Chapter 6
"Humanities Content" and Its Discontent:
Reshaping Digital Humanities in South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the remarkable but peculiar history of digital humanities and its contemporary development in South Korea. Computer-assisted humanities research in Korean studies began with the Wagner-Song Munkwa Project, which was launched in 1967 and lasted for more than three decades. This landmark achievement inspired many database-building projects, including the Sillok Project, in the following years. In the early 2000s, as a new discourse of "digital humanities" emerged in response to the "crisis" of the humanities in South Korean academia, another effort to connect the humanities through digital media to the culture industry gained momentum. "Humanities content" has since dominated the South Korean digital humanities landscape for over a decade. While recovering major digital humanities-related accomplishments, this chapter reveals that constant tension between the non-commercial, academic digital humanities and the commercial, industrial humanities content has been shaping and reshaping computer-assisted humanities scholarship in South Korea.

INTRODUCTION

The field of digital humanities in South Korea, if defined as humanistic studies with digital methodologies, dates back as early as the 1960s when the Wagner-Song Munkwa Project was launched. Edward W. Wagner and Jun-ho Song worked together on this ground-breaking project for over three decades and left indelible footprints, not only on the study of Korean history but also in the field of South Korean digital humanities. In the 1980s, largely influenced by this historical research project, the traditional Korean philosophy scholar H. Kim (2012) almost single-handedly pioneered the new field of what he would later call "humanities informatics." His primary interest was in digitizing and creating databases of a vast number of East Asian classic texts. His herculean efforts eventually led to the digital publication of Sillok, a publicly accessible database of five centuries of Veritable Records of the Joseon Dynasty, in 1995. Since then, the field of South Korean digital humanities has developed along several different paths while accumulating a number of meaningful accomplishments. After discussing the Wagner-Song Munkwa Project and the Sillok Project in more detail, the following chapter will examine a few significant efforts and achievements that were made in the 1990s and early 2000s to implement new ideas about digital humanities in research and education. It, then, covers the emergence and development of the field of so-called "Humanities Content," which has dominated the South Korean digital humanities scene for the past 15 years or so. The author critically reviews its fascinating trajectory, along with its major contributions and drawbacks. The author also introduces recent heated debates over the commercial aspect of humanities content, which reflect growing dissatisfaction with humanities content, and an equally strong mounting desire to forge an alternative practice for the digital humanities. This chapter will conclude by recovering persistent attempts to practice non-commercial digital humanities by outlining recent achievements in the scholarship.

EARLY PRACTICES OF HUMANITIES COMPUTING

The earliest known example of computer-assisted humanities research in Korean studies is the Wagner-Song Munkwa Project. Munkwa was the higher civil service examinations for the recruiting of government officials during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). In 1967, Wagner and Song began to collaborate on the bold project of digitizing and developing a database of Pangmok - the official records of those who passed Munkwa examinations from 1392 to 1894. They worked on this project for over 30 years in order to reconstruct the detailed social networks of the ruling elites in Joseon by computerizing the personal and familial information of more than

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