

# Ancient texts meet modern technology

By LIUYUWEI

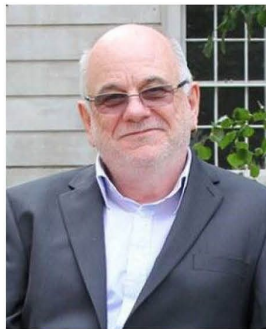
Ancient texts, manuscripts, artifacts, and ruins—key witnesses to the evolution of civilizations—are finding new vitality in the digital era. In China, the digitization of ancient books has strengthened classical studies, making more texts and images freely accessible through digital libraries, databases, and other platforms. To explore this further, *CSST* spoke with Simon Mahony, emeritus professor of digital humanities from the Department of Information Studies at University College London (UCL) and a visiting professor from the Department of Information Management at Peking University. Mahony, a longtime advocate for integrating classical studies with digital technology, believes that digital classics break down academic elitism and make classical knowledge more widely accessible. By sparking interest in classical philosophy, the humanities, and ethics among younger generations, they ensure the continued relevance of ancient wisdom. More broadly, digital classics facilitate the practical application of classical knowledge and contribute to the evolution of human civilization through cross-cultural exchange and mutual learning.

## Classical wisdom shapes a good society

*CSST: How do you perceive the contemporary significance of classical studies?*

**Mahony:** The contemporary significance of studying the classics lies in its ability to connect us with the historical periods that preceded us. These periods have profoundly shaped the society we live in today. Whether we delve into ancient China or explore the annals of Europe, the stories of our ancestors offer invaluable insights into how we have arrived at our current state and who we are now. Many scholars at the first World Conference of Classics are demonstrating the ongoing relevance of figures like Confucius, Aristotle, and Socrates. Their ideas continue to influence and inspire us, serving as timeless sources of wisdom.

Moreover, classical studies have a unique way of capturing our imagination. Once you delve into the classics, you quickly become captivated by the stories of our ancient ancestors. These tales, often filled with mythological elements, are not just relics of the past. For example, they can be vividly brought to life through cartoon or animated movies that portray the ancient world as a realm of adventure, like *"The Odyssey"* and *"Ne Zha 2."* This is a powerful way to spark children's interest and draw them into the rich tapestry of the classics. But for those who take the next step and read classic literature, such



Mahony states that digital humanities is steadily moving out of the Anglophone Western world. Photo: COURTESY OF SIMON MAHONY

as Greek drama and China's Four Great Classical Novels, the experience is truly transformative. It is an exhilarating journey that, while sometimes risky, opens up a world of profound human experience and enduring insight.

*CSST: How can classical scholars convey this significance more effectively to the general public?*

**Mahony:** A common misconception is that the classical world has no relevance to the average person. To dispel this myth, we need robust public education initiatives focused on the classics. Scholars like Mary Beard and Bettany Hughes have done an excellent job in this regard. Through a series of documentaries, they have presented classical stories—not only those of Ancient Greece and Rome—in a way that is accessible and relatable to ordinary people. This approach not only makes the classics understandable but also helps individuals see their impact on contemporary life. Effective classical education is not just about imparting knowledge; it is about cultivating wisdom that enables students to become good citizens.

*CSST: Could you provide an example of how classical knowledge has influenced the trajectory of human civilization?*

**Mahony:** Certainly. One notable example is the influence of Aristotelian philosophy on governance. For Aristotle, citizenship is inseparable from virtue ethics. The ideal citizen is the fully virtuous person, embodying the same virtues needed for both ruling and being ruled. This reflects his belief that the well-being of the state is rooted in the moral character of its people. Similar concepts have been advocated by other philosophers and adopted by many governments, including that of China. I think there is a striking similarity between Aristotle's teachings and Confucian thought, both of which emphasize the importance of creating a

good society to foster good citizens. This shared wisdom underscores the timeless relevance of classical ideas in shaping our modern world.

## Keep classical knowledge open to all

*CSST: Please briefly introduce your experience with digital classics.*

**Mahony:** My first academic position was at King's College London, at what was then known as the Centre for Computing in the Humanities, now the Department of Digital Humanities. One of the first things I noticed was that the majority of people working on digital projects were either Classicists or Medievalists by training. This led me to wonder why this was the case. It seems that these two groups were the early adopters of digital methods to humanities research. This was further evidenced by international organizations such as the Digital Classicist, which I helped found, and the Digital Medievalist. Both had limited but manageable corpora of primary sources compared to more contemporary literary fields.

Furthermore, my training in Classics (which here means the study of the ancient world, mainly Ancient Greece and Rome), involved engaging with a wide range of primary resources, including literary texts, philology, history, philosophy, art, and archaeology. As you can see, digital projects in this field require a combination of skills and interdisciplinary collaboration, as no single individual can possess all the necessary expertise. Moreover, the output of our projects was always published online for free access to anyone with an internet connection. The same applied to our teaching materials, which were hosted on open servers alongside the projects.

*CSST: How do you view the mission of digital classics to make primary sources accessible to a broader audience and contribute to our collective understanding of the past?*

**Mahony:** As above, all things remain open, whether that is research output, the data on which that research is conducted, or publications in all forms, is fundamental to the digital classicist movement as a sub-set of digital humanities. By making materials widely available and reusable, we accelerate the spread of ideas and democratize knowledge production. This is particularly crucial for those working in less well-funded institutions, independent scholars without institutional affiliations, junior staff members, and early-career researchers. While the digital divide remains a challenge for those without internet access or other disadvantages, the open dissemination of knowledge is a fundamental step toward inclusivity and equality.

*CSST: What does the Open Agenda (Open Data, Open Access, Open Licensing, Open Source Software, Open Forums) mean for digital classics?*

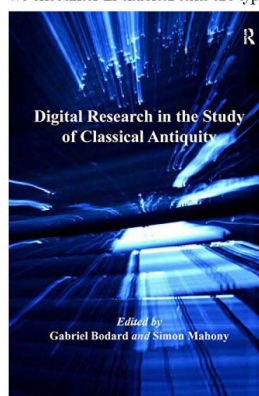
**Mahony:** The Open Agenda encompasses multiple dimensions but is fundamentally a mindset. Those who embrace it find it perplexing that others would choose to keep their work hidden or locked away. Conversely, those who prefer to restrict access fail to see the value in freely sharing the fruits of their labor. In classical studies, making everything publicly and freely available allows for greater accessibility beyond the academic sphere. It enables anyone with an interest to engage with the material, potentially sparking further interest and fostering a more inclusive community. This egalitarian principle democratizes knowledge, ensuring that it is available to all.

Both the East and the West initiated massive digitization projects in the 1980s, initially focusing on their respective canons of classical texts. These efforts laid the foundation for what we now call digital humanities. For these online collections to fulfill their potential, they must be freely accessible to all. Robust cataloging and discovery metadata are essential to ensure that these texts can be found, studied, and heard across cultural divides, ultimately enhancing our understanding of cultural diversity and differences.

## China's classical studies mission unfolds

*CSST: How do you compare and contrast the characteristics, focuses, major stakeholders, and contributions of digital humanities in the UK and China?*

**Mahony:** In the UK, the study of classics is often perceived as elitist, as the study of ancient languages, which is usually the entry point, is predominantly found in fee-paying schools. The voices we encounter in classical texts are typi-



FILE PHOTO: *Digital Research in the Study of Classical Antiquity*, edited by Gabriel Bodard and Simon Mahony.

cally those of the educated elites, excluding the perspectives of common people and minorities. In contrast, our mission in digital classics is to make everything freely available and to encourage participation at all levels, both scholarly and otherwise. Our seminars have always been public events, open to anyone, with the hope of fostering broad engagement.

In China, the ongoing study of classics, which encompasses the comprehensive study of classical Chinese literary texts, history, philosophy, and art, shares many similarities with the West. Both traditions focus on canonical texts, manuscripts, and cultural artifacts that teach us about the development of our cultures and civilizations. They highlight the enduring relevance of classical texts in providing lessons for the present and linking our past with our future. The reception of these works in contemporary times and comparative literary studies have a significant impact on our societies, bridging the gap between East and West.

This was evident at the first World Conference of Classics in Beijing in November 2024, which I had the honor of attending. Events such as these foster mutual learning which in turn leads to a deeper understanding not only about others but also about ourselves. This is greatly facilitated by having texts, criticism, and other related scholarship openly and freely available to all. It is the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and scholarship that leads to greater understanding which in turn helps to smooth the pathway to collaboration and partnership.

*CSST: What are your thoughts on and impressions of the first World Conference of Classics?*

**Mahony:** The first World Conference of Classics was an outstanding platform for showcasing the current focus of classical studies in both China and the West. I felt honored to speak at the "Classical Wisdom and the Age of Digital Intelligence" forum, engaging with international Classicists. My perspectives are informed by a Western perspective, yet they are also shaped by my experience of working in China. Such forums bridge cultural divides, enable knowledge sharing, and ignite academic and public interest in classical studies and digital humanities. I am hopeful that this conference marks the beginning of many more collaborations and exchanges between China and the West, and I look forward to seeing more such events in 2025 and beyond.

The conference also marked the inauguration of the Chinese School of Classical Studies at Athens, a landmark in China-West academic ties and a symbol of global classical studies integration. I am convinced that China's relentless efforts in classical studies will infuse new vitality into the shared prosperity of human civilization.

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Currently, county economies are undergoing diversification in development models, industrial upgrading, and regional coordination. Huo Weidong, director of the Institute of County Economies at Liaoning University, cited Kunshan, Jiangyin, and Xuyi in Jiangsu Province as examples, illustrating how county economies are accelerating the transformation and

upgrade of traditional industries to advance urban-rural integration and rural revitalization by leveraging regional comparative advantages and through technological innovation, financial support, and policy guidance.

## Bright prospects

In recent years, counties have made notable strides in advancing new industrialization and transitioning to

more sophisticated economic structures. Their role in boosting domestic consumption, safeguarding food security, and preserving ecological balance is becoming increasingly indispensable. By analyzing Kunshan's success, Huo predicted that counties will play a vital role in absorbing relocated industries, optimizing urban-rural resource allocation, and stimulating the endogenous impetus of regional development.

Wu Yin, a professor of economics at the Southwest University of Finance and Economics, underscored county economies' extensive reach, moderate scale, and strong driving force, making them crucial for spatial accommodation, social inclusivity, and demographic concentration. Their continued high-quality development will enhance planning, infrastructure, and governance in both urban

and rural areas, with more balanced distribution, flow, and integration of populations across regions.

Peng further emphasized the strategic importance of counties in China's modernization drive, envisioning them as "ballast stones" for national economic security, "powerhouses" for new urbanization, lower-tier "testing grounds" for technological innovation, and "equalizers" for common prosperity.