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Care across spaces: Chinese displaced artefacts in the British Museum and social media platforms

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ABSTRACT

In June 2025, the hashtag *#NoChineseCanLeaveTheBritishMuseumSmiling* circulated widely on the Chinese platform RedNote, sparking public debate over the British Museum's Chinese collections. This article examines how displaced Chinese artefacts are framed differently in the Museum's Chinese galleries and on digital platforms. Data were collected between October 2023 and August 2025 through two rounds of exhibition fieldwork and through a stratified sample of 622 RedNote posts drawn from 2,310 items. In addition, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted with museum professionals globally. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of care, we argue that curatorial practices enact spatio-narrative hegemony by embedding artefacts in universalist narratives, while digital publics exercise narrative sovereignty – renegotiating authority, memory and belonging across physical and digital contexts. Theoretically, the article advances a phenomenologically grounded framework for analysing contested heritage in hybrid environments. Practically, it suggests that museums adopt more participatory curatorial strategies when addressing displaced collections in the digital age.

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Displaced heritage; British Museum; digital publics; narrative sovereignty; care; phenomenology

Introduction

In June 2025, the hashtag *#NoChineseCanLeaveTheBritishMuseumSmiling* trended widely on Xiaohongshu (hereafter RedNote). Thousands of users shared videos, images, commentaries and secondary creations that reimaged Chinese artefacts in the British Museum, situating them within frameworks of national sentiment, cultural sovereignty and postcolonial critique. The resonance of this digital phenomenon underscored how displaced heritage objects remain living sites of contestation, where questions of cultural meaning, belonging and authority are actively negotiated in hybrid physical-digital environments.

Such digital controversies cannot be separated from longer histories of institutional practice. Heritage debates today are as much about how artefacts are spatially framed,

temporally remembered and affectively cared for as they are about ownership or restitution (Duthie, 2011; Economou, 2015; Macdonald, 2013). Such theoretical concerns find concrete expression in the ways digital publics mobilize social media to re-situate and reinterpret displaced artefacts in museums. Recent years have witnessed a growing convergence between institutional authority and participatory digital practices, where online platforms increasingly operate as alternative arenas of heritage negotiation – a tension particularly visible in the entangled heritage politics between China and the United Kingdom (Feng, 2024; Wan, 2024; Zhang, 2023). These developments suggest that contemporary heritage disputes are not merely questions of policy or restitution, but involve deeper struggles over how meaning is produced, spatially organized and temporally sustained. As critical museum scholarship has long argued, exhibitionary spaces are not neutral containers but technologies of power that structure visibility and interpretation (Bennett, 1995; Foucault, 1986; Lefebvre, 1991).

Founded in 1753, the British Museum is recognized as “one of the first national, public and secular museums in the world”. In Britain, it is the largest and most prominent museum preserving and documenting classical antiquities (Duthie, 2011, p. 12). As Caygill (2002), Assistant Keeper at the British Museum, notes, nineteenth-century displays resembled a global “cabinet of curiosities”, presenting items ranging from South American artefacts to Chinese shoes (p. 199). In the postcolonial era, however, the Museum has faced sustained criticism over provenance and repatriation. Between 1970 and 1999, it received 27 formal repatriation requests, largely from countries such as Greece, Egypt, Nigeria and China, which had since become sovereign states and had implemented cultural property laws declaring antiquities state-owned and inalienable (Duthie, 2011). The British Museum, however, has consistently resisted these appeals, justifying its stance by positioning itself as a “universal museum”, claiming authority to collect and preserve objects from both Western and non-Western cultures (MacGregor, 2009; The British Museum, n.d.).

Nevertheless, critical scholarship highlights the institution’s imperial legacy. Duthie (2011) argues that the British Museum “remains an essentially imperialist institution resistant to attempts to dismantle a dominant British culture of the past” (p. 12). Similarly, as Moira Simpson observes, museums such as the British Museum act as “a mirror reflecting the views and attitudes of dominant cultures, and the material evidence of the colonial achievements of the European cultures in which museums are rooted” (as cited in Duthie, 2011, p. 24). Moreover, as Cai (2025, p. 2) argues, the “modern” museum emerged through European colonization, functioning as a technology for collecting and governing colonized cultures. During the “age of discovery”, artefacts, ideas and technologies were extracted from colonized regions and recontextualized within European museums and collections. These practices reorganized objects within classificatory systems structured by imperial authority, rendering colonized cultures visible through Western interpretative frameworks oriented towards the white gaze (Cai, 2025). From this perspective, the British Museum’s claim to universality reflects not a neutral institutional principle but a historically situated epistemological framework shaped by imperial power.

Recent events illustrate how these tensions manifest across multiple sites and media. In 2023, the British Museum staged the major exhibition *China’s Hidden Century (1796–1912)*, which sought to present China’s nineteenth-century political, social and cultural

transformations through a cross-cultural art-historical narrative, drawing on over 300 objects from the Museum's own collection and international loans. However, to many Chinese visitors, the exhibition's spatial layout and curatorial framing were perceived as controversial and resulted in wide attention in China. In September 2023, the topic "The British Museum should unconditionally return Chinese artefacts" reached the top trending list of Weibo, a leading Chinese social media platform. Around the same time, independent creators on Bilibili, a popular Chinese video-sharing platform, released the short drama *Escape from the British Museum*, which was later distributed on the Chinese streaming platform Mango TV and circulated widely across short-video platforms. Even the one-minute trailer attracted more than 3 million views (Sohu.com, 2023). Using a fictionalized story of a Chinese cultural relic yearning to "return home", the series evoked strong public resonance and prompted renewed reflection on contemporary issues of cultural restitution and belonging. These cases highlight that contemporary heritage debates extend beyond legal questions of ownership or restitution. They concern how artefacts are spatially framed in exhibitions and narratives, temporally remembered in relation to colonial pasts and imagined futures, and affectively cared for by both institutions and publics (Duncan, 1995; Giaccardi, 2012; Harrison, 2015; Macdonald, 2013).

Against this broader backdrop of contested ownership and imperial legacies, studies have examined both the British Museum's physical galleries and its digital presence, with particular attention to its Chinese collections. Zhang (2023) demonstrates that the museum's exhibitions of Chinese artefacts perpetuate colonial biases by foregrounding material craftsmanship while neglecting socio-political contexts, thereby reinforcing a Eurocentric framing of China as an exoticised "civilisation of commodities". In the digital domain, Feng (2024) shows how the museum's official website reconstructs Chinese cultural identity through multimodal narratives that, while improving accessibility, risk flattening China's distinctiveness into a more generalized Asian framework. Complementing these perspectives, Wan (2024) analyses media discourse on repatriation, revealing how news outlets and social platforms use evaluative language and emotional appeals, exemplified by the viral short film *Escape from the British Museum*, to amplify nationalist sentiment and mobilize public demands for restitution. Together, these studies highlight that controversies surrounding Chinese collections are not only rooted in colonial histories but are also continuously reshaped through the digital and discursive dynamics of the present.

Existing scholarship tends to analyse physical exhibition spaces and digital discourse separately and rarely integrates phenomenological perspectives that explain why displaced heritage becomes emotionally and existentially significant to publics. To address this gap, this study draws on Martin Heidegger's concept of care. Heidegger (1927/2019) argues that human existence is fundamentally structured by care, through which things become meaningful as part of practices of memory, concern and projection rather than as isolated objects. Applied to heritage, this perspective shifts attention from artefacts as static possessions to artefacts as relational sites through which communities dwell with the past and imagine possible futures. This approach makes it possible to examine not only how museums frame displaced artefacts, but also why digital publics become emotionally invested in reinterpreting them. Accordingly, this study asks:

How are displaced Chinese artefacts framed, contested and re-signified across the British Museum's galleries and social media platforms, and how does care illuminate the negotiation of meaning, belonging and authority across these hybrid spaces?

By addressing this research question, the article aims to develop a phenomenologically grounded framework for analysing contested heritage in hybrid environments. It argues that displaced artefacts become sites where institutional and public forms of care intersect and compete, producing different narrative and spatial meanings. In doing so, the article demonstrates that the British Museum's Chinese collections are not static residues of colonial expansion but dynamic sites where institutional narratives and public discourses collide, producing new negotiations of cultural meaning in the digital age.

Literature review

Museum space, institutional authority and the displacement of objects

In museum and heritage scholarship, space has been increasingly theorized as socially produced rather than a neutral backdrop. By the twentieth century, curation had become stabilized in the galleries, libraries, archives and museums sector, which emerged as the dominant custodian of cultural knowledge. Curation involves not only arranging artefacts but constructing narratives through their selection, organization and display, shaping how historical and cultural meanings are understood. Theoretical perspectives further illuminate the spatial and ideological dimensions of museum practice. Lefebvre (1991) argued that space is not a neutral container but is socially produced through relations, practices and ideologies. Museums, as spatial institutions, thus embody power and knowledge, generating cultural meaning through architecture, display and curatorial narrative. Foucault (1986) conceptualized museums as heterotopias – “other spaces” that juxtapose multiple temporalities and geographies within a single site. In this sense, museums reorder time, bringing together artefacts from disparate contexts into new constellations of meaning. Bennett (1995) expands this perspective, describing museums as exhibitionary complexes that discipline visitors through spatial organization and pedagogical display.

Exhibition design, narrative sequencing and architectural layouts operate not neutrally but as technologies of power, shaping public subjectivities and national imaginaries. MacDonald (2003) similarly highlights how curatorial practice mediates cultural memory, positioning museums as sites where identities are both constructed and contested. Museums operate as social environments in which meaning is negotiated through visitor interactions, design and institutional framing (Løvlie et al., 2020; Tröndle et al., 2012). They also serve civic and political functions, shaping cultural identity and diplomacy (Riccioni, 2021). Kim (2024) shows that the creation of the Korean Gallery in the British Museum materialized South Korea's cultural diplomacy, positioning museum space as an instrument of international policy. Museums should therefore be understood not only as custodians of heritage but as contested spaces where knowledge, identity and authority are continuously produced and negotiated.

While museum studies foreground institutional power, material culture scholarship shifts attention to the relational ontology of objects themselves. Dudley's (2021) thing-centred perspective develops this insight by foregrounding the relational lives of artefacts

as they move across contexts. Dudley describes displaced objects as “real characters in a complex tale of relocation, dispersal, abandonment, loss, destruction and resurgence” (Dudley, 2021, p. xv), foregrounding their capacity to generate new meanings across changing contexts. Dudley further introduces the concept of “displayment” to describe museum display as a structured yet open-ended process through which objects are stabilized within institutional narratives while retaining transformative potential (Dudley, 2021, p. 4). In this sense, displacement is not simply geographical removal but a condition of relational suspension, in which artefacts are detached from the lifeworlds that once animated them and re-embedded within new curatorial frameworks that reshape their interpretation.

This perspective resonates with broader material culture scholarship, which similarly emphasizes the relational and processual nature of things. Scholars such as Appadurai (1986), Myers (2001) and Henare et al. (2007) argue that objects do not possess fixed meanings but acquire significance through their circulation across social, cultural and institutional contexts. Building on this material culture tradition, Basu (2017) develops the concept of “in-betweenness” to theorize how museum objects exist within relational and transitional states rather than fixed ontological categories. Basu (2017) argues that objects gain meaning through social and cultural relations rather than possessing fixed identities. Displaced artefacts exist between contexts, and museums become sites where their meanings are reconfigured. This relational perspective provides a foundation for analysing how Chinese artefacts in the British Museum are reinterpreted across institutional display and digital platforms.

Digital participation and the reconfiguration of museum authority

Since the advent of information and communication technologies, the world’s sociocultural context has undergone a profound transformation, giving rise to a new cultural paradigm called “digital culture” (Alsina, 2010, p. 1). Deuze (2006) describes digital culture as a process shaped by computerization, globalization and participatory practices, while Web 2.0 enables users to create, organize and circulate content across media formats (Gauld, 2015). These developments have shifted cultural authority from institutions alone to more distributed and participatory forms of meaning-making. In this digital era, the politics of time, space and place extend beyond the physical walls of museums into virtual and participatory environments. Digital heritage platforms enable communities to reinterpret cultural objects outside institutional frameworks (Giaccardi, 2012; Parry, 2007), while social media functions as mediated spaces in which users actively negotiate cultural meaning and challenge institutional narratives (Couldry, 2012).

Building on the principle of sharing and participatory culture, curation itself can be understood as a participatory practice. Jenkins (2006) defines participatory culture as one “in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” (p. 331). In response, professional cultural organizations have increasingly shifted their curatorial practices towards encouraging visitor participation. Jenkins (2006) also proposes the concept of “cultural convergence”, which describes “a new participatory folk culture by giving people the tools to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate content” (p. 93). Such grassroots culture, based on local knowledge, stands in contrast to professional knowledge, and its integration with

institutional expertise reflects the openness and inclusiveness of contemporary digital curatorial culture.

Rooted in Web 2.0 principles, social media (SM) encompasses a diverse array of platforms, including blogs, networks, collaborative projects, forums, microblogs, photo and video sharing, social bookmarking, social gaming and virtual worlds (Aichner et al., 2021, p. 215). These platforms epitomize participatory culture by enabling users to generate and share content. As Li and Bernoff (2011) observe, SM fosters multi-directional communication among users themselves, creating fast, interactive channels of exchange. Visitors' roles have shifted from passive observers to active participants who explore, connect and build stories around cultural artefacts. This digital dimension highlights the interplay between physical and virtual sites of memory.

Recent scholarship in Asian museology deepens this relational understanding of objects by emphasizing their historically contingent trajectories. As Cai (2025, p. 5) observes, objects originating in Asia often undergo multiple transformations across their social lives, first functioning as objects with social, cultural, political or religious significance and later being incorporated into museum collections and mobilized to support specific institutional and socio-political narratives. This process highlights how museum objects are continually reconfigured through changing historical contexts, institutional frameworks and interpretative regimes. While Cai (2025) focuses primarily on museums located within Asia, her intervention is epistemological rather than geographical. Cai (2025) calls for museum theory to be grounded in Asian perspectives and to challenge Eurocentric assumptions about institutional authority and heritage interpretation. Thus, Asian museology foregrounds Asia as a site of theoretical production that can reshape museum scholarship. In this study, Chinese digital publics represent an Asian epistemic standpoint, actively reinterpreting Chinese artefacts through vernacular digital practices. Digital platforms extend the negotiation of heritage meaning into transnational digital space, demonstrating how Asian public perspectives can challenge institutional authority and reconfigure heritage narratives.

Taken together, existing scholarship offers important insights into the spatial politics of museum display and the participatory dynamics of digital culture. However, studies of exhibitionary space tend to focus on institutional structures of power, while research on digital participation emphasizes user agency and media convergence. Few studies systematically examine how institutional spatial narratives and digitally mediated reinterpretations interact within a shared conceptual framework. By bringing phenomenology into dialogue with museum and digital practices, this study examines how meaning emerges through the interaction between exhibition spaces and user-generated content. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of time, space, place and care, it provides a philosophical framework for understanding how authority and agency are negotiated across museum galleries and digital platforms.

Theoretical framework

Time, space, place and care

Heidegger's philosophy offers a foundation for understanding why heritage matters and why it becomes contested. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/2019) challenges the

interpretation of being as a mere presence. Heidegger introduces Dasein (“being-there”) as a way of investigating the structure and condition of being. Furthermore, Heidegger argues that being is a spatial and temporal phenomenon, not just rooted in the present but with a history and future that is in the world. The museum serves as an institution that preserves past memories in the present; it is a memory institution that collects and stores them. Displayed artefacts represent fixed moments in time, and they are structured chronologically in an exhibition to allow visitors to understand the evolution of a specific social issue.

In his later work, *Art and Space*, Heidegger suggests that art can be perceived as a dweller in a given space (Botin, 2021). The “dweller” concept emphasizes that art and space are interconnected, each influencing the perception and essence of the other. Heidegger views art not just as an object placed in a space but as an entity that belongs to and shapes that space. Artists invest considerable time in crafting installations imbued with unique spatial characteristics (Valente & Silva, 2019). The scale of installations invites visitors to explore their boundless dimensions of time and space (Botin, 2021). Heidegger regards place as a gathering (*Versammeln*) that gathers the things under consideration, and it is a dwelling for Dasein to inhabit (Heidegger, 1969). Meanwhile, artworks could bring forth the essence of place into their environments.

Importantly, Heidegger explains how Dasein understands the world and the entities in the world through the phenomenon of care (*Sorge*). Care as a phenomenon is not chosen by Dasein but is an ontological part of Dasein. “Care is therefore a universal phenomenon of Dasein – unavoidable, unchangeable – that as part of the ontological structure of Dasein shapes the ontic interpretation of the world” (Evans, 2015, p. 46).

Hence, the phenomenon of care is the facticity of Dasein’s ontological being-in-the-world and its ontical engagement with other things and entities. Through taking other entities and things into care, Dasein understands the world as a place, distinguishing it from absolute and scientific space (Evans, 2015). Dasein cares for the world through involvement with equipment, things and other entities, which indicates how Dasein relates to the world (and place) (Evans, 2015). According to Kockelmans (1989, p. 113), the world for Heidegger is not a sum of things but has “an ontologico-eksistential meaning” that explains being in an essential structure. In contemplating space as scientific and absolute, humans are merely spectators, not participants. Employing the Heideggerian method, Dasein is viewed as an active agent desiring to engage with other entities and things and to immerse itself in a cultural environment (Evans, 2015).

Therefore, in Heidegger’s ontological phenomenology, care is how Dasein as a temporal entity is involved with other things and entities. Through the structure of care, Dasein can effectively utilize equipment to execute actions. By comprehending how to exist within the world through a care structure, Dasein can achieve familiarity with the world (and place) (Evans, 2015). Hence, just as Dasein relates to the world through care for equipment, things and other entities, users in virtual museums should develop a deeper relationship with digital artefacts and exhibits when they are presented in a context that encourages care. Instead of being distant or alienating, these digital objects become things users can relate to, understand, and feel a connection with. Heritage objects, therefore, are never inert; they are sites where care gathers, enabling stories, memories and attachments to form.

This ontological understanding of care resonates directly with museum practice. As Morse (2020, p. 18) argues, “care for objects is the very foundation of museum work”,

requiring intimate knowledge of materials, vulnerabilities and preservation needs. Care involves preventing harm, ensuring safety and maintaining objects through careful handling, storage and display. In this sense, care is not merely technical but epistemic and ethical. It reflects how museums think about objects, interpret their meanings and position them within cultural narratives. Morse (2020) frames care as both practice and ethics, shaping how museums engage with objects, knowledge and publics. Morse (2020, p. 20) conceptualizes the museum as a “space of social care”. In this view, care extends beyond objects to include care for stories, communities, staff, cultural memory and future generations. Museum work becomes a form of social responsibility, where preservation, interpretation and access are enacted as practices that sustain collective identity and cultural continuity. Social care thus transforms the museum from a neutral container of objects into a relational space where cultural meaning is actively maintained and transmitted.

Yet care is never free-floating; it is always organized and contested within social and political settings. In the British Museum, curatorial authority channels care into hegemonic storyworlds that aestheticise Chinese artefacts and situate them within universalist civilizational hierarchies. Here, Lefebvre’s (1991) idea of the production of space, Foucault’s (1986) concept of heterotopias, and Bennett’s (1995) notion of the exhibitionary complex show how institutional power disciplines the expression of care. By contrast, publics on digital platforms such as RedNote redirect care towards cultural memory, belonging and sovereignty. Through memes, videos and counter-stories, they generate what this study calls digital narrative sovereignty, reclaiming artefacts into alternative storyworlds. Digital culture theory (Couldry, 2012; Jenkins, 2006) further explains how participatory media enable publics to spread their own interpretations and resist curatorial dominance. Thus, bringing these perspectives together, this framework positions Heidegger’s care as the ontological ground that explains why heritage becomes meaningful at all, while theories of space and power show how care is channelled into competing forms of authority and resistance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case design to examine how displaced Chinese cultural artefacts are narrated, experienced and contested across physical and digital environments. Three complementary datasets were assembled: (1) two rounds of on-site fieldwork at the British Museum in October 2023 and July 2025, (2) a digital corpus of RedNote posts surrounding the June 2025 hashtag event and (3) semi-structured interviews with museum and heritage professionals. All datasets were analysed through thematic analysis, enabling cross-dataset interpretation of curatorial narration, audience responses and digital contestation. The overall research design and analytical procedure of the study are illustrated in Figure 1.

First, two rounds of on-site fieldwork were undertaken at the British Museum. In October 2023, we visited the China and South Asia Gallery, other permanent Chinese displays, and the temporary exhibition *China’s Hidden Century* (1796–1912), taking fieldnotes on spatial sequencing, interpretive texts and curatorial rhetoric. On 1 August 2025, a follow-up visit focused on systematic documentation, including detailed photographs and transcriptions of wall panels, timelines and installations. Combined, these visits

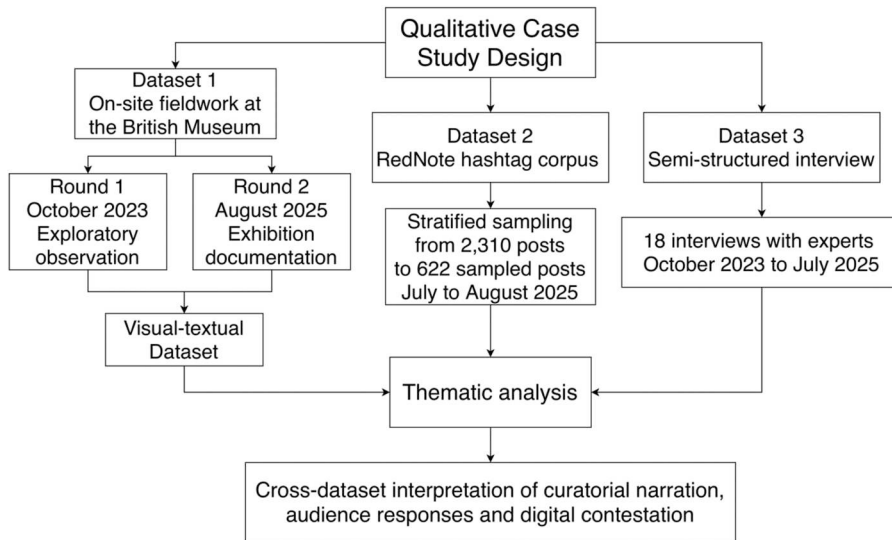


Figure 1. Methodological procedure diagram.

generated a visual-textual dataset that captures both exploratory observations and detailed evidence of curatorial strategies.

In June 2025, the hashtag *#NoChineseCanLeaveTheBritishMuseumSmiling* circulated widely on RedNote, prompting thousands of posts reinterpreting the British Museum's Chinese collections. Posts containing the hashtag were harvested between 15 July and 1 August 2025 using RedNote's in-app search. From an initial corpus of 2,310 items, we de-duplicated entries and excluded non-public or repost-only items, yielding 1,741 unique posts. From this pool, we drew a stratified sample of 622 posts to balance media modality (text/image/video), engagement level (by decile) and stance (supportive/critical/other). The resulting dataset encompassed factual commentary, personal reflection, affective narratives, humorous memes and political critique.

To contextualize institutional practice and audience dynamics, 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted between October 2023 and July 2025 with curators, exhibition designers, digital-heritage practitioners and scholars based in the UK, the United States, Canada and China. While not all participants were directly affiliated with the British Museum, their professional expertise ensured relevance to questions of curatorial authority, displaced heritage and the interpretation of Chinese collections in both Western and Chinese contexts. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling (LinkedIn, professional referrals, outreach to Chinese museums). This strategy ensured the inclusion of both Western and Asian perspectives.

Interviews were conducted online (Microsoft Teams or WeChat), lasted 60–90 min, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Transcripts were fully anonymized and coded thematically in NVivo 12 by two PhD-trained researchers. Independent dual coding strengthened rigour and allowed cross-checking of emergent patterns. The interview protocol covered three areas: (1) professional perspectives on spatial and narrative strategies in museums; (2) challenges posed by digital platforms to curatorial authority and knowledge transmission; and (3) reflections on provenance, restitution and audience engagement.

All data collected for this study were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which provides a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying patterns of meaning across heterogeneous datasets.

Ethical considerations were central to the research design. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity unless explicit attribution was requested. For the RedNote dataset, only publicly accessible posts were collected, and usernames were anonymized. Direct quotations were paraphrased when necessary to prevent traceability, particularly in cases where posts contained politically sensitive or highly personal content.

Findings

Spatio-narrative hegemony in the British Museum's China and South Asia gallery

The British Museum's presentation of Chinese artefacts demonstrates how institutional authority operates through what this study conceptualizes as spatio-narrative hegemony. China is framed as ancient, fragmented and comparable rather than as a sovereign cultural whole. Where modernity is introduced, it appears cursory and subordinated to Western-centred frameworks. However, this framing should not be understood as monolithic; rather, it reflects ongoing institutional negotiations between universalist museum traditions, diplomatic sensitivities and postcolonial critique.

In the permanent galleries, China is displayed as one half of the China and South Asia Gallery, juxtaposed with neighbouring civilizations in a comparative framework. A panel that divides the story into "China" and "Elsewhere in the World" (see Figure 2) makes this logic explicit.



Figure 2. Introductory timeline panel in the China and South Asia Gallery. 2025 © taken by the author.

Other panels reinforce civilizational continuity through artistry and intellectual achievement: “The Shang is the first Chinese dynasty with surviving written records, which are inscribed on bones and bronzes”; “The Tang capital Chang’an was the most international and populous city in the world”. These framings echo Bennett’s (1995) notion of the exhibitionary complex, where spatial and textual design disciplines interpret and situate cultures within an evolutionary “world civilisation” schema. As Duthie (2011) notes, the British Museum continues to function as an imperial museum in a post-imperial world, embedding Chinese history within comparative rather than autonomous narratives (Figure 3).

Alongside this spatial logic, the Museum’s textual strategies consistently aestheticise Chinese artefacts. Object labels highlight “highly decorated bronze vessels” or “exquisite



Figure 3. Panel on early dynasties (1600–1046 BC) in China and South Asia Gallery. 2025 © taken by the author.

craftsmanship” while offering minimal provenance detail, often limited to vague terms such as “acquired” or “gifted”. This language of connoisseurship displaces histories of looting and dispossession, detaching objects from the violence of their circulation.

The panel “Writing Chinese (AD 900–1900)” exemplifies this tendency: it presents Classical Chinese as a unifying medium and claims “today’s written Chinese derives from this style”, but omits twentieth-century reforms. Such omissions illustrate what Duncan (1995) describes as the “civilising rituals” of the museum, where aesthetic emphasis overshadows power relations. Hooper-Greenhill (2000) similarly shows how curatorial interpretation privileges visual culture over provenance, while Fforde et al. (2004) emphasize that colonial collections are often legitimized through narratives that silence their contested acquisition (Figure 4).

When the galleries reach the modern period, the silences become sharper. The panel “China and the West” claims that the Opium Wars “shifted Western perceptions from exotic fantasy to the real China”, reducing imperial violence to a matter of perception. Similarly, the “Modern China (1911–today)” panel compresses more than a century into a few sentences, covering Shanghai’s modernity, the founding of the PRC and Shenzhen’s



Figure 4. Panel on writing Chinese (AD 900–1900) in China and South Asia Gallery. 2025 © taken by the author.

rise, while omitting movements such as the May Fourth reforms or the Cultural Revolution. As Bickers (2012) has argued, Western framings of the Opium Wars often downplay aggression and present them as cultural encounters, a tendency reproduced in the British Museum's selective narratives (Figure 5).

These curatorial strategies – spatial division, aestheticization and selective silences – have provoked strong reactions. During the 2023 exhibition *China's Hidden Century*, the Weibo hashtag #The British Museum should unconditionally return Chinese artefacts went viral, amplified by *Escape from the British Museum*. Publics reframed artefacts as symbols of dispossession and sovereignty, generating alternative narrative arenas online. Macdonald (2003) notes that museums are entangled with shifting national and transcultural identities, while Giaccardi (2012) highlights how digital platforms allow



Figure 5. Panel on China and the West (1644–1911) in the China and South Asia Gallery. 2025 © taken by the author.

heritage to circulate within participatory cultures. Recent Chinese scholarship (Feng, 2024; Wan, 2024; Zhang, 2023) demonstrates that the British Museum's online presence and public discourse have become sites for negotiating national image and historical justice.

Digital space as a platform for patriotic and nationalist expression

The 2025 RedNote hashtag *#NoChineseCanLeaveTheBritishMuseumSmiling* functioned as a powerful digital arena where the public reconnected emotionally with displaced heritage. RedNote became not only a space of cultural mourning but also a site where diverse ideological positions circulated, from blind patriotism to reflexive cosmopolitanism.

Patriotism emerged as the dominant discourse, often expressed through emotionally charged language combining grief, anger and pride. One widely shared post declared:

No Chinese person can walk out of the British Museum smiling ... it is a prison of civilisation, a witness of historical wounds.

Such expressions directly linked the museum to national humiliation, reinforcing state-endorsed narratives of remembering past trauma. Alongside these emotional outbursts, some users advanced a more constructive patriotism. As one reflected:

Letting relics "return home" is not just an emotional expression, but a long process requiring law, diplomacy and cultural cooperation.

Here, patriotic sentiment was tempered by rational strategies that stressed the long-term work of restitution, rather than affective response. Nationalism and populist comparisons also appeared, extending patriotic anger towards other dispossessed nations. A user joked:

No Chinese can leave smiling ... haha, Egyptians neither.

This reframing reinforced competitive nationalist imaginaries while simultaneously acknowledging the shared predicament of colonized peoples. By contrast, some posts shifted towards humanitarian critique, emphasizing a global perspective:

It should be that no human, except the British, can walk out of the Museum smiling.

Such statements destabilized national binaries by highlighting shared colonial trauma among Egypt, Greece and China. Beyond verbal expressions, patriotism also appeared as a performative practice, enacted through cultural symbols and embodied identity. Some users connected the debate to Hanfu or cosplay performances:

Walking in the British Museum in Hanfu, I felt proud to share Chinese culture. These performances turned the museum debate into an arena for affirming national pride and personal identity.

Others contributed personal reflections that blended tourism with heritage awareness:

The British Museum wasn't as big as I imagined ... I felt more pity for Egyptians and Greeks than anger as a Chinese.

These more individualized narratives added nuance by decentring national identity.

The hashtag was also appropriated for consumerist and utilitarian purposes. Commercial posts circulated slogans such as

Click below to bring China's wandering civilisation home.

Others reminded readers of pragmatic applications:

This is a civil service exam hotspot – memorise these points!

These examples reveal how even solemn heritage debates could be instrumentalized for marketing or exam preparation, demonstrating the porous boundary between cultural politics and digital economies. The hashtag also functioned as an educational platform, with some users providing factual information:

The British Museum was founded in 1753 ... it holds 23,000 Chinese relics.

These contributions positioned RedNote as a site of knowledge-sharing, expanding the debate beyond affect to include popular history.

Finally, some posts displayed reflexive agency that complicated both patriotic discourse and hegemonic narratives. Humour and satire contributed to the hashtag's virality. One widely shared comment stated:

The British are the world's strongest movers.

While playful, such comments reinforced the hashtag's visibility, showing how humour served as an effective vehicle for critique and solidarity. More critically reflective posts interrogated provenance and acknowledged complex historical responsibilities:

The British Museum's Chinese collections came from different sources: looting, deceptive purchases, resale by Chinese and donations by Chinese collectors.

These voices challenged simplistic victim – perpetrator dichotomies, emphasizing accountability and global ethics.

Taken together, the publics emotionally and symbolically re-embedded artefacts into Chinese lifeworlds, asserting ownership despite physical inaccessibility. Yet this sovereignty does not necessarily displace institutional authority entirely. Rather, it creates overlapping regimes of interpretation in which museum narratives and digital publics coexist in tension, negotiation and occasional convergence. Yet this sovereignty was not uniform. While much of the discourse reproduced state-framed patriotism, a notable minority disrupted it through humour, pragmatism or cosmopolitan critique. This complexity reveals that digital re-dwelling is not a singular process but a contested and heterogeneous practice, one in which publics simultaneously reproduce and resist dominant frames, generating new possibilities for interpreting displaced heritage.

Professional expert reflections: linking curators and publics

Expert interviews help situate the British Museum case within wider curatorial debates. While British Museum curators emphasized creativity and resilience in the Qing exhibition, professionals noted that museums inevitably function as civic and cultural spaces where authority and public expectation collide.

Our galleries and museums are supposed to be houses for the people ... places where our civic debate happens and continues to happen with a solid artefact in front of you ... A museum and a gallery are places that should take you out of your filter bubble and remind you that you are not the centre of your information world. (Expert 6, digital arts producer, Canada)

Museums, therefore, serve a dual function: providing cultural value and resisting the dangers of intellectual isolation. This framing resonates with how audiences on RedNote transformed the Museum into a site of national debate.

Experts stressed that spatial design is inseparable from narrative. For many experts, space provides the foundation for narrative journeys. Space establishes the beginning of a story, and navigating it creates a journey that carries audiences through to its conclusion.

Context is an incredibly powerful tool ... In physical or virtual spaces, the environment itself becomes part of the story. (Expert 4, digital studio co-director, UK)

What space means to me is the ability to cement the beginning of a narrative ... these spaces, whether virtual or physical, initiate the journey that helps you arrive at the conclusion of the story. (Expert 8, storytelling artist, US)

This perspective mirrors the British Museum's Chinese exhibitions, where themed zones constructed an arc of cultural vibrancy and decline. Public responses online, however, reframed these same artefacts as symbols of dispossession and belonging, illustrating how narrative space can be re-inhabited by audiences.

Beyond spectacle, professionals stressed that digital exhibitions must anchor audiences in history and archaeology to sustain meaning.

If digital exhibitions only rely on visual spectacle, they quickly become empty. The real challenge is how to integrate archaeology and history into narratives that audiences can feel. (Expert 15, cultural heritage scholar, China)

Younger audiences also expect interactive and participatory roles, echoing how RedNote users re-narrate artefacts through memes and cosplay.

Younger audiences expect to participate. Museums should provide interactive opportunities such as avatars, digital traces, or co-created content. (Expert 16, new media curator, China)

The interviews also underscored the tension between curatorial authority and demands for decolonization.

We're doing a lot about decolonising, the collections, and we're talking with community groups about what they'd want to know about the sort of hidden histories of specimens. So that's something else we could perhaps bring out. (Expert 11, senior museum curator, UK)

Yet experts cautioned that digital platforms risk both polarization and superficiality:

Real artefacts must remain at the centre. Over-reliance on digital replicas risks diluting authenticity. (Expert 7, museum curator, China)

This reflects the core tension in the British Museum case: while curators presented artefacts as creative and resilient, publics mobilized them online as evidence of colonial wounds.

Finally, experts argued that museums must embrace hybrid and multi-channel practices, especially after COVID-19.

A future museum may well look like a place where artefacts are stored, but which is also a centre for real-time curation of different perspectives ... a place where debate happens.
(Expert 10, heritage collections curator, US)

Such visions suggest ways curators might engage publics more directly, addressing precisely the gaps made visible in the British Museum's contested Chinese collections.

Overall, the expert interviews highlighted how museums conceptualize space as a site for narrative, civic participation and cultural authority. This aligns with recent scholarship that conceptualizes museums as spaces of social care, where preservation, interpretation and public dialogue are forms of collective responsibility (Morse, 2020). However, the interviews also reveal that care remains unevenly distributed, structured by institutional priorities and political constraints. Yet, heritage does not reside solely within the institutional frame. Publics actively generate their own spatial and narrative practices through digital media, creating alternative arenas where artefacts are endowed with new meanings. Social platforms such as RedNote become symbolic extensions of the museum: spaces where emotional resonance, nationalist sentiments and popular creativity converge. If expert accounts demonstrate how museums seek to structure care through spatial and narrative design, user practices illustrate how care is re-enacted and re-imagined in digital contexts.

Discussion

Storytelling and narrative

Heritage objects do not simply exist in isolation; they become meaningful through the stories that gather around them. In the British Museum's Chinese galleries and online platforms, sequencing, taxonomies and curatorial labels embed artefacts within a narrative of "world civilisation" (Feng, 2024; Zhang, 2023). This illustrates what we call spatio-narrative hegemony: a Western story of China that appears objective but, following Bennett's (1995) account of the exhibitionary complex, actually disciplines visitors' interpretations and privileges institutional authority. Expert interviews confirmed this dynamic, with curators noting that spatial organization itself guides meaning while foreclosing alternative readings.

The RedNote hashtag event unsettled this closure. Posts mobilized metaphors of homecoming ("let relics return") and wounds of civilization ("a prison of civilisation"), while memes depicted the museum as "the world's strongest mover" or "a museum of thieves". Such vernacular storytelling destabilized curatorial rhetoric through humour and satire (Milner, 2016). Drawing on Jenkins' (2006) idea of participatory culture and Couldry's (2012) view of media as spaces of symbolic struggle, these practices exemplify digital narrative sovereignty. From a phenomenological perspective, care is not merely emotional attachment but a structure of involvement that shapes how artefacts are situated in narrative worlds (Heidegger, 1927/2019). Institutional care may stabilize objects within hegemonic frameworks, while publics redirect care into affective counter-stories. In this sense, care operates simultaneously as an ontological condition and as an institutional practice (Morse, 2020).

Space and place

For Heidegger (1969), place is not geometric location but an existential locale where meanings gather. In the British Museum, Chinese artefacts are placed within a civilizational hierarchy that privileges Western custodianship, reinscribing China into what Foucault (1986) terms a heterotopic order. Bennett (1995) similarly shows how museums function as exhibitionary complexes, where architecture and display discipline public subjectivities. Visitors often described the galleries as “othering”, while experts admitted that spatial and institutional constraints mean many artefacts remain hidden, producing a partial and politically inflected sense of place.

On RedNote, the public enacted alternative place-making. The hashtag *#NoChineseCanLeaveTheBritishMuseumSmiling* became a symbolic site of gathering, saturated with affective expressions of anger, sorrow and pride. Users donned Hanfu, reframed artefacts as living cultural identity, and asserted that “protecting relics and passing on heritage is everyone’s responsibility”. These acts echo Anderson’s (2006) imagined communities and Parry’s (2007) analysis of digital dwelling, showing how publics transformed a mediated platform into a moral and cultural geography of Chinese identity. Care here manifests as emplacement, as institutions anchor place in authority while publics reclaim place as belonging and sovereignty. Through these practices, artefacts remain in-between institutional care and public cultural reappropriation, their meanings continuously emerging through relational engagements across spatial, cultural and digital domains (Basu, 2017; Morse, 2020).

Time and memory

Heidegger (1927/2019) reminds us that temporality is ecstatic: past, present and future unfold together in the horizon of Being (Harman, 2007). The British Museum, however, privileges linear time. Artefacts are arranged chronologically, labels emphasize dynastic evolution, and heritage is presented as a detached “past made visible” (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Such sequencing aligns with modernist ideals of universal history and reflects institutional care that freezes heritage into an object of study rather than a living presence.

Digital publics disrupted this temporal order. RedNote posts invoked historical trauma (“never forget national humiliation”), connected it to present emotions, and projected futures of restitution and revival. Humour and satire collapsed ancient artefacts with contemporary politics, creating layered temporalities. These practices resonate with Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*, where the past is mobilized in the present to shape identity and future orientation. Similarly, Cai (2025, p. 5) argues that heritage sites in Asia function within contested “memoryscapes”, where narratives of war, trauma and nationhood are selectively mobilized by both state and non-state actors. Memory is therefore not fixed within institutional displays but continuously negotiated across political and public domains. The RedNote event reflects this pattern, as digital publics activated historical narratives of national humiliation to articulate contemporary identity and claims for restitution, demonstrating how heritage memory remains open to reinterpretation beyond institutional control. From a Heideggerian perspective, these practices reveal care as a temporal mode of engagement. While museums tend to stabilize heritage within a universalized and ordered past, digital publics reanimate artefacts across temporal horizons, reclaiming them as living resources for cultural identity, political expression and future-oriented meaning-making.

Conclusion

This study has shown that heritage objects are never inert but become meaningful through care – the ontological condition that gathers stories, places and temporalities. By examining the British Museum's Chinese galleries alongside digital publics on RedNote, we have argued that care is always organized and contested within political structures. Publics, by contrast, redirect care into digital narrative sovereignties, replacing artefacts within moral geographies of identity and animating them across temporal horizons of humiliation, anger and hope.

By organizing the analysis across storytelling, space and temporality, this study integrates institutional display, digital practice and professional reflection within a shared analytical frame. Theoretically, this analysis demonstrates the value of combining Heidegger's phenomenology of care with critical theories of space and power. Practically, museums should adopt dialogic curatorial protocols that reposition care as a shared responsibility rather than a unilateral institutional function. They should be open about how objects were acquired and show both their beauty and their contested histories. Exhibitions could include many voices, from source communities, diasporas and online users, alongside curators. Museums can also respond to public debates, for example, by hosting forums or online dialogues. In this way, care becomes more open and collaborative, moving museums from authority to shared custodianship and building trust with audiences.

While this study has centred on the British Museum as a paradigmatic case, future research should broaden its scope to include comparative analyses across multiple institutions, both within Europe and Asia. Examining how Chinese heritage is framed in museums such as the Victoria and Albert Museum or the Louvre would reveal whether similar strategies of aestheticization and narrative silencing persist across contexts. Audience-centred approaches, including visitor surveys and focus groups, could further illuminate how publics interpret provenance, curatorial framing and digital participation. Such comparative and user-focused studies would enrich understandings of how heritage is continuously negotiated, highlighting the interplay between institutional authority and public agency across different cultural landscapes.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Swansea University (Approval No: SU-Ethics-Student-060721/4342). Participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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