

On This Topic



## Mapping North Korean Humanities Research

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### Why North Korean Humanities?

This special issue focuses on humanities research in North Korea. When many people think of North Korea, the nuclear crisis or the food crisis come to mind. North Korea is either demonized as an *axis of evil* that poses a threat to humanity, or is presented as a subject of pity in need of humanitarian relief. While many people are interested in North Korea, they often forget that there are human beings living there, with their own history and a love of literature.

How do North Koreans perceive themselves, what kind of world do they live in, and what kind of knowledge have North Korean scholars provided to their fellow citizens? In this special issue, we go beyond a review of individual studies produced by North Korean humanities researchers to examine the characteristics of and changes in North Korean humanities itself by mapping the academic community as a whole. In doing so, we hope to shed light not only on North Korea, but also on modern academia, especially on humanities research on the periphery. Furthermore, we hope to lay the groundwork for a better understanding of North Korean society and for reconciliation and cooperation with its people.

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## Background to the Special Issue

There is a large body of research on the humanities in North Korea. I would like to introduce here some of the studies that informed the planning of this special issue, focusing on research conducted in South Korea. First, there is Kang Ho-je's study outlining the North Korean academic system (Kang 2007). Although Kang's focus is on science and technology, that study provides important information about the organization and evolution of North Korea's Academy of Sciences.

In the post-democratic South, the desire to understand North Korean society has led to a wave of research on North Korean historiography. These studies were undertaken with the aim of overcoming the academic divide by introducing the achievements of North Korean historiography to South Korean society (Chung et al. 1989; Ahn and Doh 1990). South Korea's National Institute of Korean History (Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe) analyzed North Korean historiography according to period and theme. This led to the systematic organization of North Korean historiography, including its institutional aspects (NIKH 2002a, 2003a, 2003b, 2004a, 2004b). More recently, a critical analysis based on reflections on nationalism in modern historiography has also emerged (D. H. Chung 2001; North Korean Historiography Research Group 2003).

In the field of archaeology, access to North Korean scholarly sources has led to the emergence of studies that provide an overview of North Korean archaeology (e.g. S. Yi 1992). Since the 2000s, North Korean archaeology has been analyzed and evaluated based on newly available archaeological data (e.g. K. Yi 2015). Several academic societies have also held conferences on North Korean archaeology (e.g. KRAS 2016). Meanwhile, from 2007, the National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage (Gungnip munhwajae yeonguwon) conducted a joint inter-Korean excavation of the remaining Goryeo palaces in Gaeseong (Kaesong), North Korea, to prepare for the nomination of the "Historic Monuments and Sites in Kaesong" as a World Heritage Site.

Research on North Korean literature also began in earnest after the democratization of South Korean society and the new access to the work of

North Korean writers. Kim Jae-yong laid the foundation for the study of North Korean literature by undertaking a diachronic study of the changes in the system and theory of North Korean literature (J. Kim 1994). North Korean literary studies have tended to center on changes in party-led literary theory and policy, but more recent studies have focused on reconstructing various aspects of North Korean literature from a new perspective.

First, individual books and media contents are being studied to reconstruct the production and distribution processes of North Korean literature, and to shed light on the country's cultural infrastructure. In 2018, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the release of North Korean writers, the Han Sang-eon Cinema Institute organized the exhibition "Pyongyang Bookstore," which brought North Korean literature, music, art, theater, and film books, posters, and paintings to the public. The exhibition showcased the richness of North Korean culture in the 1950s and 1960s and the social foundations of the country's state-led culture (Han 2018). Kim Seong-su provided a comprehensive review of the (North) Korean Writers' Alliance's organizational magazine, *Joseon munhak* (Korean Literature), highlighting the tension between party-led policies and North Korean literature (S. Kim 2020).

Second, the connections between North Korean literature and world literature are being highlighted. Park Tae-il and Park Jinyoung reconstructed the activities of two representative North Korean translators, Baek Seok and Lim Hak-su, respectively, and explored the meaning of world literature in North Korean translation theory and socialist education (T. Park 2020; J. Park 2015). Zhao Yingqiu and Ko Ja-yeon shed light on aspects and meanings of cultural exchanges between North Korea and socialist countries, focusing on North Korean writers' travels to the Soviet Union and participation in Asian and African writers' conferences (Zhao 2021; J. Ko 2019).

Itagaki Ryuta recently published a monograph on the life and work of North Korean linguist Kim Su-gyeong (Itagaki 2021). Kim was a brilliant linguist who studied at Keijō Imperial University and led the standardization of the North Korean language. Itagaki's study of North Korean linguistics shows its continuity with colonialism, the influence of North Korean

politics, and its relationship with Soviet linguistics, providing a new direction for North Korean humanities research.

### Characteristics of and Changes in North Korean Academia

Let us now examine the characteristics of and changes in North Korean humanities academia over time, with a focus on historical studies, to better contextualize the articles comprising this special issue.

North Korean academia has its origins in the academic system and infrastructure created by the Japanese during the colonial period, and with the efforts of Koreans to pioneer their own scholarship. However, during the colonial period, most higher education institutions were located in Seoul. Intellectuals who traveled from Seoul to Pyongyang to build a new socialist country following liberation began their studies under difficult conditions. Most of them, of course, had studied in Japanese academia.

Colonial Korea of the 1930s, often referred to as the birth period of modern Korean academia, was an incubator for what became North Korean humanities. The debate among Marxist historians in 1930s Korea over how to view world history's universality and Asia's specificity was replayed in North Korea in the 1950s. Further, the study of Joseon Korea's *silhak* (practical learning) was a key theme of the Joseonhak (Korean studies) movement of colonial Korea, which was led by nationalists and included some socialists such as Paik Nam-un. This study of *silhak* later developed in earnest in North Korea (Hong 2014).

The Soviet influence on North Korean academia and culture was overwhelming in the early years of the country's founding. Under the slogan "Learn from the Soviet Union," Soviet studies were actively introduced and embraced. The orthodox Marxist-Leninist theories adopted from Soviet historiography, along with the *socialist realism* emphasized in Soviet literature since the 1930s and the *national history* narrative established in Soviet historiography, shaped the direction of North Korean humanities in the early years of its founding (Hong 2020).

By the 1960s, nationalism was on the rise in North Korea. Juche had

been established as the state ideology, replacing Marxism. History and literature also moved away from the orthodox tenets of socialism to emphasize the nationalist Juche ideology. State intervention and censorship in academia also intensified (Hong 2022). The goal of this special issue is to examine how the humanities in North Korea have changed under such circumstances.

### **Digital Humanities Methodology**

This special issue is the byproduct of a project for the construction of a North Korean Humanities Data Archive (NKHDA), conducted by the Institute of Humanities at Seoul National University. NKHDA was built over a three-year period from 2020 to 2022 with the support of the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies. NKHDA represents the result of the application of digital humanities methodology to North Korean humanities research.

With the widespread digitization of humanities materials and research results in the 21st century, the sharing of humanities knowledge on the web is steadily expanding. North Korean humanities research is no exception to this trend. NKHDA has adopted semantic data processing, which is a qualitative approach to digital humanities. Semantic data processing is a methodology suitable for humanities research because it aims to organize various layers of information contained in different types of documents into a homogeneous format while reproducing the complex semantic relationships between them as much as possible (H. Kim et al. 2016).

NKHDA adopted a wiki as a platform for describing and compiling data by multiple people in a web environment. A wiki is a software engine that compiles information in a simple markup language, a database that organizes and accumulates the compiled information, and a website for sharing all of these in a web environment (J. Kim et al. 2021). The widely used Wikipedia is a prime example.

NKHDA was inspired by two digital archives, “Linked Jazz” and “Enslaved.” NKHDA’s debt to these two projects is that it centers on “person”

data, which was implemented as a Knowledge Graph, and takes the compilation of Triple (S-P-O) data as the core of its data construction task (Heller 2016; Shimizu et al. 2023).

The application of digital humanities methodologies to the study of North Korean humanities is largely due to the vast amount of research and information accumulated in the South. The National Institute of Korean History has accomplished the feat of archiving North Korean academia itself by cataloging historical materials and research output from the North. This is an important foundation for building a digital database (NIKH 2001, 2002b). The National Research Institute of Cultural Heritage has also published a list of articles from North Korean archaeological journals such as *Joseon gogo yeongu* (Joseon Archaeological Research) (NRICH 2017a, 2017b). Based on this, a meta-analysis of North Korean archaeology was conducted (I. Ko 2018).

In the aforementioned study on *Joseon munhak* by Kim Seong-su, the media analysis table, which summarizes the bibliographical information, accounts for more than half of the total. In the future, when the database containing information related to *Joseon munhak* is released in the digital web environment, it will open a new horizon in the study of North Korean literature.

## Introduction to the Articles

This special issue includes three articles. The article, by Ryu Intae and Hong Jong-wook, is a full report on the project for constructing the North Korean Humanities Data Archive. This article first summarizes the theoretical and technical background of NKHDA. It is a systematic and comprehensive explanation of the aforementioned characteristics of and changes in North Korean academia and digital humanities methodology. This article also describes the process of building the NKHDA and introduces the trials and errors in that process. In designing the ontology and creating the triple data, efforts were made to capture the characteristics of the North Korean humanities, which are historically connected to colonial Korea and

contemporaneously connected to Soviet academia. At the same time, the process did not lose sight of the state-driven nature of the humanities in North Korea, something that becomes evident in the process of archiving the materials and tracing the development of debates. The article by Ryu and Hong also introduces how NKHDA, which combines network knowledge graphs and wiki pages, can function as an educational platform for North Korean humanities and digital humanities in university classrooms.

The following article, by Ko Ilhong, analyzes the academic journal *Joseon Archaeological Research* (*Joseon gogo yeongu*) using digital humanities methodology to reveal the characteristics of the North Korean archaeological community and its changes over time. Ko visualizes the results of bibliometric analysis using semantic networks along with word clouds to demonstrate the efficiency of digital humanities approaches for large data sets. In this study, the bibliographic data of *Joseon gogo yeongu*, rather than its contents, have been selected as the subject of analysis. This methodological approach was influenced by the philosophy and goals of *distant reading*, a concept that originally emerged in the context of literary criticism but has since been used in the production of intellectual histories in a wide range of disciplines (Underwood 2016). In so doing, Ko reveals the existence of certain archaeologists whose importance has been overlooked in the discourse on North Korean archaeology in the South.

Next, Kim Heon's article is a comparative analysis of the prefaces of three translations of *The Iliad* by Lim Hak-Su composed at different times. Lim Hak-Su, who studied in the English Department of Keijō Imperial University in Japanese colonial Korea, first published his translation of *The Iliad* in 1940–1941, at the height of the Second Sino-Japanese War. The book's preface begins with a rave review of *The Iliad* and maintains an emotional and romantic tone throughout. Lim Hak-Su, who participated in the founding of North Korea and went on to become a professor at Kim Il Sung University, published a second translation in 1963. In his preface to this edition, Lim defined Homer's *Iliad* as a "people's epic" and referenced Marx and Engels to support his assessment of *The Iliad*. In the preface to his third translation, published in 1989, the perspectives of Marx and Engels are removed and the teachings of Kim Il-sung are introduced. While Kim

Heon's study does not directly apply a digital humanities methodology, it does share a research question with other members of the North Korean humanities research team in that it focuses on historical continuity with the colonial period and the contemporary influence of socialist knowledge centered on the Soviet Union.

One more paper was prepared for this special issue. Jang Moon-seok and Choi Kyung-hee proposed to understand North Korea's publication of the *World Literature Anthology* (*Segye munhak seonjip*) as a state-led monumental cultural project. Their paper argues that the publication of the *World Literature Anthology* was a self-making project in which North Korea invented a literary language all while educating the sensibilities of the country's emerging reading public. This paper by Jang and Choi is complementary to Kim's in that Lim's translation of *The Iliad* appeared in the first volume of that *World Literature Anthology*. Due to the authors' circumstances, this paper regrettably could not be published as part of the current special issue, but it is expected to be published soon in a future issue of the *Korea Journal*. Readers are encouraged to refer to this paper as well.



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