



Anthropological Perspectives on the Internal Dilemmas of Digital Exhibition in Chinese Museums -- Rereading *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*

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Citation: Wang, Y. (2025). Anthropological Perspectives on the Internal Dilemmas of Digital Exhibition in Chinese Museums - Rereading *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*. *Herança*, 8(3), 64-74.

<https://doi.org/10.52152/heranca.v8i3/1166>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 Jul 2025

Accepted: 09 Sept 2025

ABSTRACT

A growing contradiction has emerged in museum digitalization between the public's escalating demand for a transition from artifact appreciation to holographic experience and ultimately to cultural healing, and the uneven development of digital exhibition practices. Anthropological research offers a valuable framework for examining the underlying challenges of this trend. Using case studies and literature review, this article systematically examines digital exhibitions (both online and on-site formats) curated by Chinese museums in recent years, and draws on anthropological perspectives, including insights exemplified by *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society*. This approach reveals core dilemmas in Chinese museums' digital curation: an overemphasis on individual artifacts at the expense of relational contexts, a monolithic approach to representing regional cultures despite their diversity, the constrained curatorial horizons of temporary exhibitions, and a lack of multisensory engagement. Addressing these conceptual and practical dilemmas presents a critical area for professional reflection among museum practitioners. Throughout this process, anthropological theory provides an important point of reference for research and implementation.

Keywords: Anthropology; Museum; Digital Exhibition; Internal Dilemma.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society is one of the outcomes of an international project initiated by UNESCO. Written by renowned American anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, the book offers a systematic overview of social and cultural anthropology. Adopting a balanced perspective, it explores complex phenomena within society and culture. It aims to clarify and resolve long-standing puzzles by unpacking cultural practices that appear mundane on the surface yet are deeply layered (Herzfeld, 2001). Chapters such as "Cosmologies," "Senses," "Displays of Order," and "Aesthetics" are closely aligned with research in culture, art, and museum display. The chapter on "Senses," for instance, explicitly argues that the senses are code-laden instruments that translate bodily experience into culturally recognized forms (Herzfeld, 2001). Sensory anthropology generally holds that sensation is not merely physiological but is shaped and constructed by culture. One aim of digital museum display is precisely to intensify audience experience through multisensory orchestration, enabling effective interaction between visitors and exhibits, including the dense informational networks that surround them. Herzfeld's meticulous, incisive reasoning makes the book both generative and instructive, and the book has become a key reference in contemporary anthropological studies.

In recent years, digitalization has emerged as a primary direction for the development of museums, demonstrating significant contemporary value and practical relevance in the realm of cultural communication. In 2021, several central authorities, including the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee and the

National Cultural Heritage Administration, jointly issued the Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Reform and Development of Museums. The document calls for innovation in digital cultural products and services, vigorous development of virtual exhibitions and cloud-based museum education, and the creation of a museum communication system that integrates online and offline channels. It also urges stronger audience research, the adoption of segmented and targeted outreach, and improvements across the entire visitor journey. The overarching goal is to promote China's fine traditional culture and to advance exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations.

Digital exhibition and display involves integrating museum collections with digital technologies and employing digitized text, images, audio, animation, and video, supported by digital display systems, to reveal the meanings, histories, cultural contexts, and aesthetics of objects (Li, 2023, p. 89). Relative to traditional formats, it features interactivity, broad access, co-creation, and stronger dissemination. Drawing on our survey of current digital practices in Chinese museums, such exhibitions can be grouped into three types. The first type centers on the physical space, artifacts, and traditional curatorial layouts of museums, enhanced with digital installations and technologies. This hybrid model not only enriches the visitor experience but also offers educational value by providing information on materials, historical periods, and craftsmanship through textual explanations and visual diagrams, thereby promoting public understanding of cultural heritage. The second type leverages museum spaces and infrastructure while discarding conventional display boards, vitrines, and even physical artifacts altogether. In their place, exhibitions reconstruct both objects and spaces digitally, amplifying the unique features of artifacts and producing a more powerful visual impact. The third type consists of fully online exhibitions launched by museums, which offer broader accessibility and reach.

However, notable disparities remain in the quality and extent of digital implementation across museums of different regions and administrative levels. In China, current digital exhibitions tend to focus predominantly on technological aspects, often lacking in-depth exploration of museum collections and comprehensive presentations of regional culture. As a result, many immersive exhibitions across institutions share a homogenous aesthetic – what might be called “a thousand museums with one face” – which inhibits emotional resonance with visitors and instead risks fictionalizing or even damaging the cultural meanings intended for display. For example, in sections labeled “prehistoric society,” many museums present scenes of early human production and labor primarily through simplified animations. The content and form tend to be highly standardized; figures repeat symbolic gestures; narrative depth and visual interest are minimal. Such treatments fail to reflect the diverse lifeways and social formations of prehistoric peoples across different regions and cultural contexts.

At its core, this reveals a deeper issue: the lack of scholarly depth in digital exhibition planning. As a discipline investigating the relationship between society and culture, anthropology offers insights into the challenges arising from the rapid development of digital exhibitions in museums.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND MUSEUMS: BRIDGING THROUGH CULTURE

The term anthropology originates from the Greek language, and the rise of industrial civilization along with the globalizing world order provided fertile ground for the discipline's emergence. As a social science, anthropology centers on the study of “human beings,” with a particular focus on diverse social groups (especially marginalized communities), and explores the dynamic interplay between society and culture.

In its classical phase, anthropology was primarily shaped by two major schools of thought: classical evolutionism and classical diffusionism. This period saw the emergence of foundational figures and works, including Edward Tylor's *Anthropology: An Introduction to the Study of Man and Civilization*, Lewis H. Morgan's *Ancient Society*, and Friedrich Ratzel's *Anthropogeographie*. Modernist anthropology continues to regard fieldwork as its primary research method (Freire-Marreco, 1951), and its theoretical frameworks have been widely applied across various other disciplines, giving rise to numerous interdisciplinary fields. In fact, the scope of anthropology itself is remarkably broad, encompassing multiple branches such as biological anthropology, archaeological anthropology, social anthropology, and linguistic anthropology (Lin, 2020). Its research touches upon all areas of human beings and human activities. Within anthropological studies, cultural artifacts and artworks often serve as key evidence, acting as carriers of social and cultural information. They have not only drawn the attention of anthropologists but have also contributed to the emergence of subfield such as the anthropology of art.

In 2022, the International Council of Museums defined a museum as “a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate

and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” Museums, for their part, are repositories of human cultural heritage and function as “witnesses” to the evolution of human civilization. The artifacts housed within them encapsulate specific cultural information, conveyed through visual elements such as symbols, motifs, and forms. Compared with earlier formulations, the new definition places greater emphasis on openness and inclusivity. In this light, modern museums have become crucial institutions for the preservation, transmission, and scholarly exploration of culture. Museum exhibitions are designed to create a dialogic space between the audience, the artifacts, and the historical narratives they embody. The transition from traditional display techniques to digital exhibitions represents a significant shift in both museum development and the modes of presenting cultural relics.

Technically speaking, digital technologies are merely tools. Yet it remains a pressing question whether the application of these tools ultimately facilitates or hinders the creation of dialogic spaces between people and objects. Undeniably, anthropology and museum digitalization may appear to operate in separate spheres, but they in fact share a fundamental concern: culture. It is through this shared focus that meaningful connections can be forged between the two fields. Culture is the central subject of anthropological research, and it is also the core focus of museum study and exhibition – particularly the latter, as exhibition plays an even more prominent role in the functions of museums. To achieve effective exhibition outcomes, a deeper understanding of the essence of culture is urgently needed. In contemporary intellectual currents, anthropology has turned toward questions of artistic identity, ethnicity, cultural representation, gender politics, and power. The ways museums intersect with these debates have drawn growing attention and now figure in cultural criticism and public discourse (Guo, 2023, p. 107). Anthropological methods, perspectives, and research findings can enable museum professionals to reflect on the shortcomings in their own practices during the process of cultural interpretation and display.

THE INTERNAL DILEMMAS OF MUSEUM DIGITAL EXHIBITIONS

Individual Display and Relational Space

In 2017, China’s National Cultural Heritage Administration issued the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Cultural Heritage, which proposed the development of a technical infrastructure for “smart museums,” the integration of knowledge systems, and the implementation of “five-sense” virtual experience technologies. The initiative aimed to employ multiple strategies to “bring cultural relics back to life.” As the simple animations commonly found in “Prehistoric Society” sections show, current digital exhibitions in Chinese museums often focus on making artifacts technologically dynamic rather than culturally alive. The key to truly “enlivening” cultural relics lies in constructing relational spaces.

As Friedrich Engels once noted, “When we consider and reflect upon Nature at large, or the history of mankind, or our own intellectual activity, at first we see the picture of an endless entanglement of relations and reactions” (Marx & Engels, 1966, p. 140). Cultural anthropology, likewise, differs from general linguistics, religious studies, aesthetics, ethics, and sociology in that it does not study cultural phenomena in isolation. Instead, it examines them holistically and historically, seeking to understand their essential patterns within the broader context of human history and cultural development. It traces phenomena back to their origins, in order to uncover the historical realities of human beings, human nature, culture, and spiritual life (Yi, 2020).

Anthropologists, by emphasizing context, adopt a holistic approach that attempts to understand a given subject in relation to a wide array of interconnected systems such as politics, economics, religion, language, and art. Methodologically, this approach is distinguished by ethnographic fieldwork and writing. The knowledge produced through these methods, and the “relational spaces” they reveal and help construct, tend to be more empirically grounded, nuanced, and comprehensive. Although art history also aspires to holistic analysis, art historians more often trace the development of art by following the objects themselves. Anthropologists, by contrast, focus on how people treat objects, ultimately situating those objects within broader cultural and social frameworks.

This methodology offers critical insights for digital exhibitions in museums and, more importantly, highlights a significant gap in current practice: the neglect of relational space. It is not enough to simply reference historical texts, archaeological reports, or image catalogs. To construct meaningful relational spaces, curators must adopt an anthropological lens to investigate “real social facts” and cultivate the reflexive and critical stance that ethnographic practice demands. This process demands critical reflection: Why was this object created? In what context did it emerge? What was its relationship with the maker, the user, the viewer? How did it relate to other

objects of the same period, region, or function?

The profound historical depth embodied in a cultural relic cannot be fully conveyed merely by making it “move.” The core aim of digital exhibitions is not to display how a once-static “butterfly” can now “flutter,” but to truly bring the object to life through cultural narrative. In traditional galleries, glass display cases commonly sever the object’s “communication” with its surroundings. Even when large artifacts or fragments cannot be placed in cases, they are typically cordoned off with physical barriers or kept under staff supervision, which inadvertently obscure the full cultural meaning of the artifacts they contain.



Figure 1. “Hello, Su Dongpo” – Immersive Song Rhyme Art Exhibition (installation view) [Source: <https://www.keyispace.com/nhsdp>]

In recent years, exhibitions themed around Su Shi (Su Dongpo) have been held with growing frequency across China. Most follow a familiar format: isolated displays of his calligraphy, accompanied by brief biographical or contextual annotations. Some of these exhibitions incorporate scenic reconstructions or audiovisual elements, but they rarely succeed in constructing a full relational space. By contrast, the 2023 exhibition “Hello, Su Dongpo” – Immersive Song Rhyme Art Exhibition successfully employed digital technologies to create a three-dimensional digital likeness of Su Dongpo, enabling audiences to engage with the poet through activities like reciting verse, dialogue, or even taking photographs with the avatar. Multiple immersive environments were designed around thematic units, with each object carefully curated alongside ambient sound, imagery, lighting, and scent to contribute to a cohesive relational space (Figure 1).

Within this blend of the virtual and the material, visitors were invited to participate in activities such as dining, tea preparation, tea tasting, playing the qin, and poetry recitation. This multisensory experience engaged sight, sound, smell, and taste, immersing audiences in a vivid simulation of everyday life during the Song Dynasty, allowing them to inhabit and appreciate the aesthetic sensibilities of that era. Though not a museum-led initiative, the exhibition’s format and content presentation offer valuable references for curators planning digital exhibitions in museums.

Franz Boas once pointed out that the artworks of many peoples around the world may appear, on the surface, to be mere formal decoration, but in reality, they are imbued with meanings that can be understood by others (Boas, 2004, p. 59). When digital exhibitions overemphasize formal or aesthetic effects, they risk obscuring these

deeper meanings. Historically, museums began as institutions devoted to the display of objects. The transition from object-centered exhibitions to presentations of lifestyles, cultures, and ultimately aesthetics has required significant time; and each curatorial project is itself a process of knowledge production. Therefore, the ultimate goal of digital exhibitions may well be to shift from form to content, from movement to vitality, and from isolated display to the construction of rich relational spaces. This is the direction toward which curators should orient the future of digital exhibition in museums.

The Absence of Contextualized Exhibitions Rooted in the Regional Culture

While no culture is inherently superior or inferior, significant regional differences do exist. Local museums often serve as primary sites for the exhibition of regional cultures. It is notable that many such museums in China include one or more core exhibitions centered on local historical development. This reflects not only the growing awareness among museum professionals of the value of regional cultures, but also a proactive commitment to their preservation and dissemination. Prior to the widespread application of digital technologies, traditional local exhibitions were typically organized along a chronological axis. The conventional “artifact + label + text description” format remains dominant to this day. In recent years, the gradual advancement of digital tools has made it technically possible to reconstruct the context of regional cultures in exhibition settings. However, in practice, most implementations have merely used digital enhancements to improve visual effects, such as by adding video clips or animation to otherwise conventional displays. A case in point is the Wuhan Museum’s 2021 exhibition *Treasures of the Song Kilns, Brilliance of Husi: Artifacts and Specimens Unearthed from the Husi Kiln Sites*. The exhibition opened with a video documenting the archaeological process at Husi, which did help visitors apprehend the original condition of the finds at the moment of excavation. Because the video conveyed limited information and its delivery was somewhat monotonous, few visitors stayed to watch, especially those short on time.

It should be noted that the establishment of relational space is a necessary precondition and key factor for achieving meaningful “contextualized” exhibitions. The eminent art historian Wu Hung renders “context” as *yuanjing* (原境, “original setting”) to underscore the importance of reconstructing original environments in art-historical research. In interviews, he repeatedly emphasizes the task of building *yuanjing*; for example, in tomb studies one can reconstruct the visual and material environment of the time by reading surviving traces and spatial arrangements. (Wu & Zhu, 2011, p. 63.)

Cultural spaces are inherently diverse and place-specific, yet this study finds that many digital exhibitions in contemporary museums tend toward homogenization. One key reason for this lies in a missing link between digital technologies and the regional cultural content they are meant to serve.

Anthropological research has long emphasized the importance of adopting the “native’s point of view” (Yin, 2024, p. 78). Clifford Geertz, for instance, argued that for anthropologists, art must be understood within its specific local context: “The variety that anthropologists have come to expect in the spirit beliefs, the classification systems, or the kinship structures of different peoples, and not just in their immediate shapes but in the way of being-in-the-world they both promote and exemplify, extends as well to their drummings, carvings, chants, and dances” (Geertz, 1983). Bronisław Malinowski spent an extended period in the New Guinea region, immersing himself in the daily life of the people, learning their language and adopting their ways of living. Through this “complete rather than ‘flat’ view of the human being,” he produced fieldwork of enduring value to anthropological inquiry (Malinowski, 2014). By contrast, local museums, which are themselves embedded in particular cultural landscapes, would appear to have greater innate capacity to represent regional perspectives. In line with this, New Museology is a practice-oriented theory that insists local communities are the stewards of their culture and hold interpretive and decision-making authority (Pan, 2021, p. 6). The painted pottery culture of Gansu and Qinghai, the colored sculpture tradition of Shanxi, the Chu culture of Hubei, and the Qin civilization of Shaanxi all provide fertile ground for further curatorial exploration using digital tools.

Yet adopting a local perspective alone is insufficient. Curators must also endeavor to adopt a historical perspective, or what might be called the “point of view of people of the time.” Consider, for instance, the many artifacts featuring dragon motifs found in museum collections. To contemporary visitors, such patterns represent iconic symbols of Chinese tradition, typically devoid of political implication. However, from the perspective of historical subjects, dragon motifs once carried sacred, noble, or protective connotations and were often associated with identity, hierarchy, and imperial power. They evoked awe and reinforced authority. Thus, simply using modern digital tools to render these motifs in visually striking form, or to offer generic interpretations of their symbolism, falls short. A more meaningful approach would be to ask how digital technologies might convey the power and reverence historically associated with the dragon, enabling visitors to experience the intended sense of awe. This challenge should be at the heart of curatorial thinking.

Permanent Exhibitions and Temporary Exhibitions: Focus and Periphery

In museum practice, permanent exhibitions typically serve as the focal point for presenting regional culture, while temporary exhibitions reflect the institution's broader curatorial scope, that is, its peripheral vision. Some scholars draw a more granular distinction: a permanent (basic) display is aligned with a museum's fundamental nature and mission, bears the institution's distinctive character and a coherent display system, and remains relatively stable and open to the public year-round. By contrast, a temporary exhibition is one that is changed regularly, is usually smaller in scale, and features diverse content over a short run; traveling exhibitions are a subtype of temporary exhibition (Lin, 2023, pp. 64–65).

In China today, especially among public museums, temporary exhibitions commonly fall into two main categories: interregional exchange exhibitions and original shows centered on core collections. Online exhibitions are often three-dimensional reproductions of physical displays. While they have greatly extended the reach and influence of museum programs, their content tends to remain constrained by the same curatorial perspective as their offline counterparts.

As one anthropologist has observed, "The nature of ethnographic research may now be changing. Indeed, there is a pragmatically sensible shift from insistence on the local focus of ethnography – a tiny unit often situated within an equally arbitrary 'culture area' and defined by the supposed peculiarities of that area – and toward new efforts at finding the intimacy necessary to successful fieldwork in large cities, electronic encounters, offices and laboratories, on buses and trains" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997; Herzfeld, 1997a, as cited in Herzfeld, 2001). This indicates that anthropology has begun to break through its previous limitations and extend its focus to new domains.

In the same spirit, a museum's permanent exhibitions should be grounded in regional characteristics and involve in-depth research into the cultural value of its collections, while temporary exhibitions can broaden the museum's scope by engaging more with ethnic, rural, or even foreign artifacts and their historical trajectories. For instance, the Tujia culture in the Enshi region of Hubei or the Hui culture in Ningxia could be presented through digital exhibitions that immerse visitors in their unique customs and ways of life. At the primary level, exhibitions might showcase the transformation of rural communities, the achievements of poverty alleviation campaigns, or focus on the modernization of specific villages and neighborhoods, conveying macro-level themes through micro-level case studies. In international exchange, some Chinese museums and cultural institutions have collaborated with their counterparts along the Belt and Road, contributing significantly to the global dissemination of Chinese culture. However, the reciprocal flow, namely, the import of foreign artifacts and exhibitions, remains limited.

A notable exception is the *On Top of the Pyramid: The Civilization of Ancient Egypt* exhibition introduced by the Shanghai Museum in 2024. This exhibition generated widespread enthusiasm upon its opening, drawing large crowds of visitors and demonstrating the Chinese public's considerable interest in world cultures. This example highlights a broader point: China's advocacy for cultural confidence must be rooted in its own traditions, but this confidence should not entail closing oneself off from other cultures. Rather, both audiences and researchers require comparative and expansive perspectives to gain a deeper understanding of their own heritage and grasp the essence of traditional culture. Culture is also shaped through comparison – an aspect that is often lacking in Chinese museums.

Furthermore, many smaller and privately run museums face additional constraints. With limited exhibition space, a scarcity of distinctive artifacts, and few opportunities for inter-institutional collaboration, their digital initiatives often amount to nothing more than animated renderings of existing objects. But contemporary digital technologies offer the potential to transcend such limitations, making independent digital exhibitions possible by using virtual and freely constructed spaces to express curatorial themes.

Multisensory Engagement and Cultural Healing

One of the prominent advantages of digital technology in museum exhibitions, compared to traditional forms, is the capacity to engage multiple senses. The commonly referenced "five senses" refer to the human faculties of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. In current research and practice, the exploration of the senses has extended into fields such as sociology, cultural studies, art, education, and psychology. Anthropology has likewise developed a subfield known as sensory anthropology. The foundational premise of this field is that perception is not merely a physiological act but also a cultural one: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell are not only ways of interpreting physical phenomena, but also channels for conveying cultural values (Herzfeld, 2001). Focusing on the visual, argues Canadian scholar Constance Classen, can "introduce a rupture in the interconnected sensory system of a society." This occurs most notably with artefacts. "Although vision is commonly regarded as the primary and

most important sense,” she notes, “it is only first among equals.” More critically, she warns that vision has become a kind of ‘sensory dictator,’ effectively marginalizing the other senses from our cultural imagination” (see Herzfeld, 2001).

The human sensory system operates through complex coordination, and privileging only sight or sound risks producing limited sensory engagement across disciplines. From this perspective, digital exhibitions in museums, while often visually and aurally rich, rarely engage the other senses. As a result, visitors may struggle to feel emotionally moved or spiritually nourished by the experience. An instructive parallel can be found in 5D or 7D cinema installations at tourist sites across China. These immersive formats target not only sight and hearing but also include sensations such as vibration, swaying, translatory motion, and tactile elements like water spray. Such coordinated multisensory effects can create a highly immersive environment. This form of multisensory interaction offers important inspiration for museum exhibitions. Nevertheless, a limitation of such immersive theaters lies in their restrictive nature: people immersed in them are physically confined and unable to move freely, and they can easily be pulled back to the real world by a “single sensory thread” unwittingly.

Technologically speaking, it is not difficult for museums to surpass such limitations and achieve deeper, more immersive experiences. The China Grand Canal Museum in Yangzhou has made notable strides in this regard. Its permanent exhibition, *Boats on the Canal*, integrates a restored full-scale ancient boat – Shafei Craft, with panoramic digital technologies (Figure 2). Visitors can stand on the prow and experience a simulated journey through space and time, as if transported across history. Since its opening, the exhibition has generated enthusiastic public response, marking a successful example of digital immersion in museums.



Figure 2. *Boats on the Canal* Exhibition, China Grand Canal Museum

Multisensory digital exhibitions are not only technologically innovative but also offer a vital pathway for museums to fulfill their therapeutic potential. Contemporary youth, grappling with the pressures of work and life, often report symptoms such as anxiety, confusion, meaninglessness, or aesthetic fatigue. There is a growing desire for leisure activities that deliver emotional value. In this context, experience-driven consumer trends, such as live action role-playing games, escape rooms, rage rooms, and temple visits, have become increasingly popular among younger demographics. The rise of the “experience economy” (Liang, 2008) has thus played an important role in shaping the cultural tourism industry. While most public museums in China do not operate on a for-profit model, enhancing the quality of visitor experience remains a key factor in expanding their cultural influence.

For museums, the aim is to move visitors beyond sensory appeal toward understanding and reflection; coordinated multisensory design is especially effective in this regard. Curators design settings that enable visitors during their visit to engage in a dialogue across time with objects. When the meanings an exhibition or an artifact communicates meet a visitor’s own desires, doubts, or reflections, an affective bond forms and emotional resonance follows. Such resonance marks a deeper level of experience: viewers become participants, gaining a

sense of identification or awakening cultural memory. This is also the underlying mechanism by which culture exerts a healing effect.

Cultural healing refers to a therapeutic approach that uses cultural activities and experiences to soothe emotion, recalibrate mood, and alleviate symptoms of mental illness, thereby facilitating psychological adjustment and promoting health (Cai, 2025, p. 109). Within museums, diverse cultural elements and programs have become integral to creating “healing spaces.” It should also be noted that the emotional experiences evoked by museums are not necessarily joyful. The ability to become immersed, to forget the pressures of the present, and to enter a state of contemplative openness can itself be profoundly therapeutic.

PATHWAYS TO OPTIMIZING THE DIGITAL CURATION OF MUSEUMS

Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society offers a comprehensive discussion of key issues in anthropological research, including fieldwork methodology, the systematic contextualization of culture, and the development of sensory anthropology. For example, in the chapter on the “Senses,” Herzfeld presents numerous cases to show that bodily sensation and cultural value are inextricably linked. He maintains that our task is not only to map the diversity of such linkages but also to examine how they shape entire constellations of social relations and practices (Herzfeld, 2001). These insights provide valuable theoretical resources for addressing the challenges facing digital museum exhibitions and for guiding the shift from merely “making artifacts move” toward “bringing them to life.”

From an anthropological perspective, the digital curation practices of contemporary museums in China still face several challenges, such as an over-reliance on singular digital modes, isolated presentations of artifacts, a predominant focus on technological enhancement over cultural interpretation, and a lack of immersive, multisensory experiences. Drawing on Michael Herzfeld’s anthropological insights and the diagnosis above, improvements may be made in the following four areas:

First, museums must establish relational spaces that enable dialogue between people and objects. Artifacts should be situated within historical and social contexts, allowing curators to explore the relationships between objects, between people and objects, and between objects and spatial environments.

Second, permanent exhibitions should prioritize the presentation of regional cultures by adopting a curatorial perspective that integrates both the “local perspective” and the “historical perspective.” In practice, this requires curators to engage in field research and other immersive strategies to reconstruct the “original context” of the artifacts.

Third, temporary exhibitions should broaden the scope of curatorial attention to include ethnic, rural, and even foreign cultures, thereby enabling visitors to encounter diverse customs and historical experiences. By using the “other” as a mirror, such exhibitions offer visitors a more reflective lens through which to understand their own traditions and grasp the essence of cultural heritage.

Fourth, the transition from an object-centered to a human-centered model represents a critical trend in digital curatorial practice. This evolution calls for immersive exhibition environments that integrate a full spectrum of sensory stimuli – including touch, vibration, translatory motion, scent, and suspense. Such multisensory design should not only offer pleasurable experiences but also promote psychological healing by fostering emotional resonance and cultural identification.

Some museums in China have already undertaken promising initiatives to address these curatorial challenges. The West Pavilion of the Suzhou Museum, opened in 2021, features both an Exploration Experience Hall and a Multimedia Exhibition Hall as part of its core programming. The digital galleries are modeled on Suzhou’s classical gardens and grounded in the city’s folk traditions. The exhibition, titled the Suzhou Lifestyle, combines the twenty-four solar terms with traditional color theory. Through integrated design across sound, color, form, and spatial layout, the exhibition expresses the aesthetic philosophy of daily life in Suzhou. This exhibition avoids the conventional “object–image–text” model, opting instead for a multi-dimensional spatial structure created using full-screen LED technology. The resulting “relational space” synthesizes elements of astronomy, seasonal rhythms, folk art, culinary heritage, and garden architecture, generating a curatorial experience that is both temporally continuous and spatially expansive.

Another exemplary case is The Art of Life: Multimedia Exhibition of Mawangdui Han Culture, co-organized by the Hunan Museum and Harvard’s Chinese Art Media Lab (CAMLab) in June 2024. Launched to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the archaeological excavation of the Mawangdui Han tombs, the exhibition

explores three interconnected themes – “Time and Space,” “Yin and Yang,” and “Life.” Using cutting-edge multimedia technologies, the exhibition delves into Han funerary culture and traces ancient Chinese conceptions of life and death (Figure 3). Through an immersive interplay of sound, light, and digital imagery, visitors are invited to enter into dialogue with the ancient world across temporal boundaries.



Figure 3. Exhibition Hall Three: “Life,” Act II: “Ritual” – Installation View [Source: Hu Nan Museum]

What is truly remarkable about this exhibition is that it transcends the conventional aim of digital displays to merely recreate the historical “original context.” Instead, it goes a step further by reconstructing an imagined “elsewhere” once yearned for by people of the past, something that would be nearly impossible to achieve without digital technology.

In addition, several exemplary cases reflect these developments: in April 2018, Paris inaugurated its first large-scale all-digital art museum, the Atelier des Lumières; in May of the same year, the Palace Museum collaborated with Phoenix TV to launch *The Life Along the Bian River* at the Pure Brightness Festival High-tech Interactive Art Exhibition; in 2022, the Zhejiang Provincial Museum introduced its cloud-based exhibition *A Day in the Southern Song Dynasty*; in 2023, the National Museum of China debuted its permanent digital exhibition *The Digital World of the Rhino-shaped Vessel*; in July 2024, the *Eternal Notre-Dame VR* immersive exhibition opened in Shanghai; and in November of the same year, the Museum of Immersive Art Collection in Beijing launched its inaugural show *The Realm of Wukong: Immersive Art Ecological Experimental Exhibition*. These representative projects demonstrate valuable explorations into the potential of digital curatorial practice.

Both scholarly research and successful case studies show that museum professionals and general audiences alike are no longer satisfied with conventional exhibition models or the basic application of digital tools. There is growing demand for multisensory, immersive, and intellectually engaging digital exhibitions that offer profound cultural meaning. To meet this demand, curators should probe the layers of information embedded in artifacts to deepen the exhibition’s scholarly substance. In such environments, visitors are able to interact with ancient objects, historical figures, and recreated landscapes, exploring the complex relationships between people and things within reconstructed contextual spaces.

However, despite these pioneering efforts, they remain exceptions rather than the norm. The overall development of digital exhibitions in China, particularly among smaller, regional, and private museums, still lags behind. These institutions should draw lessons from both domestic and international best practices and design exhibitions that balance academic depth with experiential appeal. In this process of continuous advancement, anthropological theories and methodologies can serve as a vital source of inspiration and conceptual support.

CONCLUSION

In the context of China's national strategy to build up cultural strength, contemporary museums play a vital role in the collection, research, and exhibition of cultural heritage. However, traditional exhibition spaces, with their inherent limitations, can no longer meet the public's growing cultural needs. Digital technology, to a certain extent, can transcend the boundaries of time and space, dynamically unfolding dramatic personal narratives, presenting the otherworldly landscapes once yearned for by people of the past, reconstructing the splendor of flourishing eras, and allowing us to hear the echoes of ancient civilizations. Therefore, digital curation has become not only a prominent research focus in the field of cultural heritage but also an inevitable direction for the future development of museums.

Guided by anthropological theory, the study argues that curatorial practice should move from an object-centered to a people-centered approach. This shift entails breaking away from the isolated display of artifacts and instead using digital tools to establish relational spaces that connect people with objects. On a content level, curators must also push beyond conventional thinking to deeply explore and reconstruct the original historical or cultural context of artifacts, enabling immersive and emotionally resonant experiences for visitors. At the same time, permanent exhibitions should be grounded in local culture, while temporary exhibitions ought to extend outward, focusing on specific themes or phenomena, to broaden visitors' cultural horizons, especially those of the local audience, by revealing the bigger picture through focused details. Throughout this process, curators should attend to the psychological and emotional effects of multisensory orchestration, allowing visitors to become immersed in the constructed displays and exhibition spaces, thereby fostering emotional resonance and, to some extent, cultural healing.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

Conflict of interest: No declaration required. **Financing:** No reporting required. **Peer review:** Double anonymous peer review.