

DECOLONIZING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH POSTCOLONIAL DIGITAL HUMANITIES IN CENTRAL ASIA

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The field of postcolonial digital humanities constitutes an interdisciplinary convergence of scholarship, digital technologies, and postcolonial theory [5]. It employs digital tools and computational methodologies to critically examine traditional power dynamics, analyze colonial biases encoded within historical narratives, and facilitate communities reclaiming authorship over representing their own cultural heritage and histories.

At its core, postcolonial digital humanities utilizes digital humanities approaches while being informed by postcolonial theory's critiques of Eurocentrism, nationalist discourses, and the marginalization of non-Western epistemologies within academic knowledge production. The field encompasses digitizing and curating materials that preserve subjugated histories, applying computational analysis to interrogate colonial frameworks inscribed in texts and data, and creating digital platforms that elevate underrepresented perspectives.

Postcolonial digital humanities is an academic space that merges technological tools with theoretical lenses attentive to the impacts of colonial legacies and unequal power relations on how knowledge about different cultures gets constructed and circulated. The methodologies strive for more pluralistic, contextualized understandings by foregrounding viewpoints that institutional structures have frequently overlooked or silenced.

Central to the postcolonial digital humanities endeavor is the recognition that digital technologies and infrastructures can themselves perpetuate forms of "digital colonialism" if employed without critical awareness. Digital colonialism refers to the reproduction of unequal power relations and the obfuscation or silencing of underrepresented voices and perspectives through the centralized control and gatekeeping of digital spaces, data repositories, algorithms, and platforms that govern knowledge production and dissemination. This phenomenon manifests in digital realms dominated by Western/Global North institutions and epistemologies, where indigenous knowledge systems, marginalized histories, and non-English language materials remain underrepresented or distorted through digital processes shaped by colonial biases. Proprietary platforms, opaque algorithms, and data

sources reflecting systemic inequities can reinforce the privileging of mainstream narratives while rendering other perspectives invisible or peripheral [1, 2, 4, 6].

By foregrounding these concerns over "digital colonialism," postcolonial digital humanities aims to decolonize digital spaces and knowledges. Strategies include developing more inclusive community-driven digital archives, critically auditing datasets and algorithms for harmful biases, and advocating for more multilingual and culturally-grounded digital infrastructures and human-computer interaction models. The overarching goal is to leverage digital's democratizing potential while remaining vigilant against digital realms replicating the unequal power dynamics they have the capacity to transcend.

For the Central Asian region, the legacies of Russian imperial expansion and Soviet-era policies of forced resettlement, linguistic russification, and ideological indoctrination have profoundly impacted cultural preservation and narratives around history and identity. Indigenous worldviews, oral traditions, and localized knowledge systems faced systematic suppression in favor of master narratives that upheld colonial ideologies and reinforced Russian/Soviet cultural dominance across the region [3, 7].

This colonial legacy of erasure has carried over into contemporary digital spaces. Digital infrastructures, databases, and archival platforms tend to reflect inherent Western/Eurocentric biases in their architecture, metadata standards, and curation practices. As a result, digital realms can inadvertently replicate the same dynamics that characterized Russian imperial and Soviet policies toward the region's diverse ethnic and cultural tapestry.

Postcolonial digital humanities provides alternatives to the challenges of digital colonialism in representing histories and cultural knowledge of Central Asian communities. Employing digital repositories and collaborative platforms allows for the curation, preservation, and dissemination of indigenous oral traditions, epistemologies, and cultural artifacts that have faced historical suppression. Digital archives facilitate widespread access and longevity for these critical knowledge sources. Computational techniques like network analysis, text mining, and data visualization enable researchers to interrogate colonial power dynamics encoded within textual and visual representations of Central Asia. Analyzing patterns in language, imagery and framing can surface how knowledge production about the region has been shaped by colonial ideologies and perpetuated biases against local perspectives. A core emphasis is developing collaborative digital spaces centering perspectives from Central Asian scholars and community members. Such platforms promote cross-regional exchange, interdisciplinary work, and counter-narratives challenging colonial historical accounts.

Embracing these postcolonial digital humanities approaches can decolonize how Central Asian histories, cultural heritage and present realities get explored and represented.

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