

# Chapter 5

## Digital Humanities in Singapore

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### ABSTRACT

*In Singapore, digital humanities (DH) is inclusive of the larger spectrum of the humanities, including not only its traditional disciplines (e.g., languages and literature, philosophy, law, geography, history, art history, musicology) but also anthropology, heritage studies, museum studies, performing arts, and visual arts. Multilingual, interdisciplinary, and audiovisual projects are particularly prominent. A community is growing around an emergent concept of DH, and it is developing results mainly in society-driven research projects. Although the DH label is relatively new, and DH dialogue across Singapore institutions is at its early stages, Singapore-based researchers have carried out digital research for decades. An increasing number of projects are home-grown, but several projects have also migrated to Singapore recently due to the high degree of mobility at Singaporean institutions. Current trends suggest that the next stage of DH history in Singapore will include the development of more formal institutions and more participation in global DH conversations.*

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## **INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>**

The historical, financial and geographical characteristics of Singapore have made it an ideal place for the development of digital repositories and digital methods for the study of the humanities. However, until very recently the research teams active in this field did not explicitly label their efforts as Digital Humanities (DH). This has changed as the DH label has come to be seen as strategically useful, and as workshops and other activities have brought together researchers from different disciplines and institutions. There are two main initiators of DH projects in Singapore: individual researchers coming from specific disciplines and institutions (primarily libraries, archives and universities). Unlike in other countries, DH incubators and labs are only just beginning to be implemented. As of yet there are no specialized departments, research centers or tenure-stream faculty appointments expressly labeled as DH.

Many scholars arrived to the field of DH incidentally, as a result of pursuing specific questions that required or benefited from digital methods, rather than from a commitment to DH as a discipline or field per se. Thus, most people engage in what Golumbia (2013) has termed the “narrow” view of digital humanities as “tools and archives” rather than DH as a critical analysis or perspective. As a result, DH projects and publications have been directed to the specialized readership of the researcher’s home discipline (e.g., philology, history, geography, literature, and theatre studies) rather than to a general DH audience.

There is, however, an incipient group of scholars and information science professionals formed by members from across different disciplines and institutions – Digital Humanities Singapore – which runs a website and an online discussion list.<sup>2</sup> The group also organizes periodic events, but it has yet to be constituted as a formal organization.

This chapter offers an overview of DH in Singapore as an incipient label often used retroactively to contextualize longer histories of intellectual innovation. This bird’s eye view of the field has been compiled by three Singapore-based researchers who are themselves actively developing interdisciplinary and cross-institutional dialogues around DH. We avoid giving our judgment about what DH should be, instead trying to report on as many views of DH as we have found in informal surveys, and a comprehensive investigation of online DH materials in Singapore.

This overview starts with the two main initiators of DH projects in Singapore: researchers and institutions. The institutions considered include national bodies (archives and libraries) as well as universities. When analyzing the role of universities, we pay specific attention to the complex web portals they are developing with the specific aim of furthering digital scholarship. Next, we offer a comprehensive list of projects active in Singapore, distinguishing between those that were developed here, and those which originated elsewhere and then migrated to Singapore. Later

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