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Session name: Social Media and Heritage in China

Session proposer: Yikun Sun and Rodney Harrison

Biography

Yikun is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Her research explores the digital commodification of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary China, with broader interests in heritage politics and cultural policy. Her research is informed by prior professional work managing ICH commodification at TikTok China.

Biography

Social media have become an increasingly prominent relational heritage space in contemporary heritage practices, particularly in China, where large-scale user participation, sustained investment in internet platforms, and strong policy support have positioned social media as a key vehicle for the development of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

Papers in this session examine the relational production of heritage through social media, approaching platforms not as neutral channels of representation but as socio-technical spaces that actively shape how heritage is governed, valued, and experienced. By conceptualising heritage as an emergent process and taking China as a particularly illustrative case, the session seeks to generate insights that may inform research in other regional contexts under the broader theme of heritage and sustainable futures.

Presenter 1

Name: Yikun Sun

Organisation: Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Position: PhD Candidate in Heritage Studies

Primary email: yikun.sun.23@ucl.ac.uk

Biography (max 50 words):

Yikun is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Her research explores the digital commodification of intangible cultural heritage in contemporary China, with broader interests in heritage politics and cultural policy. Her research is informed by prior professional work managing ICH commodification at TikTok China.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Between the Party-state and Internet Giant: The Commodification of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China

The study examines how intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is reconfigured through its entanglement with internet platforms in contemporary China. Focusing on the recent "heritage fever" on TikTok China, it explores how ICH practitioners navigate the intersecting logics of state heritage governance, platform metrics, and marketisation in their everyday practices. Heritage

is conceptualised not as a fixed cultural object but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by heterogeneous human and non-human actors.

The study draws on nine months of multi-sited ethnographic research across three ICH communities, combining in-person interviews and participant observation with digital ethnography. By foregrounding practitioners' lived experiences and everyday challenges, the study analyses the longer-term social and political implications of digital commodification for ICH communities and reflects on its consequences for sustainable heritage development at the grassroots level.

Presenter 2

Name: Yezhi Gao

Organisation: Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Position: PhD Candidate in Heritage Studies

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Biography (max 50 words):

Yezhi Gao is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Her research focuses on affective engagements with heritage in China and their articulation through social media practices, engaging with broader themes of power and governance of heritage, and digital platform affordances.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

This research examines how people's perception and affective relationship with heritage are articulated, mediated and co-produced through social media practice. Social media and heritage site are not treated as two separate spaces, but as a dynamic, interconnected realm in a network of heritage experience and circulation.

Focusing on Kulangsu island, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it explores how everyday feelings such as nostalgia, pride, and loss shape heritage narratives and digital practices produced by different social groups (government, local residents, transient heritage-related actors and tourists). Drawing on affect theory, critical heritage studies and social media studies, the project analyses how these affective expressions interact with platform affordances and intersect with broader dynamics of power, governance, and heritage management.

The study draws on a seven-month mixed ethnographic approach combining on-site and digital ethnography. It analyses how social media has become a key arena where heritage meanings are continually reworked and politicised.

Presenter 3

Name: Guohong Li

Organisation: Centre for Heritage & Museum Studies, Australian National University

Position: PhD Candidate

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Biography (max 50 words):

Guohong Li is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, Australian National University. Her research examines rural heritage in China through everyday life and cultural anthropology, focusing on how heritage-making reshapes representation and power relations, and how villagers negotiate and rework these arrangements in daily practice.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Mapping Platformed Heritage Visibility: Presence, Representation, and Recognition after World Heritage Inscription

This paper examines how World Heritage inscription of China's Jingmai Mountain reconfigures heritage discourse through Douyin's (TikTok China) visibility regimes. Rather than treating social media as neutral channels, the study conceptualizes platforms as infrastructures that redistribute heritage authority, determining who speaks, how heritage is represented, and whose narratives gain traction.

Drawing on critical heritage studies and platform governance scholarship, I develop a visibility-centered framework distinguishing three dimensions: presence (who enters discourse), representation (narrative/visual forms), and recognition (algorithmic amplification). Through mixed-methods analysis combining longitudinal platform data with digital ethnography across creator types (local residents, commercial actors, official media, external creators), I find that inscription functions as a visibility rupture. Platform algorithms increasingly privilege state-aligned, touristic, and commercialized frames while marginalizing everyday local expressions. The study demonstrates how platform infrastructures mediate heritage authority, participation, and inequality, revealing algorithmic visibility as a critical mode of heritage governance in contemporary China.

<u>Presenter 4</u>

Name: Qiwei Guo

Organisation: Institute of Archaeology, University College London

Position: PhD candidate

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Biography (max 50 words):

Qiwei Guo is a PhD candidate at the UCL Institute of Archaeology. Her PhD thesis explores heritage politics in China and how this applies to the construction of national narratives and discourses. Her research interests are heritage psychodynamics, heritage politics, emotional studies and memory studies.

Co-Author: Juewei Fan

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Position: PhD candidate

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Biography (max 50 words):

Juewei Fan explores cultural memory, heritage, and identity in contemporary China, focusing on private museums as sites of Asian museological practices. Using ethnographic approaches, she examines how charismatic figures mobilize moral authority in unofficial narratives, highlighting individual agency in shaping grassroots legitimacy and constructing alternative heritage frameworks beyond collective discourse.

Summary abstract (minimum 100 words and maximum 150 words):

Emotional Contestation on Social Media: Chinese Digital Engagement with the British Museum

In the digital age, social media platforms have become spaces where heritage is emotionally negotiated and publicly contested. This paper explores how social media operate as relational heritage spaces through an analysis of Chinese users' engagement with the British Museum on RedNote. Focusing on comment-section interactions surrounding calls for the return of 'looted' artefacts, it examines how emotional contestation emerges and circulates through digitally mediated participation.

Through sustained interaction and collective discourse, collection histories are repeatedly recalled, reviewed, and reinterpreted on the platform, transforming digital participation into a relational mode of heritage engagement. In this process, museum collections are rearticulated as sites of ongoing negotiation over value, authority, and responsibility, positioning the British Museum within a contested heritage governance field. The analysis thus highlights how digital media shape the redistribution of heritage responsibility and visibility, and its significance for thinking about the future trajectories of heritage in contemporary China.