

Digital Humanities in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

A common feature of the academic landscape of Northeast Asia since the turn of the millennium has been the emergence and establishment of Digital Humanities (DH) as a key field of research. Although the trajectories of development may differ from country to country, it is clear that Digital Humanities can only flourish when certain elements come together. These elements include government policy, large-scale funding, institutional support, digital infrastructure, an atmosphere of interdisciplinary and convergent research, the academic freedom to propose alternative research paradigms, innovative and tenacious researchers, solidarity building and the active sharing of ideas through the formation of research societies and conferences, and academic posts that make it possible to educate and nurture the next generation of researchers.

In this installment of *News from Northeast Asia*, we present an overview of Digital Humanities research in Northeast Asia that touches upon all of the above-mentioned elements.

In “One Among Many: Digital Humanities in China,” Jing Chen of Nanjing University addresses the issues surrounding the introduction and development of Chinese Digital Humanities. Although these issues are seen to have arisen from the unique context of Chinese academia, they will also resonate with DH researchers of other Northeast Asian countries.

The achievements of Taiwanese Digital Humanities are presented by Chijui Hu of National Changhua University of Education in “From Digitization to Digital Humanities: The Development of Digital Humanities in Taiwan.” Here he traces the steps that led to the construction of digital humanities platforms such as the DocuSky Collaboration Platform. The features of the DocuSky Collaboration Platform, which are introduced in detail, well illustrate the innovations of Taiwanese DH researchers.

The remaining two contributions – dealing with Digital Humanities in South Korea and Japan, respectively – shed light on the

foundations that have sustained this new field of research from two different, but equally important, perspectives. In “Trends and Challenges in Korean Digital Humanities,” Intae Ryu of Sungkyunkwan University introduces the Korean government’s past policies that established the digital environment in which Digital Humanities could take root, as well as the current administration’s policies that will hopefully ensure the sustainability of this field of research.

Finally, in “Recent Developments in Digital Japanese Studies,” Paula R. Curtis of The Terasaki Center for Japanese Studies

discusses the efforts of researchers who have been active in hosting events for the sharing and dissemination of research results and who have also come together to create community spaces for Japanese Digital Humanities. Her analysis of the increasing importance of digital-related research in job postings for East Asian Studies illustrates that the future of Digital Humanities in Northeast Asia is bright indeed.

Ilhong Ko, HK Research Professor, Seoul National University Asia Center; Regional Editor of *News from Northeast Asia*, Email: mahari95@snu.ac.kr

One Among Many: Digital Humanities in China

Jing Chen

Since 2009, the year that “Digital Humanities” was translated into Chinese as *shuzi renwen* (数字人文) by Professor Xiaoguang Wang, the field of Digital Humanities has come to receive more and more attention from scholars in mainland China. For example, the first research center for Digital Humanities was established at Wuhan University in 2011. The first Digital Humanities (DH) course came to be offered at the History Department of Nanjing University, the first translated book on DH was published in Beijing, and the first peer-review journal on DH was launched by Renmin University of China. In 2019, the first annual national conference was organized and held by the first national association of DH. Every year, more than a dozen conferences related to Digital Humanities have come to be held across the country. Reports on Digital Humanities have also featured centrally in newspapers – not only in key academic newspapers like *Chinese Social Science Today* (中国社会科学报) but also popular media outlets such as *The Paper* (澎湃). So what do Digital Humanities bring to Chinese academia, and how do scholars benefit from Digital Humanities?

Digital Humanities facilitate, first of all, a transformation of the research model from “institute-driven” to “research-oriented.” In the dawn of Digital Humanities in China, most projects were financially and strategically supported by institutes or governments. This is because the high cost of developing

databases made it difficult for individual scholars in the early 2000s to develop or maintain digital projects without major financial support; the hardware and software for Digital Humanities were also unaffordable for the individual scholar. To ensure their stability and sustainability, DH projects required a host and, therefore, in order to avoid the fate of disappearing, it was unavoidable that projects were primarily driven by the interests of institutes rather than of researchers. Also, it was not easy to directly integrate DH projects into the research of individual scholars. This situation gradually improved as some of the projects completed the digitalization process and moved one step further, allowing researchers to dig deeper into the value of its contents.

Second, in relation to the role of digital technology and tools in humanities studies, scholars are trying to explore the theoretical foundations of Digital Humanities from various perspectives. The value of digital technology is under constant debate in China, and its reconceptualization is a key issue. The common misunderstanding about DH among Chinese scholars concerns how the humanities can benefit directly and quickly from the application of digital technology. Many scholars still hold that digital technology (or Digital Humanities) is more about the innovation of tools or methods, as opposed to being about asking new research questions. They also often assume that DH research projects are primarily about the use of quantitative

methods for studying data. The value of qualitative studies in DH, such as media studies or visualization-related studies, is rarely recognized or even noticed by humanities scholars.

Third, the barriers within and between disciplines, which acted as a serious obstacle in the early stage of Digital Humanities, are slowly disappearing. On one hand, the majority of DH projects are based on the databases and archives of digitized historical documents that are specific to a sub-discipline due to the requirements of funding and hosting. On the other hand, DH practitioners, including creators and users, have research needs that go beyond disciplinary boundaries. If individual scholars lack data analysis skills, they have to collaborate with other experts to conduct cross-disciplinary projects, especially when they involve substantial data processing and advanced digital technologies. Another obstacle is the failure of academic institutions to recognize cross-disciplinary research outcomes. It is hard for scholars to break disciplinary boundaries when they are nested in disciplinary fields and institutional units. They still have to conduct research that is recognized by evaluative systems that are usually unfriendly to new forms of digital humanities research. This is especially the case for individual scholars that are not part of research groups.

Last but not least, cyberinfrastructure has become a key concern of scholars after witnessing, for many years, the repeated construction of projects with the same content. Huge amounts of time, money, and effort have been wasted during these cycles of reproduction. Moreover, many databases are emerging from China at present, but it is not easy to be certain that they command enough resources to remain active, nor that their data will be utilized effectively in research by scholars with the required skill sets.

In the beginning of her essay “The Humanities, Done Digitally,” Kathleen Fitzpatrick asks a question: Are the Digital Humanities singular or plural? This article raises a similar question, but places it in a global context, considering the diversity of approaches to humanities on a worldwide scale. To be sure, in a global context, no single unified definition of Digital Humanities is possible, even if one would desire it. Amidst this plurality of concepts and practices, the scholarly context of Digital Humanities in the Greater China region is starkly different from that of academic communities elsewhere. This is partly due to the unique features of humanities data in Chinese, especially for texts, and also due to the context in which Digital Humanities was introduced, debated, and developed. More importantly, since around the early 2010s, Chinese scholars have been increasingly active in carrying out these discussions online, on WeChat. There are numerous public accounts (known as *gong zhong hao* [公众号]) on WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China. These accounts – akin to blogs that incorporate interactive functions – are devoted to the sharing of electronic resources for research and relevant academic events. These often attract a large following among younger academics, and they have gradually been shaping digital humanities fields and communities.

Jing Chen, Associate Professor, Nanjing University.
Email: cjchen@nju.edu.cn

Notes

- <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3fdb36bfb1e/section/65e208fc-a5e6-479f-9a47-d51cd9c35e84>