
**Abstract:**

As part of the ongoing effort to redefine North Korean studies, this article analyzes research trends in master’s and doctoral dissertations published in South Korea prior to 2008. The analysis validates North Korean studies as a multidisciplinary area studies field and documents its considerable quantitative and qualitative development over the past two decades, but it also suggests that North Korean studies could be significantly improved through more effective management of related departments and relevant scholarly societies in South Korea. Previous trend research for studies of North Korea all focused on ascertaining and reaffirming the wide variety of research areas and subjects discussed within the field. This article suggests ways in which to systematically improve the quality of studies on North Korea, first by exploring the multidisciplinary nature of the field, and then by suggesting methods for turning this area studies field into an independent academic discipline.

Studies on North Korea have expanded quantitatively as well as qualitatively for the past twenty years. North Korea–related research in the form of books, journal articles, and dissertations increased rapidly in 1989 and again in 2000. The timing of these increases indicates that studies on North Korea have been affected by North Korean issues, inter-Korean relations, and international situations, such as the fall of socialism, the Roh Tae Woo administration’s Nordpolitik, the North Korean nuclear issue in the late 1980s, and the inter-Korean Summit in 2000. All of these issues have had an important influence on the types of dissertations produced.
in North Korean studies. Notably, from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, inter-Korean relations attracted far more interest than other topics, such as politics, economics, and social and cultural issues. Research on North Korean defectors has proliferated since the early 2000s. These academic trends are closely related to changes in South–North Korean relations due to the possibility of total breakdown in North Korea, the second nuclear crisis caused by North Korea’s highly enriched uranium program, and global concern about the growing North Korean refugee crisis and human rights issues.

North Korean studies is a multidisciplinary area studies field that is currently practiced in a wide range of departmental contexts in a relatively small number of universities, graduate schools, and professional institutions in South Korea. Efforts to establish the field as an independent area of study, based on the recent quantitative and qualitative growth of research and publications, continue to accelerate with the development of studies related to education and society in North Korea.

The quantitative and qualitative growth of studies on North Korea has enabled scholars to adopt more inter- and multidisciplinary approaches and has resulted in far more comprehensive research. Thus, the authors of this study suggest, it is time to firmly establish the identity of North Korean studies as an independent discipline. For a model of how this might happen, they point to how the growth of research on politics allowed for the creation of the new disciplines of political economy, political sociology, and political psychology.

The status of North Korean studies in South Korea depends on institutional arrangements in both universities and the government. For this reason, the debate on the identity of North Korean studies should not take place exclusively on an abstract academic level. Most research on the current status and problems of area studies in South Korea emphasizes the need to recruit human resources, find financial resources, and establish supportive academic and educational environments. North Korean studies is in a similar situation. For it to be established as an independent discipline it will be necessary to increase support at the government level, establish long-term support at the university level, and expand the range of research topics addressed at the department level. Furthermore, efforts to resolve different perceptions of the identity of North Korean studies among scholars are vital.