

# Visual Style Evolution of Korean Medicine Advertising (1920-1940)

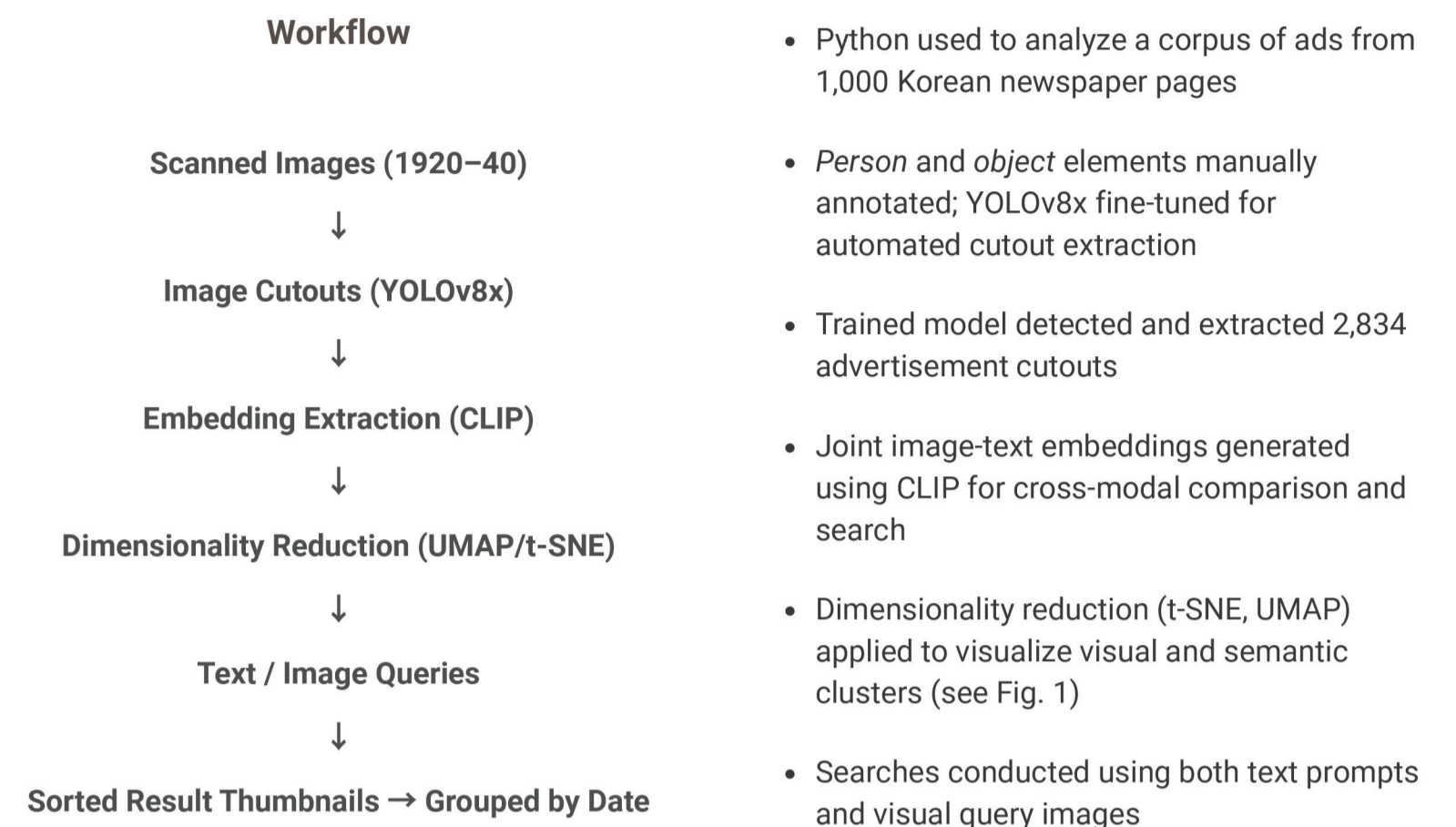
Olga Szumowska and Yuan Gao

## Introduction



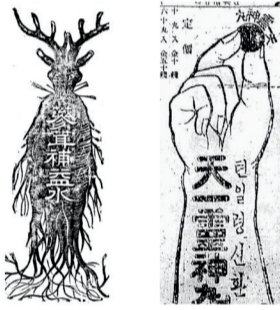




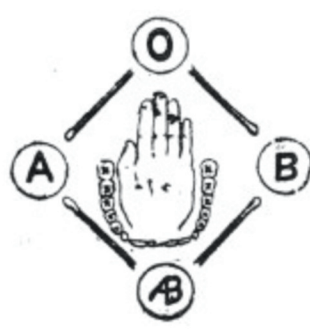
During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910–1945), modernization was promoted through colonial policies, including reforms in medicine. By the 1920s, some Korean nationalists also began to view local traditions as barriers to national strength and modern progress. As a result, both imperial agendas and nationalist reformist visions contributed to the gradual replacement of herbal and shamanic healing with modern Western medicine by the 1930s (Kendall 2000, 29–31).

While prior research has explored this cultural transformation in written texts, the visual dimension remains little addressed. This project uses deep learning-based image analysis and embedding to examine that aspect. Using YOLO and CLIP models, hundreds of pharmaceutical advertisements were searched, clustered, and compared to identify recurring visual styles and shifts over time.

## Methods



## Our Findings

	Doctor	Treatment	Medication	Rationale
1920s	 Stylized or symbolic depiction	 Metaphorical visuals of healing	 Mysterious substances, magical remedies	 Based on spirituality and energy flow
1930s	 Modernised, formal appearance	 Precise, anatomical imagery	 Labelled, measurable products	 Classifications like blood types

## Visualizing and Exploring Queries

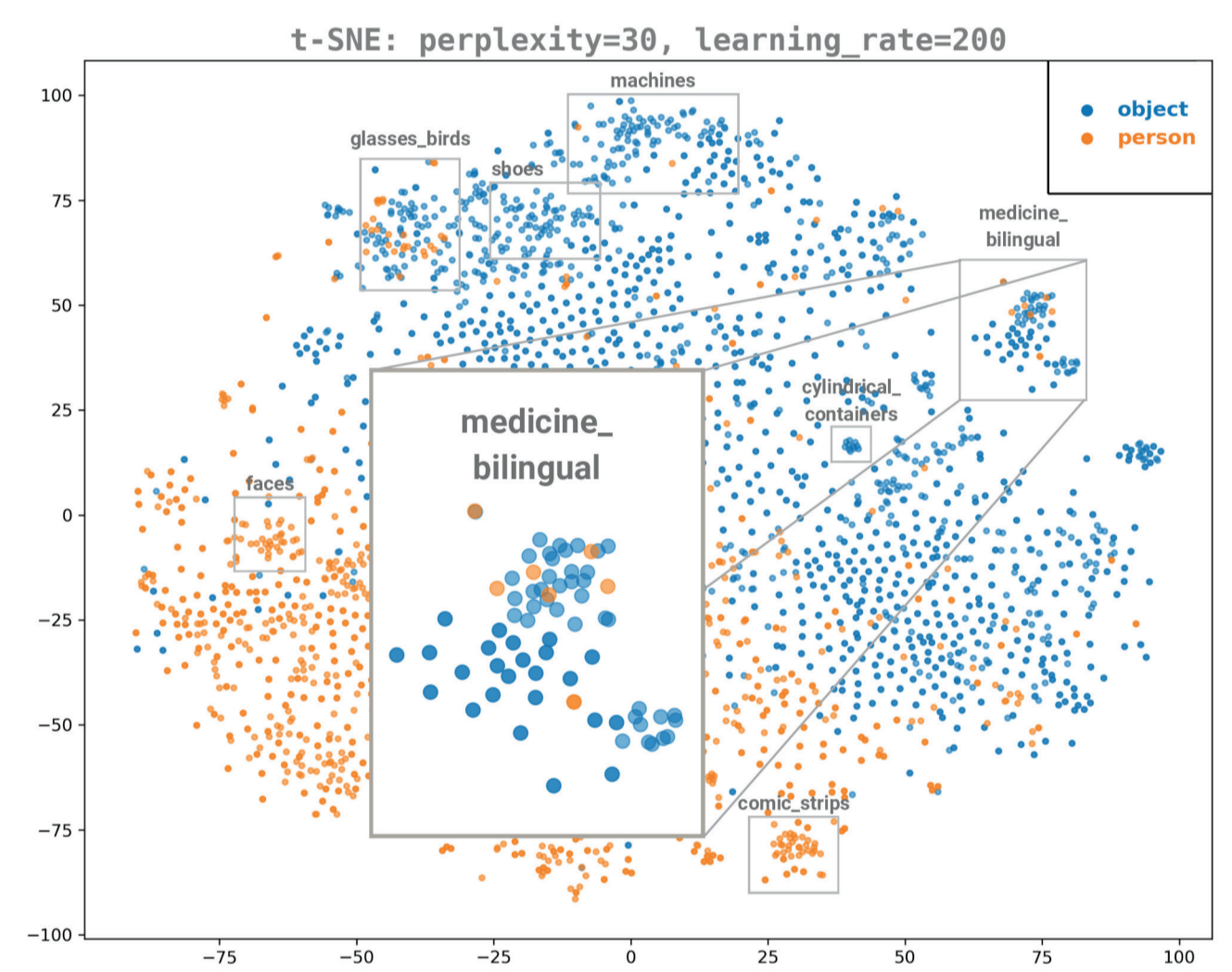


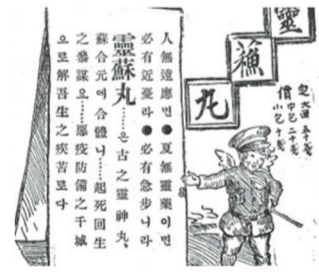


Fig. 1 Dimensionality-reduced embeddings of ads with labeled clusters

## Text Queries

Searches using terms like *miraculous remedy* and *healing power* across Korean, Japanese, and English revealed visually and semantically related ads.

## Image Queries

Three ad styles used as visual queries to examine clustering of meaning:

	1923	Cartoon hero as a magical messenger of health
	1928	Medicine as premium product, framed by typography and social presence
	1930	Targeted treatment with symptoms marked on the child's body - clinical, specific, and trust-oriented

## Results

	Style	Healing	Language	Consumer
1920s	Symbolic, narrative, rich in metaphor and cultural associations	Holistic, energetic, focused on balance and invisible forces	Korean script with poetic, traditional or religious naming	Traditional public with spiritual or cultural trust in remedies
1930s	Detailed, commercial, technically precise, influenced by Japanese design	Anatomical, aimed at diagnosis and treatment	Technical terms in Japanese and Latin, standardized scientific vocabulary	Modernizing consumers familiar with Japanese science and visual culture

## Conclusion

Advertising shifted from spiritual “cure-all” products to science-centered modern medicine. Early advertisements emphasized abstract concepts such as vitality or mystical cures, while later examples referred to specific diseases and increasingly used clinical imagery.

By the late 1930s, pharmaceutical advertising reflected the norms of Western medicine, featuring labeled boxes, pills, and specific claims of efficacy. It moved away from ambiguous promises of wellness or spiritual healing toward messages grounded in medical science and visual clarity.

## References

- Kendall, Laurel. 2000. “The Cultural Politics of ‘Superstition’ in the Korean Shaman World: Modernity Constructs Its Other.” *Praeger*, 25–27.
- Lea-Henry, Jed, and Merosse Hwang. 2019. “The Korea Now Podcast #61.
- Son, Annette H.K. 1999. “Modernization of Medical Care in Korea (1876–1990).” *Social Science & Medicine* 49 (4): 543–50.

Scan to listen: Shamanism and Modernisation in Korea (Podcast)

