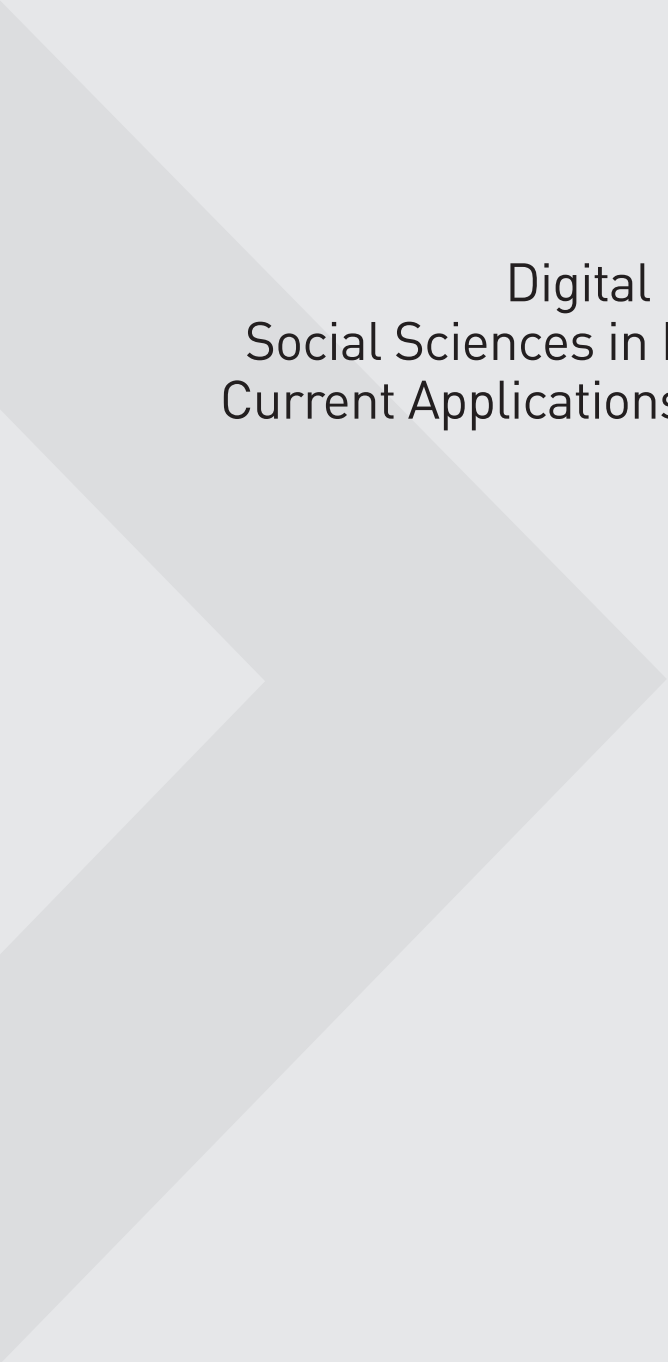




Special Feature

Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies: Current Applications and Prospects

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Guest Editors' Note

Introducing Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies

There has been a growing interest across disciplines in humanities in the use of digital and computational tools and methods, including the digitalization of historical texts, text and corpus analysis, topic modeling, mapping and visualization, network analysis, and machine learning. Commonly referred to as *Digital Humanities*, this field of scholarship explores how emerging digital technologies are reshaping and at times challenging traditional modes of asking and answering humanities questions (Burdick et al. 2012). In social sciences, digital and computational methods have long been deeply integrated into efforts to identify regular patterns, latent relationships, and robust predictive models in behaviors and interactions of humans, organizations, and institutions. More recently, however, advances in media, computing, and data technologies have dramatically expanded researchers' capacities to collect, process, analyze, and understand large-scale data that were previously inaccessible, facilitating the emergence of *Computational Social Sciences* as a distinctive field (Lazer et al. 2009). Across both humanities and social sciences, these digital and computational approaches have not only broadened the scope of inquiry by extending the boundaries of traditional disciplines but have also provided innovative perspectives to reexamining established research questions.

What does this digital turn in humanities and social sciences bring to Korean Studies, a field which is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary beyond

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its traditional humanities-centered orientation and attracting scholarly interest worldwide beyond the Korean peninsula? Before addressing this question, it is important to clarify what we mean by *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*, the term we as coeditors use as an umbrella concept for this special issue. We argue that one of the most significant contributions of digital technologies is their potential to foster greater integration between humanities and social sciences—and, in some cases, even natural sciences—within Korean Studies. Scholars have long emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches in Korean Studies (Chang and Lee 2006; Shin and Robinson 1999). However, entrenched disciplinary traditions, institutional constraints, and limited methodological innovation have often hindered the full realization of such integration. Scholarly evaluation, promotion, and career advancement are still largely anchored along disciplinary lines, discouraging cross-boundary research.

Digital Humanities and Computational Social Sciences may help address these barriers, not merely by providing new digital and computational tools that can be useful for both humanities and social sciences researchers, but more importantly by structurally encouraging collaboration across fields. As Burdick et al. (2012) argue in their discussion of “projects” as an emerging form of scholarship in digital humanities—and can be also well applied to digital social sciences—digital research projects are inherently multidimensional. Their data, methods, research questions, research designs, and modes of collaboration necessarily require scholars to move beyond conventional disciplinary boundaries. To emphasize this integrative vision, we adopt the admittedly cumbersome term *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*. Cha and Wall (2023) use the more concise formulation *Digital Korean Studies*, which is both useful and compelling. Our preference for the longer term, however, reflects our explicit intention to foreground the integration of humanities and social sciences as a central goal.

What do recent empirical and theoretical studies reveal about the prospects of *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*? What are specific questions addressed by scholars using digital and computational tools for historical and contemporary Korea? How do digital and computational approaches expand our understanding of historical and contemporary Korea? What possibilities do they suggest for a more fully integrated Korean Studies? And what challenges continue to hinder the development of this emerging field?

These questions motivated the organization of the “Digital Humanities and Social Sciences Korea Conference,” held on April 25, 2025, at the University of Pennsylvania’s James Joo-Jin Kim Center for Korean Studies, with generous support from the Academy of Korean Studies as part of the Core University Program for Korean Studies and the Kim Center for Korean Studies. At the conference, eight papers were presented across a wide range of disciplines, including art history, communication, cultural studies, history, literature, and sociology. Although the selected papers leaned more heavily toward humanities, the conference itself benefited from interdisciplinary dialogue, including perspectives from social sciences through the involvement of the coeditors whose backgrounds are in political science and sociology. Following the conference presentations and discussions, participants agreed to develop the papers into a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal. After further discussion, we decided to submit the collection to the *Review of Korean Studies*, and we are grateful to the journal for providing an ideal venue for this interdisciplinary conversation. Emily Noh and Hyunjoon Park who organized the conference, served as coeditors. Of the eight papers presented at the conference, six ultimately appeared in this special issue.

This introduction briefly traces the origin and evolution of the special issue while providing an overview of its structure and contributions. Our motivation for the special issue is to engage with a wider audience beyond our conference participants in conversations about the value of *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*. Eight years ago in 2018, Cha (2018) assessed that Korean Studies scholars have “given surprisingly limited attention to computing and digital methods,” a fact that is surprising because of the large, high-quality, and comprehensive archives of digitized source materials available to Koreanists. Digital archives have continued to grow over the years, building on large scale investments on digitization by the South Korean government. Departing from the past, however, recent assessments highlight that Korean Studies has expanded the digital platforms and analytical tools available to Korean Studies scholars, as well as the scope of inquiry to include the digital world (Horváth and De Weerd 2023; Vierthaler 2020). Building on a previous collection of digital Korean Studies compiled by Cha and Wall (2023), we hope our special issue showcases the growing diversity and maturity of digital Korean Studies. By bringing together studies that vary not only in disciplinary orientation but also in methodologies and tools, this special issue provides a rare opportunity

to demonstrate the prospects of Korean Studies as an interdisciplinary field. We hope that the issue will appeal to a broad audience from various disciplines that constitute Korean Studies today. At the same time, putting these papers together naturally reveals fundamental limitations and unresolved challenges facing the current *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*. We return to these issues at the end of this introduction.

Introducing the Special Issue

We have structured the special issue in two sections. Part One groups together four papers that use digital tools such as prosopography, network analysis, text analysis, and geographic information system (GIS) to re-examine traditional historical and sociological questions—specifically how society, land, political concepts, and rights were structured and understood from the Joseon era through the 2010s. To pursue these questions, the authors use digital tools to bring together different aspects of a population’s characteristics, examine the interplay of multiple actors in a given time period, investigate evolution over time, and render visible the gap between reality and what was recorded. Collectively, these four papers demonstrate the significant value of digital methodologies for Korean Studies by showing how computational approaches can uncover patterns and relationships that are difficult to detect through conventional methods alone. Taken together, they highlight the potential of *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*, illustrating how digital tools not only expand access to previously underutilized data but also to enable scholars to connect disparate materials, reassess established interpretations, and generate new perspectives on long-standing historical and sociological questions.

Part Two shifts the focus from data-driven digital methods to symbiotic relations between the digital and human. Both papers also use digital methodologies but substantively focus on the “Digital” as both a medium and a tool for affect, a seemingly non-digital and human quality, by showcasing how human sincerity and emotion are encoded into digital formats—whether through AI-labeled poetic datasets or virtual avatars in K-pop. In his discussion of digital humanities, Vierthaler (2020) distinguished computational analysis from the study of how technology shapes society. Similarly, Horváth (2023) juxtaposed research “*about* the digital” to pursuing research questions “*with* the

digital.” We view Part Two to exemplify the types of *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies* projects that investigate the interplay between the digital and non-digital worlds.

Part One begins with Donghyeok Choi’s paper “Lifespans, Exam-Passing Age, and Careers of Joseon *Yangban*: A Prosopographic Analysis of Linked Biographical Records.” Choi identifies a limitation in existing scholarship that the literature on lifespans and the literature on career trajectories have developed separately despite scholars’ long-standing argument that one’s timing of entry into the bureaucracy strongly shaped their career trajectory in premodern Korea. Choi bridges this gap by constructing and analyzing a dataset that draws from two separate historical sources to link biographical information on Joseon officials to their examination, promotion, and appointment records. A core question driving this project is: Is passing the *gwageo* at a younger age associated with greater career success? Choi finds that yes, it is, more so than the official’s regional roots or *gwageo* performance. Unlike earlier scholarship in *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies* that did so based on the digitization of source materials as they exist in their physical, non-digital forms, Choi’s project brings to light how digital methods can allow Korean Studies scholars to link across source materials to test longstanding arguments in different ways.

Eunkyung Song’s paper “Lasting Themes Beyond Vocabulary Shifts: Human Rights Discourse in South Korea, 1990–2010” also uses digital methods to understand Korean society more comprehensively. As opposed to Choi’s project which links different types of information about a given official that was dispersed across source materials, Song links different domestic actors’ human rights discourse. Song employs computational text analysis to explore how local human rights and civil society organizations, news outlets, and the National Human Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea have jointly produced human rights discourse. To capture this interplay, Song introduces “topic drift”—how vocabulary evolves—and “topic span”—how long an issue stays visible. She demonstrates that the domestic human rights discursive space was heavily dominated by persistent, long-lasting topics, even when their underlying terminology is rapidly updated over time.

A window into how discourse evolves for a given concept in civil society is Hyunchul Cho’s “Refunctioing ‘Civilization’ in Korean Associational Journals, 1906–1909: A Co-Occurrence Network Analysis.” Cho investigates how the

discourse on *munmyeong* (civilization) evolved, drawing from publications of two Korean associational journals. He employs computational co-occurrence network analysis to guide close reading of this discourse and finds that the concept of “civilization” was first linked primarily to the state’s legislation, administration, and sovereignty. By 1908–1909, “civilization” discourse revolved around education efforts to develop “competent agents rather than the reform of state institutions.” Similar to Song’s study applied to contemporary Korea, Cho’s work centers on applications of text analysis to understand how deeply politically consequential concepts and issues have been contested and constructed over time.

Digital methods and tools enable researchers to not only link source materials but also aid scholars to recast source materials as qualitatively different information. A case in point is our last paper in Part One: Sora Kim’s “Making Land Legible: Digital Reconstruction and the Logic of Land-Tax Adjustment in Joseon *Yang’an*.” Kim’s starting point is that late Joseon land-history researchers have “written the history of these lands without knowing where they were located,” because while their source material, the *yang’an*, provides records of the Joseon lands in text form, it does not reveal the actual physical location of the parcels of land. In turn, scholars have had to interpret the information in *yang’an* without knowing whether the records reflected physical reality. JigsawMap, a digital visualization tool, was developed by Kim and others to remedy this limitation. Using JigsawMap, Kim finds that the *yang’an* systematically recorded lands to be smaller than their actual size, and that this was the case more so for dry fields than paddy-fields. This implies that the Joseon state pursued fairness rather than exact records by intentionally calibrating tax burdens based on agricultural productivity levels across field types.

Part Two transitions to the potential of *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies* for bridging the digital and non-digital worlds. Both papers in Part Two show that rather than digital methods and products replacing human sensibility, they can aid human emotions and connection. We first turn to how digital tool-building can help preserve human sensibility. Iro Lim, Haein Ji, and Byungjun Kim’s “KPoEM: A Human-Annotated Dataset for Emotion Classification and RAG-Based Poetry Generation in Korean Modern Poetry” introduces KPoEM and its application. The project highlights a limitation in the scholarship on large language models (LLMs) that computationally analyzing culturally nuanced emotions in literary text is challenging. This is particularly the

case for Korean poetry, because of its high use of metaphors and symbolism. The authors worked with expert annotators to create a Korean poetry-specific dataset of emotion-annotated entries, KPoEM, that reflects the sensibilities, metaphors, and symbolism in Korean modern poetry. The dataset is then used to train models, which then analyze input poems' emotions. It is also used to generate new poems that retain the emotions of a given poem. A core implication of KPoEM and its applications is that digital and computational methods do not inherently abstract away human sensibilities. Instead, they can be used to preserve and reflect human emotions.

Digital platforms can also bridge digital and non-digital worlds by exposing human sensibilities. Berbiguier's "PLAVE: "Virtual Idols" as Best Representatives of K-pop's Humanity" looks at how the K-pop virtual idol group PLAVE crystallizes—instead of replaces—K-pop fans' connection with idols through human authenticity. Berbiguier employs topic modeling to identify thematic patterns on YouTube comments for PLAVE music videos, live performances, and variety show appearances. He finds that the discourse revolves around PLAVE's effort and emotion, despite widespread ambiguity over whether the idol group is AI or real people. What PLAVE reveals is that the connection fans feel to K-pop idols work primarily through human sensibilities such as effort and authenticity, rather than through physical realities. As Berbiguier ends his paper with, "PLAVE is not the future of K-pop; they are its present, being made legible."

Conclusion

The six papers included in this special issue collectively highlight that *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies* facilitate scholarly inquiry in various ways beyond mere computational data-driven analyses. The contributors show that these digital approaches are not simply supplementary techniques but offer powerful research frameworks that allow scholars to pose novel questions and revisit established interpretations in innovative ways. These contributions include empirical investigations of longstanding theory-driven arguments, fresh interpretations of existing source materials, and revelations of non-digital dynamics through the lens of digital phenomena and tools. Ultimately, we hope this collection illustrates how digital scholarship can expand the current scope of

Korean Studies, convincing readers that it represents a transformative approach for the future development of Korean Studies.

However, our collection of six papers also reveals the current limitations and challenges facing *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*. First, the fact that five of the six papers are single-authored stands in stark contrast to the emerging, collective nature of digital scholarship, which particularly thrives on multi-disciplinary, project-based teamwork. While the final paper does feature multiple authors, they are all situated within a single discipline: literature. What does it symptomize? Despite the immense potential of digital scholarship to cross disciplinary boundaries and facilitate collaboration, we still largely see isolated scholars working within specific, traditional fields. Another indicator that the field has not yet fully matured is the disciplinary imbalance within this special issue; only one paper can be classified under social sciences. In other words, our special issue unintentionally reveals the current state of digital scholarship in Korean Studies, which remains predominantly single-authored and heavily concentrated in humanities. These patterns likely reflect institutional and cultural barriers within Korean Studies that continue to hinder cross-disciplinary collaboration.

It is another important omission that our collection does not explicitly address what these institutional and cultural barriers are, and how they shape the specific modes of scholarship, teaching, and training in *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies*. Our six papers focus primarily on the potential of digital tools and methodologies in addressing specific research questions. In other words, they can be classified primarily as studies “with” the digital, although the final two studies touch upon the broader relationships between digital technologies and humans (or human emotions) (Horváth 2023). Consequently, we lack a study that is fundamentally “about” the digital, an inclusion that would have made our special issue more complete and comprehensive. Moving forward, we hope to see more research that critically examines the structural and cultural conditions of contemporary digital scholarship in Korean Studies and how those very conditions shape the current scholarship, including our own.

Fast-evolving technologies represent both challenges and opportunities for future Korean Studies. The future of *Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Korean Studies* must expand to encompass the realities of South Korea as a hyper-digitized, algorithmic society. In an era when the average Korean spends more than half of their free time on digital media, future research must

increasingly turn its gaze toward how AI, algorithms, digital platforms, and other technologies actively construct contemporary Korean society (Song 2025). This can include projects on digital-native phenomena such as how YouTube or Instagram algorithmic recommendations shape political polarization. It can also encompass research on how AI bots reconfigure care and social relations (Choe 2026). While our special issue does not fully address these emerging frontiers, the future of Korean Studies lies not just in adopting digital tools, but in critically analyzing the digital infrastructures that define modern Korean life. Ultimately, we hope the insights and limitations articulated in this special issue serve as a catalyst for this next phase of scholarship—moving us toward a more collaborative, cross-disciplinary, and comprehensive understanding of Korea in the digital age.

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