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## RESEARCH ON KOREAN STUDIES FROM THE INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH OF AREA STUDIES

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**Abstract:** This paper proposes an interdisciplinary approach to Korean studies through the lens of area studies. The study synthesizes and presents the key concepts and fundamental characteristics of both area studies and Korean studies to emphasize the necessity of applying area studies methodologies to Korean studies research. The paper highlights the interdisciplinary nature of this approach while clarifying key aspects of Korean studies research. Additionally, it relates the current state of Korean studies in Vietnam, identifies challenges, and proposes directions for development, aiming to establish a theoretical foundation for Korean studies as an interdisciplinary field of study and research in Vietnam.

**Keywords:** area studies, Korean studies, interdisciplinary research

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# NGHIÊN CỨU HÀN QUỐC HỌC TỪ CÁCH TIẾP CẬN LIÊN NGÀNH CỦA NGHIÊN CỨU KHU VỰC HỌC

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**Tóm tắt:** Bài viết này nhằm đề xuất cách tiếp cận liên ngành của nghiên cứu khu vực học đối với nghiên cứu Hàn Quốc học. Nghiên cứu tổng hợp và đưa ra các khái niệm và đặc điểm cơ bản của cả nghiên cứu khu vực học và nghiên cứu Hàn Quốc học, từ đó đưa ra quan điểm về sự cần thiết trong áp dụng các phương pháp nghiên cứu khu vực học vào nghiên cứu Hàn Quốc học. Bài viết làm nổi bật bản chất liên ngành của cách tiếp cận này, đồng thời làm rõ các khía cạnh nghiên cứu của Hàn Quốc học. Ngoài ra, bài viết còn liên hệ đến tình hình nghiên cứu Hàn Quốc học tại Việt Nam, xác định những thách thức và đề xuất các hướng phát triển, nhằm thiết lập nền tảng lý thuyết cho nghiên cứu Hàn Quốc học như một ngành học và nghiên cứu liên ngành tại Việt Nam.

*Từ khóa:* khu vực học, Hàn Quốc học, nghiên cứu liên ngành

## 1. Background of the Study

Along with the burgeoning global interest in the Korean language, the development of Korean studies has also been a subject of academic discussion and concern in recent years. Since the early 2000s, numerous studies have addressed the challenges and prospects of Korean studies in various countries and regions worldwide. One of the pioneering studies in Korean studies was conducted by Kang in 2006, which analyzed the Korean language and Korean studies curricula (both undergraduate and graduate programs in South Korea) and proposed directions for the field's development. This study recommended separating the Korean language curriculum into basic and advanced levels, with the key suggestion being the inclusion of foundational courses on Korean politics, commerce, art, society, and culture within the language training program (Kang, 2006). Since 2015, studies on the development of Korean studies have seen a notable increase in both quantity and scope.<sup>1</sup> Generally, these studies assess the current state, identify challenges, and propose directions for the growth of Korean studies in specific countries (such as China, Indonesia, Vietnam) or regions (including Central and South America, Africa, Europe). A common theme across these studies has been the growing demand for new knowledge in both language-teaching subjects with the need for content localization and broader fields of Korean studies (non-language subjects on Korea). Additionally, there is a clear need for qualified faculties, as well as a call for expanded and more in-depth research into Korean studies, as emphasized in many of these works.

Korean studies, along with its teaching and research, has undergone more than 30 years of development in Vietnam. Amid significant changes in the teaching environment for

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the data the author searched for on Korea Citation Index (KCI) - a non-commercial South Korean citation index operated by the National Research Foundation of Korea, with the keyword “한국학 발전 방향” (Development Directions of Korean Studies) over the years. (Website: <https://www.kci.go.kr>)

the Korean language and Korean studies in the country, research in these fields has also highlighted the need for transformation. In this context, the paper aims to propose a new perspective on approaching Korean studies as a specialized branch of area studies, applying the methodologies of area studies to the research of Korean studies. The discussion of positioning Korean studies as a social science or as a subset of area studies has been explored in several conferences and studies in Korea over the past five years. However, in Vietnam, the approach to Korean studies as an area studies discipline, along with its interdisciplinary nature, is still in its early stages. Therefore, the author seeks to synthesize and provide a deeper analysis of this issue, aiming to establish a theoretical foundation for approaching Korean studies from an interdisciplinary perspective within area studies in Vietnam.

This paper will synthesize and define the fundamental characteristics of both area studies and Korean studies. Building on this, it will propose an approach to Korean studies from an interdisciplinary perspective within area studies. Finally, some issues related to the current state of Korean studies in Vietnam will be examined through the lens of area studies as an interdisciplinary social science.

## **2. Area Studies and Interdisciplinary Research**

### ***2.1. Overview of Area Studies***

Area studies is an interdisciplinary field within the social sciences and humanities. It originated in Europe at the end of the 19th century and experienced significant growth during World War II in many countries. Both historically and analytically, area studies has been regarded as a branch of International Relations (Morgenthau, 1952).

As International Relations gained recognition and established itself as an independent discipline after World War I, area studies initially followed international relations by focusing on specific regions but more comprehensively. It was often aimed at serving national security (geopolitics) and economic interests during that period, particularly for some European countries and the United States. Hence, area studies aims to generate comprehensive knowledge about a specific territory within a defined space. It is an integrative field that combines disciplines such as geography, history, culture, politics, economics, and society. From this point of view, the interdisciplinary approach to area studies becomes essential.

Area studies takes the region as the subject of research, and the term “area” or “region” itself can be interpreted in varying scopes depending on the purpose and subject of the study (Mai, 2012). Overtime, the research focus of area studies has shifted and varied across different regions. In the United States and several Western European countries, area studies is closely associated with political science, whereas in the United Kingdom, it tends to focus more on ethnology and anthropology. In Japan, area studies encompasses almost the entire world, covering various levels from macro-regions like the Asia-Pacific to individual countries (Tran, 2013).

In Vietnam, the term “area studies” was officially designated as a field of study by the Ministry of Education and Training in 2005. Prior to this, the roots of area studies in Vietnam can be traced back to the 20th century, considering the research by Western scholars on Vietnam and the works of feudal-era scholars on Vietnam and its region. An early characteristic of area studies in Vietnam was its approach to foreign language education. After the liberation of the North in 1954, foreign language departments such as English, Russian, Chinese, and Japanese were established and later expanded. By the early 2000s, programs

such as Oriental studies and International studies (Europe - America) had become more prevalent, and the naming of foreign language departments often reflected a cultural dimension - for example, English Language and Culture or Korean Language and Culture.

Returning to the concept of area studies, Tran (2013) defines it as an “interdisciplinary science that examines a specific geographic-cultural space inhabited by one or more communities, characterized by a set of distinctive relationships mapped out geographically.” Additionally, Go (2021) outlines four conceptual characteristics of area studies: (i) it is a field of study grounded in spatial foundations; (ii) it provides a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the region; (iii) it is an interdisciplinary field; and (iv) it aims to identify and research the distinctive characteristics of the studied region.

Based on these definitions, it is evident that the research methodology applied in area studies is interdisciplinary rather than specialized. Secondly, the unit of research - “area” - can be divided into various spatial levels, such as the world, areas, regions, sub-regions, countries, and specific cases. Thirdly, the subjects of area studies may include natural geography, people, history, language, economic activities, political organizations, culture, foreign relations, and more.

## ***2.2. Interdisciplinary Research in Area studies***

### **2.2.1. Concept and Characteristics of Interdisciplinarity**

The concept of interdisciplinarity is described as “an approach in social science that involves the collaboration of two or more fields of study” (Tran, 2013; Trinh, 2015). Tran (2009) defines interdisciplinary research as “inter-scientific research,” which refers to the integration of various subjects and fields of study. This interdisciplinary combination aims to synthesize knowledge from multiple domains and fields of study, create connections, establish reciprocal relationships, and encourage mutual influence among disciplines and research methods.

For a long time, the development of scientific fields has followed a path of specialization and division into distinct disciplines. The classification of knowledge into specific fields has facilitated in-depth research, leading to numerous scientific achievements. Scientific disciplines exist independently and equally, with clear boundaries between them. However, scientific issues - especially those in the social sciences and humanities, which examine human life - have become increasingly complex. Only by approaching these issues from diverse perspectives and weaving together different viewpoints can researchers fully comprehend the challenges faced by humanity.

Specialized research methods<sup>2</sup> have begun to show limitations in addressing the diversification and increasing complexity of society. Hence, interdisciplinary approaches are proposed as a viable solution, given that all scientific fields are interrelated and influence one another. Through interdisciplinary research, scholars aim to connect and establish reciprocal relationships among disciplines to gain a more comprehensive and profound understanding of the research problem. Some common interdisciplinary combinations in the social sciences and humanities include: culture-literature, economics-politics, geography-anthropology, history-

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<sup>2</sup> Regarding scientific research methods, two main approaches can be identified: specialized research methods and interdisciplinary research methods. In many cases, the terms multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary methods are also used. Although their connotations may differ, they share the common meaning of approaching a research problem from multiple fields of analysis.

economics, culture-business, education-human resource management, economics-sustainable development, and art-business administration. Furthermore, interdisciplinarity also encompasses the integration of the social sciences with the natural sciences, or among various branches of the natural sciences.

### **2.2.2. Characteristics of Interdisciplinary Research in Area Studies**

First and foremost, it is important to emphasize that interdisciplinary research in area studies aims to provide comprehensive and profound insights into that area. According to Nguyen (2008), “formal and systematic interdisciplinary research requires the simultaneous, holistic, and effective use of multiple specific methods for a research subject, bringing about a common scientific understanding. Here, the research methods must be placed on an equal footing, without bias or distinction between primary and secondary methods.”

American area studies scholar Szanton (2002) emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary research in area studies. He identifies five key characteristics, which are also the most fundamental conditions for conducting interdisciplinary research on an area, a country, or a territory, including: (1) intensive study of the local language of the research area; (2) use of the local language to conduct field research; (3) thorough investigation of the context surrounding historical events, local perspectives, documents, and interpretations; (4) examination, discussion, critique, and development of theory based on grounded observations; (5) engagement in discussions that involve multiple social sciences and humanities disciplines.

Additionally, Trinh (2015) notes that, due to the broad and universal nature of interdisciplinarity in area studies, the research subjects can be divided into two main categories, which are (1) research to understand and discover the nature or characteristics of the area, and (2) research on a specific issue within the area. To effectively conduct such research, the most essential requirements for researchers included proficiency in the local language and the ability to conduct fieldwork. In many cases, collaborative or team-based research is also required.

## **3. Korean Studies from the Perspective of Interdisciplinary Approaches in Area Studies**

### **3.1. Overview of Korean Studies**

In general, Korean studies is the academic field that focuses on studying Korea.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the scope of research and the approach taken by the researcher, the concept of Korean studies is adjusted to suit the research objectives. Specifically, Kim (2007) provides a simple and general definition of Korean studies as “a system of knowledge about Korea.” On the other hand, Jeon (2010) offers a more detailed definition, describing Korean studies as “research on language, history, ethnicity, culture, and the region, as well as comprehensive and systematic knowledge about politics, economics, society, academia, and the arts on the Korean Peninsula”.

In Korean studies, one debated issue is whether the Korean language falls within the scope of this academic field. Since the 1980s, the South Korean government has promoted

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<sup>3</sup> In terms of this paper, the official country name of the Republic of Korea could be also used as Korea and South Korea. In some cases, when it is necessary to refer to Korea in the historical context before the division into North and South, the author will mention the Korean Peninsula as an expanded research scope. Additionally, “Korean studies” refers to studies on South Korea in particular.

budget support for expanding and developing Korean studies abroad.<sup>4</sup> In 2002, the South Korean Ministry of Education officially recognized Korean language education as an academic discipline. Since 2004, the National Research Foundation of Korea has classified the Korean language as an independent academic field and has allocated national research funding for projects related to the Korean language (Jeon, 2010). Except for the North American region, where the origins of Korean studies are largely driven by security and regional geopolitical concerns, research on Korea generally began with an approach centered on the Korean language. A typical example is Southeast Asia, where, motivated by economic cooperation, Korean has been taught as a second foreign language and gradually has become an official academic major. According to the research synthesis by Kwak (2012) and Lee (2020), Korean studies programs abroad are generally divided into two categories: Korean linguistics, which combines teaching the Korean language with courses on Korean culture and society, and Korean studies (non-linguistic), which focuses on the study of Korea as an academic discipline.

In the scope of this study, the author adopts a broad definition of Korean studies that includes the Korean language. In other words, Korean studies is regarded as an academic field that examines all aspects of Korea - including language, history, geography, economy, politics, society, and culture. Based on this theoretical foundation, the study proposes an approach to Korean studies from the perspective of area studies. At the same time, it advocates for the application of interdisciplinary research methods from area studies to Korean studies, in order to address the increasing complexity and growing demand for research related to Korea.

### ***3.2. Korean Studies from the Perspective of Area Studies***

In the criteria for regional division within area studies, scholars have developed various ways of categorizing regions depending on the purpose and object of the research. First, at the spatial level, areas are divided into regions, sub-regions, and cases. Second, in terms of research scope, scholars distinguish between macro-level studies, cultural area studies, regional studies, national studies, micro-level studies, sub-regional studies, case studies, sample studies, and exemplar studies. Third, regarding the field of study, researchers may examine natural conditions, the environment, history, economy, political institutions, legal systems, demographics, society, and more (Tran, 2013).

Based on this foundation, Korean studies, in its broad sense, encompasses topics ranging from language, culture, economy, politics, and history to religion, law, and more. It is considered a research subject at the national level within the framework of area studies. Depending on specific research objectives, subjects related to South Korea may vary significantly among researchers. However, based on the interdisciplinary approach of area studies, the author proposes three fundamental characteristics when approaching Korean studies as follows.

First, based on the spatial foundation of the Korean Peninsula, the researcher should go beyond a purely geographic analysis to explore the demographic composition and everyday lives of the people residing in the area. Spatial scale in this context is not fixed but dynamic, shaped by shared values and cultural commonalities. When applying a human geography

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<sup>4</sup> In terms of Korean studies development policy, the South Korean government, through its specialized agency, the Academy of Korean studies (AKS) under the Ministry of Education, has distinguished between “Domestic Korean studies” and “Overseas Korean studies”.

approach, researchers examine various aspects - such as politics, economy, culture, history, and language - within the region, which are inherently linked to the lived experiences of its inhabitants. This approach allows researchers to uncover strong cause-and-effect relationships between social phenomena and the natural, cultural, and lifestyle characteristics of the people.

Second, the researcher needs to have a comprehensive understanding of Korea (and the broader Korean Peninsula). Such an understanding involves not only in-depth knowledge of South Korea itself but also of the country's relationships with closely connected nations and regions. This is because no country exists in isolation; international relationships - both bilateral and multilateral - play a significant role in shaping domestic conditions. In the case of South Korea, prominent cultural, economic, and political ties exist with countries such as China, Japan, the United States, and Vietnam. A comprehensive understanding also requires researchers (individually or as part of a team) to synthesize interdisciplinary knowledge from fields such as language, culture, history, economics, sociology, and political science to develop a more nuanced and multi-faceted analysis of social phenomena.

Third, drawing on this comprehensive and interdisciplinary foundation, researchers must generate findings that reflect the specificity of Korea. While disciplines such as sociology often aim for generalization, area studies emphasizes particularity (Go, 2021). This means that while general theoretical frameworks may be applied, researchers must also account for the distinct characteristics of the specific country or region under study. Generalization must not come at the expense of obscuring cultural and contextual uniqueness. For example, understanding the organizational logic of Japanese society does not equate to an understanding of Korean society. In comparative research, area studies specialists are uniquely positioned to identify both similarities and differences between countries and regions with precision.

#### 4. Korean Studies in South Korea

In South Korea, the teaching of Korean studies at the university level can be broadly categorized into three main models. First, some universities offer Korean language programs that are supplemented by non-language Korean studies courses. Second, other universities have established dedicated departments of Korean studies that focus on core areas such as South Korea's politics, society, culture, economy, and history. Third, a number of institutions provide Korean studies as a specialized graduate program (Park et al., 2018). As of April 2025, a total of 36 universities in South Korea offer 46 undergraduate and graduate programs in Korean studies - up from 20 programs in 2022.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the names of Korean studies departments vary widely, such as the Department of Korean Studies, the Department of Global Interdisciplinary Korean Studies, the Department of Global Korean Studies, the Department of Global Advanced Korean Studies, the Interdisciplinary Global Korean Studies Program, the Department of Korean Studies in Cooperative Interdepartmental Programs, or the Cooperative Korean Studies Program. According to the DaehakAlimi database (as of April 2025), among the 46 Korean studies programs, 22 fall under the category of area studies (often referred to as *International*

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<sup>5</sup> Source: DaehakAlimi <https://www.academyinfo.go.kr/index.do> (Accessed: 2025.04.29). The author accessed the Daehak Alimi website by following the navigation path "Department Information" - "Keyword-based Department Information", and conducted a search using the keyword "Korean studies". Based on the 46 results retrieved, the information was organized and analyzed.

*Area Studies*), one under International Studies, 13 under Korean Language and Literature, one under Linguistics, two under General Education in Social Sciences, four under Cultural Studies, Folklore, and Art History, one under History/Archaeology, and two are unclassified or do not clearly fit into any specific academic category. This classification provides compelling evidence of Korean studies' advancement as a social science discipline. It also underscores the increasing emphasis on area studies and highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the field's contemporary development.

In addition to formal education, research in Korean studies has been significantly advanced through national initiatives. Notably, the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS) - a government-affiliated institution under the Ministry of Education - launched a major project (2021–2026) aimed at generating new foundational knowledge in Korean studies. As part of this initiative, ten (10) university departments or research institutes were selected to lead research in five specialized domains: Politics and Diplomacy, Economy and Society, History and Ethnology, Religion and Philosophy, and Language and Culture. These research units collectively formed the *K-Academic* centers for the development of Korean studies.<sup>6</sup>

Operating under a 3+2 year model, the project is supported by an annual budget of KRW 11 billion (approximately USD 8.5 million). It sets out two primary objectives: (1) to promote Korean studies research and education globally through the development of online lectures, curricula, and teaching materials; and (2) to contribute to the global production of original Korean studies knowledge and foster the next generation of scholars in the field.

To support global accessibility, researchers, educators, and students interested in Korean studies can easily access online lectures by signing up and joining classes on K-MOOC (Korea's Massive Open Online Course), a platform offering free online educational lectures from South Korea. Upon completing the course and meeting the assessment requirements, learners can receive a certificate of completion. For instance, Seoul National University has established the Center for Korean Economy and K-Academics within the framework of this project. By the third year of the project, the center had developed educational resources with 12 courses (hundreds of lecture videos), including “Korean Economic Development”, “Korean Social Policy”, “Industrialization of Korea during Economic Development”, and “History of the Korean Shipbuilding Industry”. Inha University participated in the Korean studies academic development project in the field of political diplomacy, and under the establishment and operation of the Inha K-Academic Diffusion Research Center, courses such as “Korea and International Relations”, “Democratization and Democracy of Korea”, “Formation of International Law”, and “Korea and Overseas Koreans” were developed. Moreover, these courses cover a wide range, from K-pop, language, religion, philosophy, Hallyu, and cultural content, creating a vast body of source knowledge on Korean studies. The courses are generally designed in Korean (or English) and include Korean subtitles, with translations available mainly in English and Chinese. Professors teaching these courses are experts in their respective fields. In addition to the free online lecture materials that can be accessed from anywhere, interested individuals can also download the curriculum and teaching plans, access numerous published research papers, and participate in specialized seminars organized within the framework of the ongoing projects at ten universities, centers, and research institutes in South Korea.

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<sup>6</sup> From 2007 to 2023, within the field of domestic Korean studies supported by the AKS, the “K-Academic Expansion Research Institute Project” received the largest average annual research funding.



Regarding recent academic discourse, a review of major Korean studies conferences from 2022 to 2024 reveals a distinct shift toward interdisciplinary research frameworks. There is a growing emphasis on expanding Korean studies beyond traditional boundaries, incorporating sociological and cross-disciplinary perspectives. One of the most prominent events exemplifying this trend is the 12th World Congress of Korean studies under the central theme of “Beyond Boundaries: Interdisciplinary Communication in Korean studies”, a large-scale international conference organized by the Academy of Korean studies (AKS) in collaboration with Korean studies associations from various regions around the world. This congress brings together scholars and researchers in Korean studies globally. This theme is considered to mark a turning point for Korean Studies, signaling its transition into a new phase that better aligns with the realities and global demands for knowledge and research in the field.

At Inha University, notable international academic conferences were held under the themes “Political Science, International Relations, and Social Sciences as Korean Studies: Toward an Integrated Approach to Korean Studies” (June 2022), and “Exploring New Possibilities for Korean Studies in the 21st Century” (September 2024). The conference “Comparative Interdisciplinary Korean Studies in the Altai Region”, organized by the Eurasia Korean Studies Research Center (April 2022); “The Potential of Global Korean Studies”, hosted by the Institute for Global Korean Studies at Yonsei University (August 2022); “Exploring a New Paradigm for Korean Studies in Central Asia”, held in Kazakhstan (June 2023); the “16th Kyujanggak International Symposium on Korean Studies” (November 2023), which covered a wide range of topics such as Korean history, colonial Korea, North Korea, ideology, communication, Korea-China relations, development in the Republic of Korea, Korean cinema, and premodern Korean history; and “Korean Studies in the Digital Era: Sources, Tools, and Methods”, held at Keimyung University (May 2024) are few examples.

## 5. Discussion and Closing Remarks

### 5.1. *Current Status of Korean Studies in Vietnam*

According to statistics provided by the Korean Education Center in Hanoi, as of April 2025, a total of 48 universities in Vietnam offer majors in Korean language and/or Korean studies, with more than 27,000 students currently enrolled in these programs.<sup>7</sup> Geographically, 21 universities are located in northern Vietnam, 6 in the central region, and 21 in the southern region. Among these institutions, programs specifically focused on Korean studies constitute only approximately 27 percent of the total, while the vast majority - over 70 percent - offer curricula centered on Korean language, Korean culture, and, to a lesser extent, interpretation and translation. Furthermore, the field is supported by around 700 lecturers across Vietnamese universities, most of whom specialize in Korean linguistics or Korean language education (Luu, 2025).

A review of the curricula at several prominent Vietnamese institutions offering Korean studies majors,<sup>8</sup> reveals that specific courses on Korean studies (such as Korean

<sup>7</sup> Korean Education Center in Hanoi, [http://www.kecvn.com/sub/sub3\\_7.php](http://www.kecvn.com/sub/sub3_7.php) (Accessed: 2025.04.29). The total number of Korean language learners in Vietnam, including non-majors, exceeds 50,000. If colleges and vocational schools are included, approximately 60 educational institutions offer Korean language majors.

<sup>8</sup> The author analyzed the official curriculum of a few major Korean studies' education organization in Vietnam, including the Department of Korean Studies at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University Hanoi and Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City; the Korean Studies Division

Society, Introduction to Korean Studies, Korean Political System, Korean Foreign Policy, Korean Business Culture, Political Economy of Korea, etc.) account for only about 15 percent to 25 percent of the overall curriculum, while the majority are Korean language skill-based courses. In practice, due to a shortage of specialized faculty, the number of Korean studies courses offered is significantly lower than initially planned in the official curriculum.

The interdisciplinary trend in Korean studies education and research is also reflected in the case of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (USSH-VNU HCMC). In 2022, USSH-VNU HCMC launched the first Master's program in Korean studies in Vietnam. In 2024, the university officially introduced a new undergraduate major in Korean Business and Commerce, enrolling its first cohort of 60 students. This undergraduate program is designed to train high-quality human resources in the socio-economic sector, with a specialized focus on interdisciplinary business and commerce in relation to country studies, specifically, Korea. These initiatives represent pioneering efforts to respond to evolving societal demands for Korean-speaking professionals who are proficient in the language and well-equipped with expertise in a specific professional field. The establishment of the Korean Business and Commerce major reflects interdisciplinary collaboration between member universities of Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City, particularly between the Faculty of Korean Studies at USSH and the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Economics and Law (UEL). Graduates of this program are awarded a Bachelor's degree in Korean Business and Commerce, and those who complete additional required coursework may also qualify for a second degree in either Korean Studies or Business and Commerce, depending on the academic unit's regulations.

Based on the aforementioned observations, it is evident that the landscape of Korean studies education and research in Vietnam has undergone a notable transformation in recent years. The emergence of new Korean studies programs with a social science orientation and the growing recognition of Korean studies as an interdisciplinary field are expected to significantly reshape the discipline in the medium to long term. However, a key limitation persists: more than 70 percent of current lecturers in Korean studies programs specialize in Korean language and language education, while the number of faculty with expertise in core fields such as area studies, sociology, or international relations remains relatively limited. As a result, the range and depth of course offerings addressing contemporary issues in Korean society - such as Korean cultural industries, K-content, and media studies - remain insufficient to fully meet the growing academic and societal demand.

## ***5.2. Challenges and Tasks in the Development of Korean Studies in Vietnam***

A general trend observed in both theory and practice is discussed to develop Korean studies as a field of area studies with an interdisciplinary approach, starting from linguistics to social sciences and humanities. These collective efforts contribute to the broader advancement of what is now referred to as Korean studies. Through this interdisciplinary lens, phenomena and events occurring in or related to South Korea are situated within a comparative analytical framework, allowing for more comprehensive interpretation of increasingly complex and diverse issues.

For researchers in Korean studies, the primary professional requirement is proficiency

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under the Faculty of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam; and the Korean Studies Division within the Faculty of Korean Language and Culture at the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

in the Korean language.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, in Korean studies education, language training plays a crucial and foundational role, serving as a necessary tool for information access and data collection. However, language proficiency alone is insufficient; only when researchers are additionally trained in social science disciplines - particularly sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science - can they effectively analyze collected information and generate new knowledge. In practice, due to limitations in specialized personnel or learner demand, departments of Korean language or Korean studies in many countries are often responsible for fulfilling all these roles (Kim, 2021).

To sustain the demand for learning and researching Korean Studies in the long term, Korean studies needs to be “localized.” This means that the phenomena occurring in Korean society should be explained within a cultural context, reflecting the social characteristics of the local country. In other words, Korean studies needs to be adapted to fit the social environment of the local country, and knowledge about Korea should be considered in relation to that country's cultural and social context. Through this, the localization of Korean studies will generate more interest and enthusiasm among learners.

In addition, research in Korean studies must foster greater exchange of perspectives between Korean and international scholars. A commonly observed challenge is the bias in research viewpoints that stems from regional or national differences among researchers. However, this limitation can be effectively addressed through collaborative research projects, open dialogue, and systematic information sharing.

Moreover, building a robust academic workforce in Korean studies requires diversification of disciplinary expertise. While current faculty members are still predominantly concentrated in Korean language, culture, literature, and history - fields that accounted for 57.3 percent of Korean studies faculty worldwide as of 2021 (Go, 2021) - there is a pressing need to expand into the social sciences, including sociology, political science, international relations, and economics. The existing specialization imbalance is already evident in the structure of Korean studies curricula across institutions. For instance, Korean studies programs in Australia have begun moving beyond traditional language training to address broader socio-political themes such as migration, North Korean affairs, inter-Korean relations, and Korea's role in Northeast Asia, particularly its interactions with China and Japan. Despite this progress, the supply of qualified experts still falls short of meeting the increasing demand for more comprehensive Korean studies education and research (Shin, 2020).

After more than three decades of development, Korean language education in Vietnam has experienced rapid growth, positioning Vietnam as one of the most dynamic countries globally in this field. However, for Korean studies to develop both in breadth and depth, it is clear that an interdisciplinary approach is an inevitable trend in teaching and research. To implement this direction, Vietnam already has a strong foundational platform in terms of language. However, as described above, creating a shift in direction requires a long process, the most important of which is a shift in mindset and awareness of the necessity for change.

This study acknowledges its limitations, particularly in its capacity to analyze the teaching and research of Korean studies in Vietnam from a fully interdisciplinary perspective. The current research also lacks comprehensive empirical data on the actual structure, content,

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<sup>9</sup> Limited proficiency in the Korean language is considered a significant obstacle for many foreign researchers in Korean studies, particularly those in Europe and North America, in accessing knowledge about Korea and promoting multidimensional academic exchange (Duncan, 2022).

and delivery of Korean studies programs across Vietnamese institutions. Future research should engage in more critical discussions of practical challenges and explore context-sensitive models for applying interdisciplinary methods to Korean studies education and research in Vietnam.

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