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The Shape of the Asiascape: Ten Years of Digital Asia Research

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Abstract

This article reviews a decade of research, published in the journal *Asiascape: Digital Asia* (DIAS), that explored the question of how digital technologies and their usage have shaped – and have been shaped by – societies, politics, and economies across the Asian region. It discusses the kind of scholarship that DIAS has published, and on which topics, before giving an overview of the contributions that form this anniversary issue. The article concludes by offering thoughts on the future of digital Asia research.

Keywords

Asia – area studies – digital technology – meta-analysis – methodology

1 Introduction

With this issue, *Asiascape: Digital Asia* (DIAS) celebrates its tenth birthday. A decade has passed since a small group of researchers and editors in Leiden discussed the lack of an academic platform that focused explicitly on digital developments in Asia, and they concluded that a new journal should play this role. These discussions led to an ambitious project: an attempt to create an outlet for cutting-edge research that combined the sensibilities of area-studies scholarship (its concerns with local and regional contexts, positionality, mobility) with the multitude of disciplinary approaches for studying digital technologies and their implications. To this end, we assembled an international editorial team of scholars from diverse backgrounds and organized an

international conference in The Hague that led to the publication of the inaugural issue in early 2014. Since then, DIAS has published over sixty reviews and nearly a hundred research articles, each dealing in its own unique way with the core question driving the journal: how have digital technologies and their usage shaped – and been shaped by – societies, politics, and economies across Asia?

This tenth anniversary offers an opportunity to pause and reflect on this endeavour. For this special issue, we invited a multi-disciplinary group of scholars to take stock of advances and trends in their respective disciplines and to describe what the past decade of digital Asia research has revealed about dynamics in the region and its various digital societies. Are there national or regional internets that form an 'Asiascape', and how do they differ from the 'global' internet? Does 'digital Asia' truly exist and, if so, in what guises? What concerns motivate research in different parts of 'digital Asia', and do those concerns respond to one another? And which sources and methodologies can we use to answer these questions?

In this article, I review how our journal has tackled these questions over the past ten years. I also discuss the kind of scholarship that DIAS has published, and on which topics, before giving an overview of the contributions in this anniversary issue. To conclude, I offer some thoughts on the future of digital Asia research.

2 Digital Asia: Taking Stock of the Field

One of the goals of DIAS has always been to cast a wide net, without dictating what should constitute scholarship on digital Asia. In fact, our first issues explicitly problematized the assumptions that often inform debates about digital Asia. Our inaugural issue revisited the way in which digital technology is often understood as emancipatory 'liberation' tech (see Schneider & Goto-Jones 2014). With the events of the so-called Arab Spring still fresh in many minds, our contributors complicated the often-techno-centric (and, at times, Western-centric) arguments about technology and empowerment. They did so through nuanced studies of mobile technology use (Hjorth 2014; Liu 2014), new social movements and internet activism (Hung 2014; Postill 2014), and videogame politics (Goto-Jones 2014).

A year later, our second special issue explored the extent to which it makes sense to speak of digital Asia (Schneider & Goto-Jones 2015). How should we unpack loaded terms such as 'digital' and 'Asia' in the first place, and what is the source of risks and opportunities from thinking in these terms? This discussion drew attention to the way in which Asian studies scholars have treated Asia

as a method (Duara 2015, channelling Chen 2010), how gaming explorations (Goto-Jones 2015), network theories (Schneider 2015), and digital humanities paradigms (Cha 2015) might prompt us to think about positionality and space in new ways, and how the transnational movement of media might require a new understanding of the 'region' (Lamarre 2015).

All these concerns have remained influential topics of research and debate in DIAS. The issues of activism and resistance have been popular (e.g. Azlan 2020; Beta 2020; Duong 2019; Lengauer 2022; Liew & Abidin 2020; Pan 2017; Sharma 2020; see also Barendregt & Schneider 2020). The same can be said of questions about space (see, in particular, Gairola & Roth 2019), for instance with regard to digital space and heritage (Müller 2019), 'hybrid media' spaces (Postill & Epafra 2018), the connection between digital practices and physical (often urban) space (Ruiz Andrade 2019; Sharma 2022; Sneep 2019; Swaminathan 2015; Wang 2020), and the many different ways in which actors construct and manage 'digital space', whether through national policy and state control (Leong 2016) or capitalist market dynamics (Roth 2019). These themes are as relevant today as they were then, and several of the contributions to this anniversary issue follow up on these earlier concerns.

But what have been the most attractive topics of research in DIAS? For a bird's-eye view, I compiled the words that appeared most frequently in the abstracts of DIAS articles (Figure 1) and in the keywords provided by authors to describe their work (Figure 2). As it turns out, 'activism', 'social movements', and 'space' appear frequently but so do broader concepts such as 'culture', 'economy', and 'religion', the latter often represented by scholarship on digital practices and Islam (e.g. Beta 2020; Muslim 2017; Nisa 2018; Postill & Epafra 2018; Schäfer 2018; for an overview, see Slama & Barendregt 2018). Studies about mobile technology were particularly numerous (e.g. Hjorth 2014; Liu 2014; Nizaruddin 2022; Pan 2017; Sneep 2019; Yoon & Jin 2016) and so were articles about 'new' and social media (e.g. Fahadi 2022; Kermani 2020; Seto 2020, Sharbaugh & Nguyen 2014; Tapsell 2014). Throughout, the most common concerns among scholars tended to be 'political' – a term with high frequency (Farooq 2022; Hicks 2017; Hussain & Lee 2021; Schmidt 2018; Sheikh 2021; Yang & Kang 2021), for instance, with regard to questions of citizenship and community (see Schneider 2019) as well as participation and democracy (see Lee 2021). In scholarship that explored digital China, politics was of particular interest, frequently involving issues that mirrored common themes in contemporary studies on China – specifically concerning state regulation and governance, censorship and propaganda, and the potential for civic participation in authoritarian contexts (Benney 2014; Brussee 2022; Creemers 2018; Gu 2021; Huang 2018; Jin & Yang 2016; Liu 2014; Pan 2017).



FIGURE 1 Wordcloud of the most common terms in DIAS abstracts, vols. 1–9



FIGURE 2 Wordcloud of the most common terms listed among DIAS article keywords, vols. 1–9

A keyword that is exceptionally frequent in DIAS is ‘platform’. To some extent, this reflects the empirical interest of many scholars in specific social media environments – for instance, in the interfaces, contents, and everyday practices on Sina Weibo (Benney 2014; Brussee 2022), Instagram (Beta 2020; Nisa 2018; Oskuie et al. 2020; Sharma 2022), Telegram (Kermani 2020; Nizaruddin 2022), Twitter (Azlan 2020), Facebook (Duong 2019; Sharbaugh & Nguyen 2014), WeChat (Svensson 2017), and WhatsApp (Nizaruddin 2022). At the same time,

the term has served many of our authors as a conceptual anchor, tying their work to broader academic debates over media convergence and digital infrastructures (e.g. Lamarre 2017; Tapsell 2014). In this way, they are connected to influential work by media and communication studies scholars such as Henry Jenkins (2008), Tarleton Gillespie (2010), and José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal (2018).

Like other area-studies scholars, such as Dal Yong Jin (2015), contributors to this journal have critiqued the overreliance on American cases in such debates and have reinvented the concept of the 'platform' in ways that open up a much wider range of local and regional processes for analysis. This has certainly been the case for the contributions to a themed issue that dealt specifically with 'regional platforms' (Jin 2017; Lamarre 2017; Li 2017; Mukherjee & Singh 2017; Steinberg 2017; for an introduction, see Steinberg & Li 2017). However, the concept also informed debates in Chinese-speaking contexts (e.g. Hou 2022), especially in the study of livestreaming activities (Gu 2021; Qu 2021; Yang & Kang 2021; Zhang 2021; for an introduction, see Zhang & de Seta 2021), and it was a popular touchstone for exploring the transformative power of digital platforms in contemporary India (Dey 2022; Eapen 2022; Farooq 2022; Nizaruddin 2022; Raval & Lalvani 2022; for a general introduction, see Mukherjee & Nizaruddin 2022).

Much more could be said about the many themes covered by contributors to DIAS over the past decade, but I limit myself here to the variety of methodological approaches applied in these studies. In general, and at the risk of over-simplifying, research in DIAS has tended to follow methods that are common in three different but connected fields of scholarship: (1) media, communication, and cultural studies, (2) social and cultural anthropology, and (3) political science, political economy, and law.

Those in the first field predominantly examined media contents, for example, social media posts, blogs, hashtags, websites, and online videos (e.g. Fahadi 2022; Farooq 2022; Kermani 2020; Lengauer 2022; Löschke 2022; Oskuie et al. 2020; Pissin 2015; Schmidt 2018; Sharbaugh & Nguyen 2014; Sharma 2022; Singh 2021). It also included analyses of online networks (Schneider 2015; van Klinken 2017) as well as interface and platform dynamics (Benney 2014; Brussee 2022; Hou 2022) that applied methodologies familiar in social network analysis (e.g. Scott 2012) and science and technology studies (e.g. Light et al. 2016). Somewhat related in concern, though less focused on content and more on media effects, were studies that deployed survey work, experiments, and focus-group studies to explore how digital communication affected opinions and practices (Al-Sumait et al. 2021; Jin & Yang 2016; Yoon & Vargas 2016). Finally, studies on videogames and digital play also often took a

media-centric approach but combined their analyses of game technology with first-hand experiential research (Goto-Jones 2014, 2015; Roth 2015; see also Jin & Schneider 2016). In this, they leaned towards the auto-ethnographic, and to some degree their techniques were comparable with those often used in anthropological research.

Indeed, anthropology-inspired approaches have been popular in DIAS. Numerous authors used either traditional ethnographic and interview approaches to explore the everyday use of digital technologies (Hussain & Lee 2021; Kripe 2019; Lim 2021; Lin 2016; Mukherjee & Singh 2017; Ruiz Andrade 2019; Snee 2019; Uddin, Faisal, & Zannat 2019; Yoon & Jin 2016; Zhang 2016), or they took inspiration from 'netnographic', 'virtual', and 'embedded' methods such as those proposed by Hine (2005), Kozinets (2010), and Hjorth et al. (2017). These studies transposed or updated ethnographic methods for use in digital contexts (e.g. Gu 2021; Hjorth 2014; Ismangil 2018; Liew & Abidin 2020; Muslim 2017; Nisa 2018; Nizaruddin 2022; Qu 2021; Sheikh 2021; Svensson 2017; Zhang 2021).

Finally, scholars of law, politics, and the economy focused on the study of markets, industries, and state regulation to explore how specific digital issues were governed and how they affected social processes more broadly. This includes the role of the state and its policies (Creemers 2018; van der Veere 2019), industry dynamics and digital innovation (Ip & Che 2016; Keane & Chen 2017), and regional media ecologies (Lamarre 2015; Tapsell 2014), and it also often extended to questions of political economy, for instance, with regard to the labour exploitation involved in producing smartphones (Qiu & Lin 2017) and so-called gig work (Raval & Lalvani 2022).

Of course, these various approaches are not mutually exclusive, and many of the studies cited here use multi-disciplinary and mixed-methods perspectives that combine interests in content, practice, and socio-political context. They include Azlan (2020), who seamlessly tied Twitter analyses to participant observation techniques, Fahadi (2022), who combined content analyses and netnographic research, and Brussee (2022), who shows how the commercial platform Sina Weibo is connected to China's state system of digital governance (Brussee 2022).

As many of these articles illustrate, most studies in DIAS have focused on a specific country. This is understandable, considering the language barriers and institutional divides within university departments, which are often reproduced in scholarship on digital Asia. In some cases, the nature of the subject may well channel scholars into national contexts, perhaps because a specific nation-state is building a national digital infrastructure, of which China is arguably the most high-profile example (see also Leong 2016). Although this

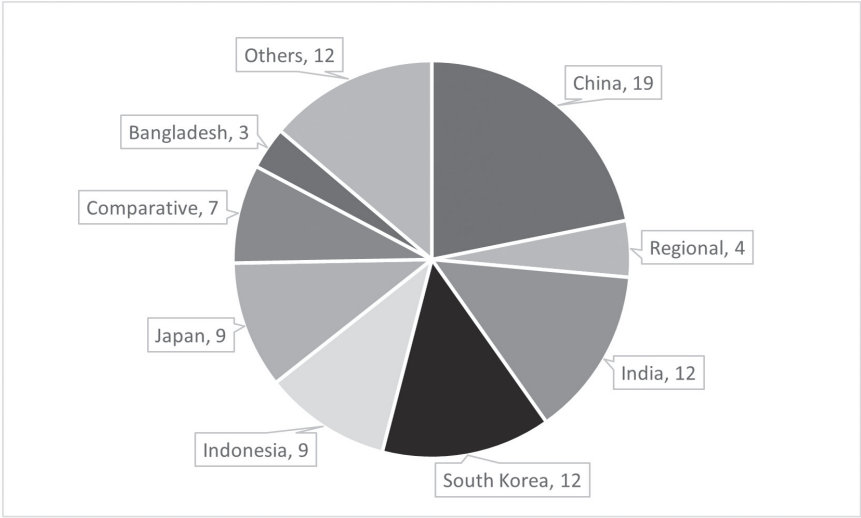


FIGURE 3 Geographic focus of DIAS articles, vols. 1–9

focus may be justifiable, especially when scholars are interested in neatly defined cases on platforms that are, at least to some degree, country specific (e.g. Kakao in South Korea, Sina Weibo in China), it risks producing what the migration scholars Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002: 302) call ‘methodological nationalism’: research that accepts, either empirically or conceptually, the nation-state as ‘the natural social and political form of the modern world’. Except for the introductions to various special issues, almost all of which took a regional approach, only nine DIAS publications explicitly moved away from this paradigm and put their research focus on regional dynamics (Duara 2015; Grincheva 2019; Lamarre 2015, 2017; Schneider 2015) or comparative perspectives (Leong 2016; Schäfer 2018; Tapsell 2014; Wang 2020). All other contributions had a national focus (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 also shows that, in terms of single-country studies, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) attracted the most attention, followed by India and South Korea, and then Indonesia and Japan. Other locales received far less attention, such as Bangladesh (Hussain & Lee 2021; Sharma 2020; Uddin et al. 2019), Iran (Kermani 2020; Oskuie et al. 2020), Malaysia (Azlan 2020; Postill 2018), Singapore (Kripe 2019; Liew & Abidin 2020), Taiwan (Hung 2014; Yang & Kang 2021), Vietnam (Duong 2019; Sharbaugh & Nguyen 2014), Kuwait (Al-Sumait et al. 2021), and Macau (Lin 2016). Although this still provides an impressively diverse range of contexts, especially when combined with the regional and comparative articles in DIAS, it still produces an imbalance that risks becoming a blind spot. In its first ten years, DIAS did not have any

research on Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, or Thailand. It had no contributions focused just on Hong Kong. The Arab world was woefully underrepresented, and Central Asia was entirely absent (though it is noteworthy that DIAS received a series of submissions from Kazakhstan in 2022, all of which unfortunately fell outside the journal's thematic scope). The research in DIAS has been diverse, but it can still benefit from fresh viewpoints and contexts that so far have been underrepresented.

Representation in DIAS is generally difficult to assess, as the journal does not keep track of detailed demographic data on its contributors. The background, e.g. ethnicity or gender, of authors is hard to establish with any certainty. However, based on published biographies of the authors, it appears that almost two-thirds of the DIAS authors employ male, rather than female, pronouns (see Figure 4), which indicates a worrying gender imbalance that sadly mirrors imbalances in academia more generally (see Times Higher Education & UNESCO 2022). This imbalance was most pronounced early in the journal's publication and has improved somewhat over time (see Figure 5), but it remains a matter of concern.

Similarly, the imbalance in the contributors' home institutions of higher education at the time that their work was published in DIAS should be cause for concern. Most of these institutions are located in Europe or Asia, followed by North America and Australia (see Figure 6). While this means that many contributors come from Asia (and the data cannot tell us anything about

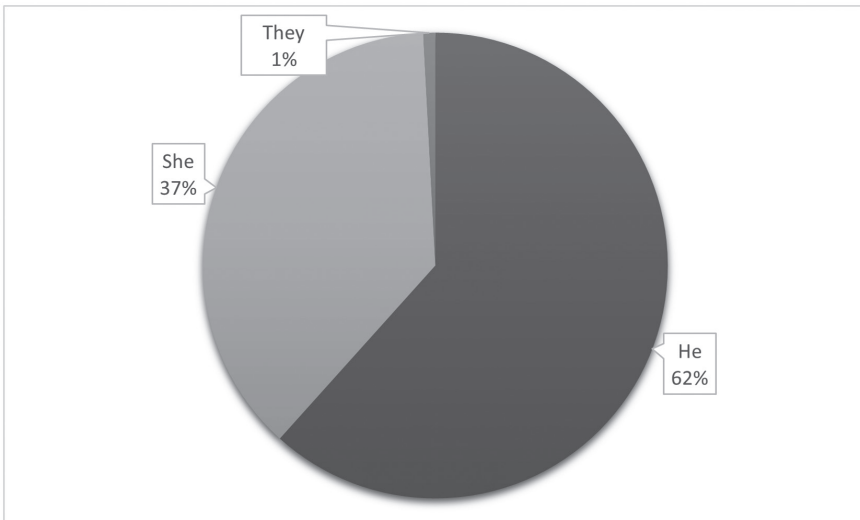


FIGURE 4 Preferred pronouns in author biographies, DIAS, vols. 1–9

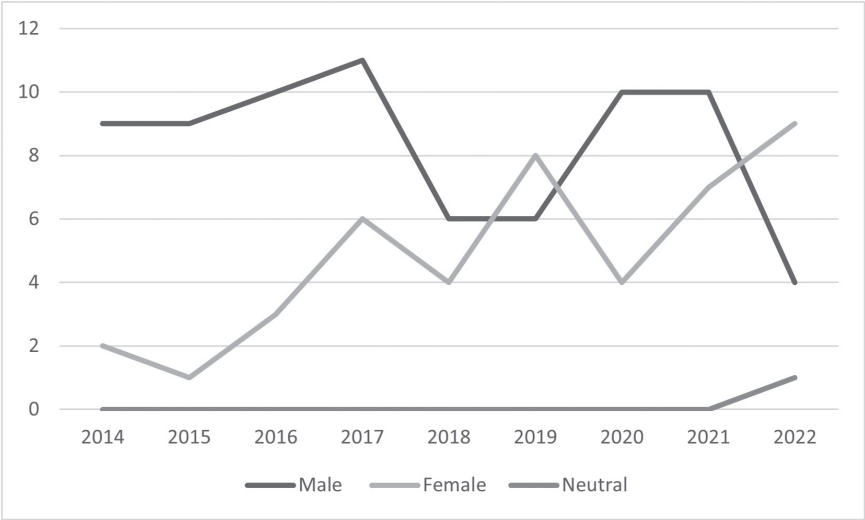


FIGURE 5 Evolution in author pronouns over time, DIAS, vols. 1–9

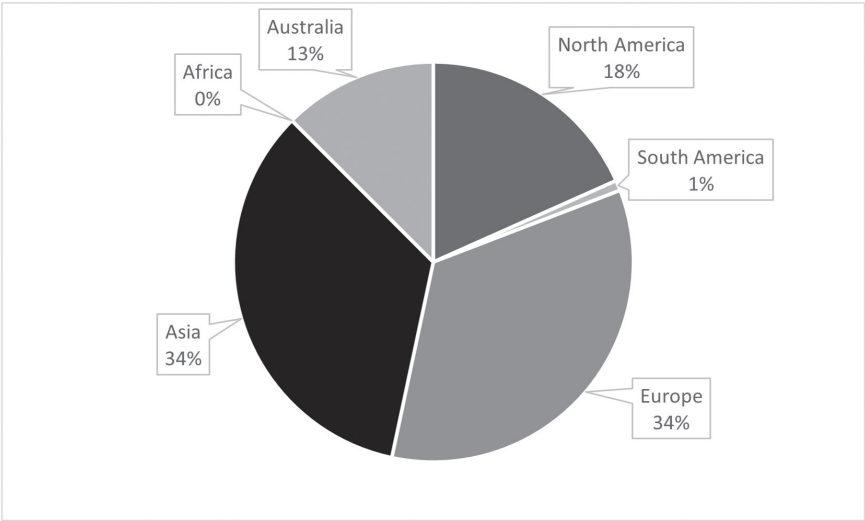


FIGURE 6 Author institutional affiliation by continent (at the time of the respective publication), DIAS, vols. 1–9

Asian scholars at institutions located in Europe or America), the bias towards often-prestigious universities in the Global North is evident.

Reflecting the history of the journal's inception, the majority of authors in Europe were based in the Netherlands (see Figure 7), often at Leiden University. Behind the Dutch universities were German and UK institutions, as well as

a few Scandinavian universities, but South European and Eastern European institutions were not represented. In Asia, authors mainly worked in India, China and Hong Kong, Bangladesh, Japan, Iran, and Kuwait, though the last two are well represented mostly because a small number of articles had a large number of co-authors. Some had sole authors who also came from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia, yet, as with the regional focus discussed above, Central Asian institutions of higher learning were not represented in DIAS. Even more glaringly, none of the authors came from South American or African institutions – and this is also true of readers who access DIAS articles. Full user data is confidential, but all the top-10 institutions that subscribe to the journal are prestigious universities located in Europe and North America. Individual download requests had more diverse origins, with many more requests from readers located in Asia, but almost none from countries in South America and Africa (other than Brazil and South Africa).

This is a potentially crippling omission, because it means that DIAS’s conversations about ‘digital Asia’ have been taking place predominantly among scholars from the northern hemisphere, joined to some extent by colleagues from South and Southeast Asia, but without large portions of the global majority in other parts of the world. In this respect, these statistics reflect the general asymmetries in academia that reproduce coloniality and hegemony

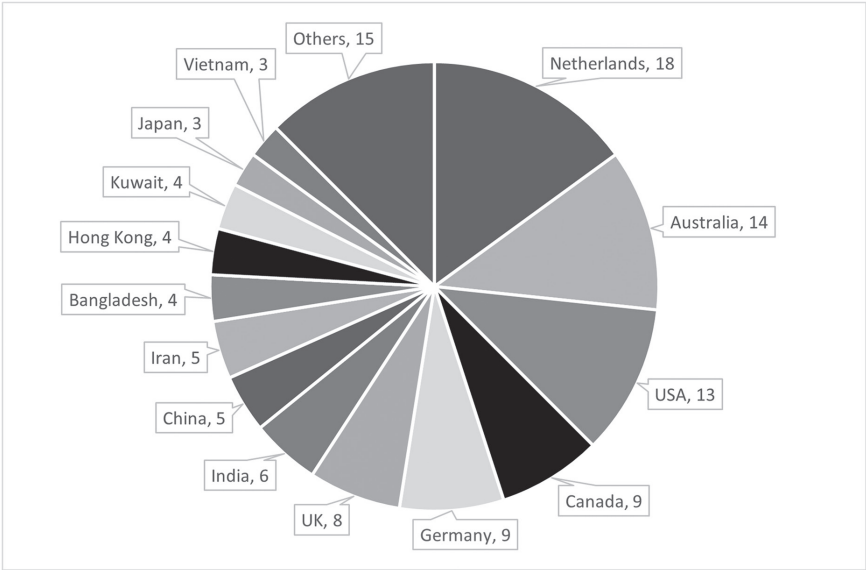


FIGURE 7 Author institutional affiliation by country or region (at the time of the respective publication), DIAS, vols. 1–9

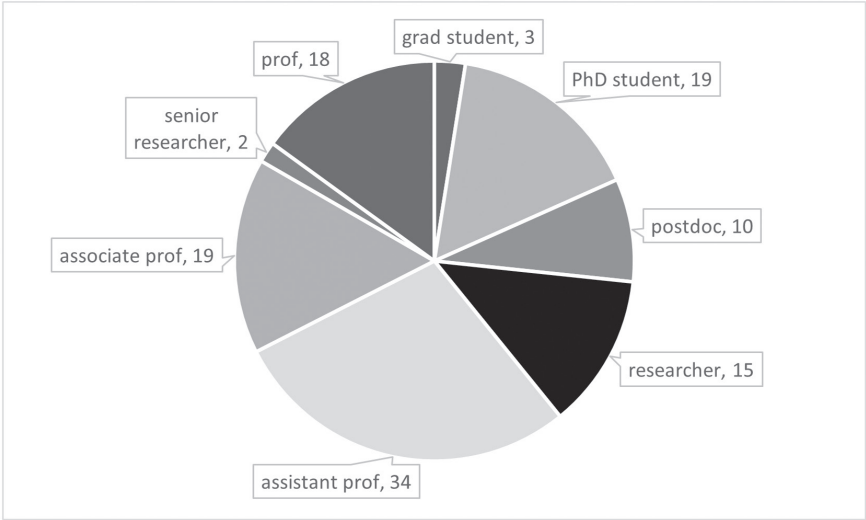


FIGURE 8 Author position (at the time of the respective publication), DIAS, vols. 1–9

(for discussions, see Bernal 2021; Cirhuza 2020; Lee & Naidoo 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020; Rodríguez 2018). Although a journal cannot single-handedly move the needle significantly on these issues, it has a responsibility to ensure a diversity of viewpoints in the scholarly debates that it enables, and, in this regard, DIAS still has room for improvement.

On a more positive note, DIAS has published the work of researchers at all rungs on the academic ladder, particularly those with the lowest seniority – scholars early in their career (see Figure 8). In their biographies, nearly 40% of the contributors identified themselves as graduate students, PhD students, postdocs, or early-career researchers, and 28% held posts equivalent to that of an assistant professor. Only about a third of the authors held positions as associate professor or higher, and many of them served as co-authors of articles along with more junior researchers. In this way, DIAS has lived up to the hopes of its editorial team: to provide a space for young scholars to showcase their work and create a dialogue with more experienced colleagues.

3 The Asiascape: Contributions to This Anniversary Issue

In this special issue, we again promote eclectic approaches to the study of digital Asia, with a wide range of colleagues at all stages of their careers. Collectively, the contributions to this anniversary issue interrogate the role of digital Asia in contemporary discussions, whether in a mainstream, scholarly,

or professional context. They do so by homing in on issues that cross disciplines, using examples from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, South Korea, and Vietnam. Several take an explicitly regional approach, involving Laos, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Thematically, they focus on continuing research, along with potential future research programmes, that highlights the issues to which digital Asian studies gravitated at the time of writing.

Carwyn Morris, for instance, spotlights questions concerning digital space. Using examples from China, Myanmar, and India, he leads us to think of spatiality through the lenses of territory and positionality, scale and place, and mobility and networks. He asks how actors position themselves vis-à-vis centrally organized digital territories, for example, by deploying virtual private networks to move into and out of the spaces surveilled and regulated by the PRC. At the same time, he demonstrates how ‘digital alcoves and enclaves’ emerge in the face of political power that is exercised at different scales. Finally, using the example of an illegal Beijing food vendor and her social media contacts on Weixin, he shows how social networks enable mobility (as well as potential ‘stillness’ in place), even where powerful actors attempt to regulate the use of both physical and digital spaces. Morris concludes by arguing that conceptual tools familiar in the field of human geography, such as ‘territory’, ‘scale’, and ‘mobility’, can help us ‘understand phenomena that seem very “digital” – a hashtag or internet shutdowns – as well as phenomena that do not seem particularly digital, for example, the Myanmar-China border or a food stall in Beijing’.

Much of Morris’s work takes an ethnographic perspective (see also Morris 2021), and he shares this approach with many of the contributors to this anniversary issue. Christina Kefala makes an explicit case for ethnographic research, and she discusses the opportunities and risks that arise when ethnographers connect with their research participants through social media. Kefala’s experience in conducting research on China brings the relevance of positionality into sharp focus. Although this issue was also addressed in previous contributions to *DIAS* (e.g., Svensson 2017), Kefala’s article updates those discussions by reflecting on the often rapidly changing circumstances in China and their impact on field-based research. The COVID-19 pandemic looms large, as do other factors that prevent access to field sites in China, for instance, due to increased xenophobia and authoritarian surveillance. Kefala shows that the resulting limitations are also a strength and that reflective, self-critical auto-ethnographic research on digital sites can throw a light on the pressures and dynamics that govern those local contexts.

In a similar vein, Kai Shmushko demonstrates that digital ethnography can help explore new dynamics in religious practice. Compared to earlier research

on religion in Asia, scholars today are confronted with a profoundly changed landscape: religious activities combine physical and digital elements, and, as practitioners move into digital spaces, their relationship to commercial dynamics and state regulation come into view, often in novel ways. The pandemic only accelerated these developments. Shmushko warns that these new conditions in, for example, China create new risks that ethnographers will need to consider in their work, such as the potentially missing dialogue with participants or the lack of embodied practices that digital research can entail.

Embodied practices are also addressed in Alvin Bui's contribution, which examines how YouTubers create videos of their motorbike rides through Ho Chi Minh City, producing a new genre of nostalgia-filled explorations that are particularly popular with members of the diaspora as they 'locate histories and memories of a Sai Gon of the past'. Bui takes this case as a point of departure to discuss how Vietnam studies scholarship often eschews digital materials, such as YouTube videos, and he makes an impassioned plea that scholars take such sources seriously as entryways for exploring questions of history, memory, diaspora, and language practices.

Like Bui, Xenia Zeiler also points out a blind spot in digital Asia research. Her contribution laments the paucity of scholarship on India's burgeoning videogame industry. After a short introduction to Indian videogames, she presents two cases that illustrate how these games can fruitfully be used to explore contemporary Indian affairs. Zeiler's first example, *Missing: A Game for a Cause*, is a 'serious' or 'applied' game that tackles the issue of human trafficking in an innovative, interactive way. The game *Raji: An Ancient Epic* demonstrates that a strong female character can be the protagonist and avatar in journeys through Hindu and Balinese mythology. Zeiler shows that issues such as gender and gender representation can be addressed in a highly mediatized society using videogames.

In the next contribution, Wu Shuxi compares regional internets and their history to obtain a better understanding of the source of diverse digital practices. She argues that research is only slowly coming to grips with path dependence in non-Western contexts and that scholarship on digital affairs (including research on digital Asia) rarely examines transnational cross-fertilization between technological systems. Based on the history of two early telecom projects, i-mode in Japan and Monternet in China, Wu suggests that expertise, concepts, and methods from infrastructure studies, science and technology studies, and media studies can be combined into a framework for successfully studying how specific local internets emerge.

Chen Zhixin also takes a regional approach, showing that Chinese technology ambitions and health concerns travel along the much-evoked 'Silk Road'.

Chen demonstrates that the pandemic, and the global demand for digital health governance solutions, were used as part of PRC efforts to expand its Belt and Road Initiative, specifically the 'Digital Silk Road' (DSR). In the wake of the pandemic, technologies for health surveillance, in particular medical artificial intelligence (AI) solutions, have become an important area of regional cooperation. As Chen's research outlines, efforts by China to promote its technologies along the DSR illustrate that 'digital health is emerging as a new venue for the rise of digital power'.

Whereas Wu's focus is telecom industries, and Chen examines digital power in foreign relations, Rogier Creemers explicitly concentrates on the complexities in domestic state regulation. As he points out, researchers, journalists, and other observers ignore technology policy at their peril, offering examples in which the lack of attention to state processes often leads to severe misunderstanding of digital processes, for instance, regarding technology regulation in China (e.g. dystopian interpretations of the social credit system). To avoid misreading the digital situation, Creemers suggests new methods for document analysis, such as computationally driven studies of widely available but frequently ignored Chinese policy documents. He argues that this approach can open up avenues for research in contexts with limited access, whether in China or elsewhere in the region. In locations in which methods such as interviews and participant observation confront hard ethical and practical limitations, systematic document-based scholarship can be an alternate route for researching a topic.

Two contributions to this anniversary issue address questions of information in 'post-truth' digital societies. Stevie Poppe, Linda Havenstein, and Fabian Schäfer examine ways in which the New Right in Japan spreads right-wing ideology about COVID-19 through 'metapolitical discourse', a strategy that disseminates dog-whistle concepts and normalizes them, both in writing and through visual communication. Poppe and his colleagues show that disinformation in a manga series resonates with readers, as exemplified in Amazon reviews. The discourse draws on tropes that are familiar in other societies – including common right-wing populist claims about political elites, the media establishment, and academic experts – which, the authors argue, intentionally undermine trust in public institutions.

My own contribution explores how we can make sense of rumours and conspiracy theories in digital contexts. Because of their highly developed digital infrastructure and diverse political norms, mechanisms, and institutions, Asian societies are a particularly fruitful site for this inquiry. Based on examples in East Asia, I propose a research agenda for studying online rumours and conspiracy theories, consisting of three elements: the discursive and narrative

elements of unverified information (what I call its anatomy), how information travels and changes in complex socio-technical systems (its genealogy), and the way in which it is the product of, and in turn produces, power in translocal networks (its pathology). Thanks to its cross-sectional focus on area studies, digital studies, and the social sciences, DIAS is the ideal venue for enacting just such a research agenda on mis- and disinformation practices.

Finally, Jacqueline Hicks comments on discussions about digital IDs in the Asian region. She argues that analyses of these ID systems overlook a crucial dimension: the way in which they are shaped by geopolitical dynamics. After reviewing scholarship that mainly examines the effects of digital IDs, she proposes that more attention is needed in academia on how US-China relations have affected technological struggles in the Global South, because the interplay of political factors explains the current operations by digital service companies in these societies. Much like my own contribution on digital rumours, Hicks's article concludes with an appeal for future research: to combine literature in three disciplines (on the state-citizen relations, on social shaping, and on the geopolitics of digital technologies) and to bring that combined knowledge to bear in empirical studies on digital IDs, in order to disentangle domestic contexts from great power competition.

4 Conclusion: the Future of Digital Asia Research

The contributions to this anniversary issue represent the multidisciplinary, regional, and transnational concerns that have shaped DIAS's diverse research agenda since its inception. By revisiting the current state of the field in their respective disciplines, and by confronting existing scholarship with their own research, the authors in this anniversary issue illustrate what it means to study 'digital Asia' today. Collectively, this scholarship raises an important question: is the study of digital Asia a 'field'? Considering the diverse geographical locations, conceptual frameworks, disciplinary questions, and methodological approaches showcased here and, more broadly, in ten years of DIAS research, one might be left with the impression that there is no field, at least not the kind found in specific disciplines such as media studies, political science, and area studies. The degree to which DIAS contributions truly engage in dialogue, for instance, by responding to and extending the research and arguments made by prior DIAS authors, is also not always clear. Some cases demonstrate clear cross-fertilization, for example, in the study of digital religion, in which several authors relate their work to earlier DIAS contributions by Nisa (2018) and Beta (2020). Similarly, ethnographic discussions frequently point back to

Svensson's DIAS article in 2017. But many contributors do not explicitly refer to previous DIAS scholarship. Perhaps DIAS scholarship merely represents a collection of people, from different backgrounds, trying to make sense of their own moving targets.

However, the publications in this journal are grounded in common ideas about the digital world and Asia's relation to it. They have a collective commitment to the issues of space and positionality, as well as to questions about the nature of socio-technological interactions, that spans disciplines. They also share an awareness that studies of the digital are incomplete if they draw solely on American and European examples. That might produce eclectic results, but this eclecticism is crucial: the complex nature of digital technologies and their role in Asian societies, politics, and economies are unlikely to be clarified by any single approach. Instead, they deserve to be disentangled and unpacked with different lenses and diverse tools. The contributions to this anniversary issue highlight what this might mean and what research projects it could lead to – whether we study religion or games, state power or industry dynamics, communicative interactions or spatial activities.

So, what is next in this eclectic and dynamic field and our journal? The past decade has yielded a wealth of case studies and conceptual arguments. Future scholarship may well ask what the results of these studies collectively tell us more broadly about human-computer interaction in a rapidly changing world. In doing so, DIAS contributions are bound to offer important discussions of local contexts in Asia, but they also have the potential to go beyond any single country or platform to show what 'comes into common', as Lamarre (2015: 120) put it, within the region and possibly beyond. As my own contribution to this anniversary issue states, digital scholarship could reconsider what 'local' means, taking cues less from geographic parameters and more from the concerns and lived experiences in digital interactions and exchanges – however 'near' or 'far' they are. This attention to new and evolving 'localities' might, then, also lead to new theorizing about the digital. This theorizing should not be limited merely to explanations *about* the field but, rather, should extend to what happens *in* the field and comes *from* the field. For this to occur, diversity in approaches is crucial, and so is expanding the well-established research and collaboration networks seen in DIAS to colleagues and institutions whose voices have not yet been sufficiently heard.

In parallel with these ambitions about theory, DIAS scholarship should also embrace methodological innovation. Many of our contributors have shown what this can look like, especially when scholars creatively repurpose traditional methods to fit new research sites, or when they fuse qualitative and

quantitative methods into promising new mixed-methods strategies. As data analytics become more sophisticated, so do the questions that we can pose about digital Asia, whether through small or big data. DIAS scholarship should engage with digital humanities and computational social science research, not just as methodological inspiration but also to provide a qualitative, ethnographically grounded reality check when those data science methods risk creating only partial pictures of digital complexity.

Finally, DIAS research over the past decade has done an excellent job in staying abreast of digital developments and the pressing questions that they raise. It has assessed the newest platform innovations, and it has traced emergent practices such as livestreaming trends, innovations in digital governance, and developments in political economies. It is my hope that future scholarship will likewise stay ahead of digital affairs. The contributions to this issue suggest several important directions: disinformation in digital networks, evolving state approaches to digital development, changing relations between religious practitioners and their digitally mediated faiths, the rapidly developing approaches to digital IDs, and many more. Other crucial themes are bound to include the way in which ‘smart city’ paradigms continue to shape urban life, how digital development schemes transform rural economies and cultures, how digital participation is sometimes enhanced and at other times stifled by digital technologies, and how innovations in digital capitalism create new risks and precarities.

One of the most profound issues is arguably the impact of AI on all kinds of social, political, and economic practices. Here, as with any other cutting-edge digital topic, DIAS research is in an excellent position to participate in ongoing discussions about the disruptive effects of such tech, but without perpetuating undue hype and hyperbole. As illustrated by deep-learning models like ChatGPT and DALL-E 2 at the time of writing, AI has the potential to ‘disrupt’ many existing practices. For example, high-school and university students around the world are increasingly letting bots write their papers, but this does not mean that we need to fear the end of (higher) education. We need nuanced analyses of how AI affects life in different contexts and of the implications for wider social and political affairs. As David Karpf (2022) states, in response to the buzz surrounding products by the misleadingly named ‘OpenAI’ research and development company, the question is less about how established industries are disrupted by such technologies and more about how AI innovation follows familiar patterns of commercialization and corporatization, and how it affects social groups that are already facing precarity in volatile capitalist markets. Large industries tend to have so much weight and leverage that they

can usually co-opt and integrate technological challenges into their practices, rather than being brought down by them. As Karpf (ibid.) writes:

ChatGPT won't be the end of college; it could be the end of the college-essays-for-hire business, though. It won't be the end of *The New York Times*, but it might be yet another impediment to rebuilding local news. And professions made up of freelancers stringing together piecework may find themselves in serious trouble. A simple rule of thumb: The more precarious the industry, the greater the risk of disruption.

DIAS scholarship is in the privileged position of exploring this transformation in new and exciting contexts that enhance our understanding of ostensibly 'disruptive' technologies. In China, for instance, the state has integrated blockchain technology – a supposedly disruptive innovation that was originally touted as radically democratic and even anarchist – into its efforts to strengthen national sovereignty, build its domestic industries, and get ahead of geopolitical competitors in the establishment of Web3 and Metaverse infrastructures (Ekman 2021; Ma 2022). This is just one of many examples that show how Asian actors use transformative technologies in their respective contexts and to their own ends.

The future of DIAS research is in methodologically rigorous and conceptually ambitious studies of what such developments mean for people in Asia and elsewhere. Over the past decade, the contributors to our journal have laid the groundwork and made inroads into new and exciting research topics. At ten years old, DIAS is still young, but it is gaining an understanding of its field and its position in it. Over the next decade, it will become a teenager, ready to make the necessary connections from its prior experiences to confidently understand the world around it. It is an exciting time to witness this maturing of digital Asia research.

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