Initiative. JPP will serve as a central hub for digitally-accessible Japanese Studies materials in a variety of languages. In the future, it will sponsor events and projects related to Japanese Studies as well.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the acceleration of digital activity over the last two years has generated new opportunities for community building and scholarly exchange in virtual spaces. We would be wise to leverage these changes to advocate for expanded support in the intersecting fields of Japanese (and East Asian) Studies and Digital Humanities at the institutional level and to continue building an infrastructure that allows us to share knowledge, offer educational opportunities, and promote interdisciplinary and international collaborations.

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