

Staging the Museum: Script Intersections and Heritage Communication in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

Museums are often understood as places where cultures are displayed and interpreted. Yet few institutions bring questions of history, power, memory, and affect into such close proximity as museums do. This article examines the British Museum as a site where these interactions become particularly visible. Drawing on a corpus of 186 Chinese-language Xiaohongshu posts, reflexive field observations from four museum visits, and selected institutional and policy materials, the study explores how museum artifacts are interpreted through multiple narrative frames. The analysis introduces the concept of script intersections to describe moments when different interpretive frames converge around a single artifact, display, or digital image. Rather than producing a single interpretation, these scripts often coexist and compete, shaping how questions of legitimacy, responsibility, and belonging are negotiated. Methodologically, the findings are presented through academic theatre. A three-act script stages composite voices representing artifacts, curators, visitors, policymakers, donors, and digital publics. By foregrounding script intersections and the role of digital publics, the article contributes to a more relational understanding of how heritage meanings are produced and contested.

Keywords: *intercultural communication; museums; script intersections; digital publics; heritage communication; Xiaohongshu*

1. INTRODUCTION

Why the museum? In intercultural communication research, museums are often discussed as places people visit rather than as communicative environments in their own right. Yet few institutions concentrate on questions of history, power, memory, and affect as intensely as museums do. Within a single gallery space, visitors encounter objects whose meanings have been shaped by colonial histories, institutional authority, public interpretation, and personal memory. The British Museum, with its global visibility and complex legal context, offers a particularly revealing example. It functions as a site where meanings are produced through interactions among visitors, curators, donors, policymakers, and the material presence of objects themselves (Bennett, 2013; Macdonald, 2010; Hicks, 2020).

This article approaches such encounters through the idea of a planetary relational field. Here, planetisation refers to a shift in intercultural communication analysis that moves beyond interactions between human groups

to consider broader relational networks involving objects, digital platforms, institutional governance, and ecological histories. Rather than focusing only on dialogue between cultural communities, a planetary perspective draws attention to the ways communication unfolds through entanglements between human actors and material infrastructures. Work in environmental humanities and post-humanist scholarship has increasingly emphasized how objects, materials, and ecological processes participate in shaping human meaning-making (Chakrabarty, 2021; Haraway, 2020; Heise, 2008; Nixon, 2011). From this perspective, a museum artifact is not only a cultural symbol but also a material object embedded in histories of extraction, labor, circulation, and digital representation.

To examine how these meanings emerge in practice, the article introduces the concept of script intersections. In this study, scripts refer to recurring interpretive frames through which museum artifacts are understood and evaluated. These may include scientific preservation,

ancestral dignity, restitution justice, ecological responsibility, philanthropic legitimacy, and consumer spectacle. Such frames rarely appear in isolation. More often, they intersect within particular encounters, for example, when a visitor simultaneously admires conservation expertise while questioning colonial acquisition histories. Script intersections, therefore, describe moments when several interpretive frames converge around a single artifact, exhibition display, or digital image, producing tensions that shape how legitimacy and responsibility are negotiated in museum spaces.

The legal context of the British Museum also plays an important role in structuring these debates. The British Museum Act 1963 restricts the museum's ability to permanently remove most objects from its collection, limiting deaccessioning to a small number of exceptional circumstances. At the same time, the Human Tissue Act 2004 and guidance issued by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport establish procedures governing the ethical treatment and possible repatriation of human remains. These legal frameworks influence what institutional actors can publicly say or do in response to restitution debates. In this sense, policy operates not merely as background context but as part of the communicative environment that shapes how institutional authority is articulated.

Digital mediation adds another layer to these dynamics. On platforms such as Xiaohongshu, users photograph, caption, and reinterpret museum objects through short videos, travel notes, and commentary posts. For this study, a purposive dataset of 186 Chinese-language Xiaohongshu posts referencing the British Museum was compiled between 2023 and 2025. Posts were identified through keyword searches including 大英博物馆 (British Museum), 国宝 (national treasure), 回家 (return home), 归还 (restitution or return), 殖民 (colonialism), 修复 (restoration), and 保护 (preservation). The sample captures a range of formats and narrative styles, including travel notes, explanatory posts, and reflections on restitution debates. Comment threads and repost chains were also examined in order to trace how particular interpretive tropes circulated across the platform. These materials show how digital publics actively reinterpret museum artifacts through recurring narratives such as national treasure, cultural homecoming, and conservation as care. To analyze these intersecting discourses, the study adopts academic theatre as a creative analytic method. Rather than presenting findings solely through conventional thematic analysis, the article stages composite characters representing objects, institutional actors, and digital publics. This performative format allows multiple interpretive positions to appear simultaneously without

forcing their tensions into a single analytical voice. The theatrical script, therefore, functions as an analytic device rather than a literary embellishment, making it possible to retain the polyphony that characterizes museum encounters.

Empirically, the analysis combines digital discourse with reflexive field observation. Field visits to the British Museum were conducted during four visits between 2023 and 2025, during which spatial arrangements, visitor behavior, exhibition texts, and gallery atmospheres were documented through field notes. Reading these observations alongside digital materials makes it possible to trace how interpretive scripts circulate between institutional spaces and online platforms.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural communication scholarship has traditionally focused on interaction between people with different cultural or linguistic backgrounds. Research in the field has therefore tended to emphasize dialogue, adaptation, and identity negotiation in interpersonal or institutional encounters (Gudykunst, 2005; Kim, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 2017). Within this perspective, museums have often appeared mainly as sites of cultural representation or education rather than as communicative environments in their own right. Yet museums concentrate many of the very issues that concern intercultural communication: asymmetrical histories, contested legitimacy, affective responses, material infrastructures, and the coexistence of competing interpretive frameworks (Bennett, 2013; Macdonald, 2010; Hicks, 2020).

Over the past three decades, a more relational and process-oriented perspective has gradually reshaped intercultural communication research. Rather than treating cultures as bounded entities that encounter one another and then exchange or clash, scholars increasingly understand interculturality as an ongoing practice shaped by power relations, historical conditions, and mobility (Dervin, 2016; Holmes, 2017). This shift also resonates with work in anthropology and material culture that examines the social life of objects and the ways meanings circulate across different regimes of value (Appadurai, 2012; Miller et al., 2005). From this perspective, museum encounters can be understood as moments where visitors, artifacts, institutional narratives, and broader social imaginaries intersect. A single artifact may simultaneously appear as an archaeological specimen, a looted object, a diasporic symbol, a tourist attraction, or a material trace of planetary histories, depending on the interpretive frames activated in a particular encounter.

Alongside this relational turn, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the roles of materiality and affect. Approaches that focus primarily on verbal dialogue struggle to explain why museum objects often provoke strong emotional responses such as pride, anger, nostalgia, or unease. The affective turn reconceptualizes emotions as circulating forces that move between bodies, objects, and spaces, attaching themselves to particular signs and shaping perception and interpretation (Ahmed, 2013). In museum contexts, the communicative force of an artifact therefore arises not only from textual interpretation but also from its material presence, its display conditions, and the historical narratives that surround it (Nakayama & Halualani, 2010; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). Work in environmental humanities further extends this perspective by emphasizing the entanglements between humans and nonhuman worlds and the ecological responsibilities that increasingly shape cultural debates (Heise, 2008; Nixon, 2011; Haraway, 2020; Chakrabarty, 2021).

Museums are also sites where colonial histories and institutional authority remain active conditions of communication. Research in critical heritage and museum studies has shown how collecting practices and exhibition narratives are historically entangled with imperial expansion and the extraction of cultural materials (Bennett, 2013; Byrne et al., 2011; Macdonald, 2010; Hicks, 2020). Intercultural encounters in museums are therefore structured by asymmetries of power that complicate narratives of dialogue or cultural exchange. In Chinese-language public discourse, for example, the British Museum is often framed as a site where memories of colonial extraction remain unresolved. References to the Opium Wars or the looting of the Old Summer Palace frequently appear in digital discussions of museum artifacts. In the present study, such discursive framings were identified primarily through the analysis of Xiaohongshu posts and related online commentary concerning the British Museum.

Digital mediation adds another layer to these dynamics. Platform publics increasingly participate in circulating and reinterpreting heritage narratives. Research on Chinese social media suggests that platform-specific communication formats encourage users to combine personal narrative, cultural commentary, and visual documentation when discussing museums and heritage sites. On Xiaohongshu, recurring tropes such as 'national treasures wanting to return home' often coexist with expressions of admiration for conservation practices and museum expertise. These digital practices illustrate how museum discourse is co-produced across institutional and platform contexts, forming participatory

archives that can reinforce, reinterpret, or contest official narratives.

The British legal framework adds a further dimension to these debates. The British Museum Act 1963 places significant restrictions on the museum's ability to permanently remove objects from its collection, allowing deaccessioning only under limited circumstances. Additional guidance from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, together with the Human Tissue Act 2004, establishes procedures governing the treatment and potential repatriation of human remains. These legal constraints influence how museums respond to restitution claims and how questions of responsibility and authority are communicated in public discourse.

Against this background, the present study develops two analytical concepts that help explain how meanings are negotiated in museum encounters. The first is planetisation. This concept refers to a shift in intercultural communication analysis that moves beyond interactions between human actors to include wider relational networks involving objects, digital platforms, institutional structures, and ecological histories. From this perspective, museum communication is not limited to dialogue between cultural groups but emerges through entanglements between human actors, material infrastructures, and broader planetary conditions.

The second concept is script intersections. In this study, scripts refer to relatively stable interpretive frames through which museum artifacts, displays, or institutional decisions are understood. Examples include scientific preservation, restitution justice, ecological responsibility, philanthropic legitimacy, and consumer spectacle. These interpretive frames rarely appear independently. Instead, they often converge within particular encounters, where multiple narratives shape how objects are interpreted and evaluated. Script intersections, therefore, describe moments when several interpretive frames operate simultaneously, producing tensions that influence how legitimacy, responsibility, and belonging are negotiated in museum spaces.

Taken together, these concepts reposition the museum not simply as a repository of cultural objects but as a communicative arena where historical memory, institutional authority, digital participation, and material presence intersect. By examining how these dimensions interact in museum encounters, the present study seeks to extend intercultural communication research toward a more relational and materially grounded understanding of cultural interaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses academic theatre as a creative analytic approach to explore how intercultural meanings emerge in museum spaces. The article is organized as a three-act script in which artifacts, human remains, curators, visitors, donors, officials, and digital publics appear as characters. These characters are not intended to represent specific individuals. Rather, they function as composite voices that bring together recurring interpretive positions identified across the data. In other words, the theatrical form is used as a way of presenting analysis rather than as a literary device. A trace matrix linking the characters to clusters of data sources is provided in the appendix to make this process transparent.

The analysis draws on four types of material. First, a small institutional corpus related to the British Museum was compiled. This included six documents, such as exhibition labels, gallery guides, sections of the museum website, institutional statements, and public explanations concerning restitution, conservation, and the display of human remains. These texts were selected because they articulate how the museum presents its authority, stewardship responsibilities, and approach to contested objects. Second, relevant legal and policy documents were examined in order to understand the governance framework surrounding these debates. These included the British Museum Act 1963, the Human Tissue Act 2004, and guidance issued by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on the care and possible repatriation of human remains. Rather than treating these texts as background context, the study approaches them as part of the communicative environment that shapes what institutions can publicly say or do in response to restitution claims.

Third, the study analyzed a purposive corpus of Chinese-language Xiaohongshu posts referencing the British Museum. In total, 186 publicly accessible posts published between 2023 and 2025 were collected. Posts were identified through repeated keyword searches, including 大英博物馆 (British Museum), 国宝 (national treasure), 回家 (return home), 归还 (restitution or return), 殖民 (colonialism), 修复 (restoration), and 保护 (preservation). The aim was not to produce a statistically representative dataset but to capture a range of ways in which museum objects are discussed on the platform. The sample, therefore, includes different formats such as photo-text travel notes, short video posts, educational commentary, humorous remixes, and reflections on restitution debates. Comment threads and repost chains were examined when they contributed to the circulation of particular

interpretive narratives. Posts that contained only travel advertisements or minimal reference to the museum were excluded. Fourth, reflexive field observations were conducted during four visits to the British Museum between 2023 and 2025. During these visits, field notes were taken on exhibition design, label language, visitor movement, photographing practices, overheard remarks, and the overall atmosphere of particular galleries. The intention was not to conduct a formal ethnography but to document how visitors encountered objects in situ and how different interpretive cues appeared within the physical exhibition space.

Data analysis followed an abductive coding process, moving back and forth between empirical materials and conceptual interpretation. Initial open coding focused on identifying recurring ways in which objects were interpreted or evaluated across the different datasets. These included references to preservation, justice, dignity, national belonging, ecological cost, institutional trust, and tourist spectacle. In a second stage, these recurring patterns were grouped into broader interpretive scripts. In this study, a script refers to a relatively stable interpretive frame through which museum artifacts, displays, or institutional decisions are understood. Examples include scientific preservation, ancestral dignity, restitution justice, ecological responsibility, philanthropic legitimacy, institutional governance, and consumer spectacle. The analysis then examined moments when more than one script appeared in the same post, observation, or institutional text. These instances were treated as script intersections. Where several scripts appeared together, one was identified as the primary script shaping the overall interpretation, while others were noted as secondary frames that complicated or modified it.

Transforming coded material into theatrical form involved an additional analytic step. First, clusters of coded segments representing similar interpretive positions were grouped together to form composite characters such as the Curator, the Visitor, the Government Official, or the Public Sphere. Second, lines of dialogue were drafted through paraphrased condensation of these patterns rather than through verbatim quotation. Individual lines, therefore, synthesize recurring arguments, emotions, or rhetorical logics that appeared across multiple sources. Third, stage directions were informed by field notes in order to retain spatial and sensory aspects of the museum environment. Finally, scenes were organized so that different scripts could appear alongside one another, allowing tensions between interpretive positions to remain visible rather than being resolved into a single analytical voice. The use of theatrical representation draws on traditions of performance ethnography

and ethnodrama, which treat staged dialogue as a legitimate form of qualitative analysis when it remains grounded in empirical material. In this study, the aim is not to recreate actual conversations but to present the interpretive patterns that recur across institutional discourse, digital platforms, and visitor encounters.

Because the study relies partly on social media material, several ethical considerations were taken into account. Only publicly accessible Xiaohongshu posts were included, and the analysis focuses on narrative patterns rather than on individual users. No attempt was made to identify or contact content creators. The characters that appear in the theatrical script, therefore, represent collective discursive tendencies rather than identifiable persons. Several limitations should also be acknowledged. Platform visibility is shaped by recommendation algorithms, meaning that the Xiaohongshu corpus cannot be treated as a comprehensive record of public discourse. In addition, reflexive field observations inevitably reflect the researcher's own positionality and selective attention. For this reason, observations were interpreted alongside institutional and digital materials rather than treated as independent evidence. Finally, the condensation of diverse perspectives into composite characters necessarily simplifies some geopolitical and historical differences between actors involved in restitution debates. To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, the study triangulates across institutional discourse, policy frameworks, digital platform materials, and field observations. Coding decisions were documented through analytic memos and iterative revisions to the coding frame. The appendices summarise how characters were constructed and how different platform narratives were categorized, allowing readers to trace the relationship between the data and the theatrical representation presented in the findings.

4. FINDINGS: A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

The findings are presented through academic theatre. Museums are not simply places where objects are displayed; they are environments in which different actors, institutions, and histories come into contact. In such settings, meanings rarely appear as single, stable interpretations. Instead, they emerge through overlapping interpretive scripts that frame how objects are seen, valued, and discussed. Conventional analytic prose can sometimes smooth over these tensions by presenting interpretations in a linear argument. The theatrical format used here offers another possibility. By staging different voices side by side, it becomes

possible to show how multiple interpretive positions coexist within museum encounters. The aim is not to dramatize the material for its own sake, but to preserve the coexistence of perspectives that appeared across the empirical materials.

The characters in the script are composite analytic voices rather than fictional individuals. They condense recurring interpretive positions identified across institutional texts, legal and policy documents, digital platform posts, and field observations. Dialogue lines reflect patterns that appeared repeatedly in these materials, while stage directions draw on observational notes taken during visits to the museum. Presenting the analysis in this form allows the study to keep different interpretive scripts visible at the same time. Rather than resolving these tensions into a single analytical voice, the play format makes it possible to show how questions of legitimacy, responsibility, and historical meaning continue to be negotiated in museum spaces.

The three acts that follow illustrate different layers of script intersections within the museum environment. Act I focuses on artifacts and visitor encounters, where objects become sites of competing interpretations. Act II stages institutional, political, and ecological claims that shape debates about ownership and restitution. Act III turns to possible futures, exploring how these scripts continue to circulate and evolve through digital publics and ongoing debates about responsibility and belonging.

4.1 Act I: Objects speak

A dim gallery. A bronze ritual vessel stands in a central display case. A linen-wrapped mummy lies in a nearby case. A visitor enters holding a leaflet and a phone.

Bronze Vessel

I was cast more than three thousand years ago. Copper and tin shaped in fire, handled by people whose names are no longer known. Today I stand here as an object of heritage. Some visitors see craftsmanship. Others see something taken long ago. In the gallery label, I am evidence of civilization. In other conversations, I appear as something that should return home.

Mummy

Do not call me 'it'. I was once a person. I had a name, a family, a place in the world. Here I am arranged as an object of study and display. Visitors look with curiosity, sometimes with discomfort. Preservation and disturbance sit close together. Some see scientific

knowledge. Others speak about dignity and the treatment of the dead. When you look at me, which of these meanings do you hear?

Visitor

I came to see the museum, to understand what it holds. The label explains the history of the object. My phone shows another set of stories. On social media, people say these objects should go home. Others admire how carefully they are preserved. I take a photograph almost automatically. When I share it, which story travels with the image?

The visitor types a caption. Above the gallery, a projection briefly shows phrases that circulate on Xiaohongshu before fading again.

Narrator

What appears here is not a single interpretation but a set of overlapping scripts. Objects do not carry one stable meaning. Instead, meaning emerges through encounters between objects, visitors, institutional narratives, and circulating public discussions. The same vessel can be seen as archaeological evidence, cultural heritage, colonial acquisition, or national treasure, depending on the interpretive frame through which it is viewed.

Across the Xiaohongshu dataset analyzed in this study, certain expressions appeared repeatedly. Phrases such as 国宝想回家 (national treasures want to return home) and 走出大英博物馆笑不出来 (leaving the British Museum without a smile) circulated widely in posts discussing the museum. These expressions do not simply describe objects; they frame how visitors interpret them before and after entering the gallery.

In this sense, museum encounters rarely unfold as a straightforward dialogue between cultures. Instead, they involve multiple interpretive scripts that coexist, overlap, and sometimes contradict one another. Each script offers a partial way of understanding the object, but none fully resolves the tensions that surround it.

Curtain.

4.2 Act II: Voices clash

The gallery space widens. Downlights isolate several figures: a Curator standing beside an exhibition panel, a Government Official at a lectern, a Donor near a wall listing major gifts, and an Environmental Advocate holding a small placard. The Bronze Vessel,

the Mummy, and the Visitor remain. A faint murmur of overlapping speech fills the room.

Curator

We work with objects that carry long and complicated histories. Our responsibility is to care for them and to make them accessible to the public. Conservation, research, and education guide our decisions. The past cannot be undone, but museums can preserve what remains and make it available for future generations.

Government Official

But preservation is not the only question. Many of these artifacts left their places of origin under unequal conditions. They carry histories of colonial extraction. For the communities from which they came, these objects are not simply heritage items. They are part of cultural memory and national dignity. Restitution is therefore not a symbolic gesture. It is a question of historical justice.

Donor

Museums also rely on forms of support that allow them to function. Philanthropy funds conservation, research, and public access. Many museums would struggle to maintain collections without this support. A donation does not rewrite history, but it does make it possible to care for objects and to keep museums open to the public.

Environmental Advocate

And yet another history sits behind these objects. Bronze requires mining and smelting. Taxidermy reflects histories of extraction from ecosystems. Materials, labor, and landscapes all lie behind what we see in the gallery. If museums display objects without acknowledging these ecological histories, they risk telling only part of the story.

Collector, 1840s

In our time, we traveled under imperial authority. Expeditions, trade routes, and diplomatic agreements made it possible to collect objects from across the world. We believed we were rescuing knowledge and preserving artifacts that might otherwise have been lost. We cataloged, shipped, and displayed them as contributions to learning and civilization.

Narrator

The Government Official in this scene does not

represent a single country. Instead, the role condenses arguments that appear across different restitution debates, including claims made by countries such as Nigeria, Greece, and China. Similarly, the Collector voice reflects justifications commonly found in nineteenth-century collecting discourse rather than the position of a specific historical individual.

What emerges here is a clear example of script intersection. Claims about restitution justice, institutional stewardship, philanthropic support, ecological responsibility, and historical justification appear at the same time. None of these scripts disappears when another enters the conversation. Instead, they overlap and compete, shaping how legitimacy and responsibility are discussed in museum contexts.

Law also forms part of this communicative environment. The British Museum Act 1963 restricts the museum's ability to permanently remove most objects from its collection, while the Human Tissue Act 2004 provides specific legal frameworks governing the treatment and potential repatriation of human remains. These legal structures do not settle the debates, but they influence how institutions respond to them.

At the same time, practices continue to evolve. In recent years, several institutions have returned Benin objects, including the University of Aberdeen, Jesus College, Cambridge, and the Horniman Museum. Digital initiatives such as Digital Benin have also made the dispersal of these objects visible across institutions worldwide. In this sense, museum legitimacy is not fixed. It is negotiated continuously across legal frameworks, institutional policies, and public debate.

Mummy

Am I an object or a person? How many different meanings can a body carry?

Visitor

I hear all of these voices. Justice, preservation, generosity, responsibility. Each one makes sense in its own way. But none of them seems to end the argument.

Curtain.

4.3 Act III: Negotiating futures

The gallery space shifts. The display cases remain, but a round table now stands in the center. The lighting softens. Above the room, silent headlines cycle slowly: Calls for restitution. New philanthropic gift. Decolonizing displays. Climate emergency. Platform publics react.

Curator

We cannot undo the past, but museums can change how it is presented. Exhibitions can acknowledge extraction, displacement, and repair alongside narratives of civilization. The question is whether institutions can hold accountability and wonder in the same space.

Government Official

Return restores dignity. Where immediate return is not possible, the history of these objects must still be told honestly. Shared stewardship may be possible in some cases, but only if it is based on equity rather than continued possession.

Donor

Support from philanthropy can also play a role in these futures. Donations already sustain conservation, research, and public access. Perhaps they could also support new forms of collaboration or return. Generosity does not erase history, but it may help create different possibilities.

Environmental Advocate

Another voice belongs to the planet itself. Every object here is also material: copper, clay, linen, bone. Behind each artifact are landscapes, labor, and ecological histories. If visitors see these connections, admiration may turn into responsibility.

Public Sphere, 2020s

Much of this conversation now happens online. On our phones, the museum appears in fragments: short videos, captions, stitched images. Some posts say that national treasures should go home. Others admire conservation work, the polish of lacquer, the repair of cracks, and the skill of restoration. Old engravings appear beside new photographs. Jokes circulate, including the line that visitors from China leave the British Museum without smiling. In this digital space, people respond, argue, remember, and reinterpret what they see.

Narrator

The Public Sphere character represents recurring narrative patterns observed across the Xiaohongshu dataset analyzed in this study. Rather than reflecting a single user, it condenses broader tendencies in how museum objects are discussed, circulated, and reframed on the platform.

These online discussions do not replace institutional narratives, but they sit alongside them and sometimes

challenge them. Platform features such as reposting, captioning, and comment threads allow particular interpretations to travel quickly and gain visibility. In this way, digital publics participate in shaping how museum objects are understood.

Negotiation in this environment rarely produces consensus. Instead, different interpretive scripts continue to coexist. Claims about restitution, conservation, ecological responsibility, and institutional legitimacy intersect without fully resolving one another. In this sense, the museum appears less as a repository of stable meanings and more as a forum in which questions of belonging, responsibility, and historical interpretation remain open.

The theatrical form used in this study makes these overlapping positions visible. By placing different voices within the same scene, the analysis preserves the coexistence of perspectives that emerged across the empirical materials.

Bronze Vessel

People see many things in me. Craft, history, loss, heritage. The meaning of the object changes with the story that surrounds it.

Mummy

Care can preserve a body, but it also raises questions about dignity. To display a person is always to decide how they should be remembered.

Visitor

Perhaps I am not only observing. What I photograph, share, or question becomes part of the story as well.

Curtain.

5. DISCUSSION

This study has examined the British Museum as a communicative environment in which human and nonhuman actors, colonial histories, institutional governance, and digital circulations intersect. The theatrical scenes presented in the findings suggest that what is often described as cultural difference in museum encounters may be better understood as the interaction of overlapping interpretive scripts. These scripts redistribute authority, affect, and belonging across different actors and institutions. Rather than leading to a single interpretive resolution, they tend to coexist and compete. In this sense, the theatrical format functions not only as a way of presenting findings but also as part

of the analytical argument: intercultural communication in heritage spaces emerges through entanglements among people, objects, institutions, digital platforms, and wider historical conditions that shape how meaning becomes visible and legitimate (Chakrabarty, 2021; Haraway, 2020).

Classical frameworks in intercultural communication have often conceptualized encounters as exchanges between culturally bounded interlocutors. Models such as cross-cultural adaptation, anxiety and uncertainty management, and face negotiation theory typically assume relatively stable participants who negotiate meaning through communicative competence (Kim, 2000; Gudykunst, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2017). The museum scenes analyzed here complicate this assumption. Visitors do not simply interpret objects through cultural codes alone. Instead, they encounter a range of interpretive warrants, including scientific preservation, ancestral dignity, restitution justice, ecological responsibility, philanthropic legitimacy, and tourist spectacle. These interpretive frames are activated not only through interpersonal interaction but also through objects themselves, exhibition design, institutional policies, and digital narratives circulating beyond the museum walls.

Seen from this perspective, intercultural communication in museum contexts unfolds within a dense relational environment where meaning emerges through interactions between material and symbolic infrastructures. A visitor may admire conservation work while simultaneously questioning colonial acquisition histories. A photograph taken in the gallery may quickly circulate online, where different narratives reshape how the object is interpreted. Meaning therefore develops across networks of people, artifacts, images, policies, and platforms rather than within a single moment of encounter. A planetisation perspective draws attention to these wider relational dynamics, shifting analysis away from purely interpersonal adjustment toward the material, institutional, and ecological entanglements that shape communication in heritage spaces (Heise, 2008; Nixon, 2011; Chakrabarty, 2021).

Affect also plays an important role in these dynamics. Emotions such as pride, grievance, admiration, and discomfort circulate across objects, narratives, and digital platforms, shaping how visitors interpret museum displays. Ahmed's concept of affective economies helps explain how emotions attach themselves to particular historical narratives and symbolic objects, guiding perception even before conscious interpretation occurs (Ahmed, 2013). In museum environments, affective responses often arise from the convergence of institutional framing, personal memory,

and circulating media narratives. Digital discourse on Chinese platforms, for example, frequently combines admiration for conservation practices with emotional claims about cultural loss or historical injustice. These affective frames accompany visitors into the gallery and influence how museum encounters are experienced and shared.

The theatrical scenes also reveal how institutional governance structures shape intercultural interpretation. Exhibition labels that foreground conservation, provenance, and educational value while offering limited discussion of colonial acquisition histories illustrate how institutional scripts of stewardship become materially embedded in gallery spaces. Legal frameworks such as the British Museum Act 1963 and policies governing the treatment of human remains place constraints on how museums respond to restitution debates. These regulations shape institutional discourse by defining what actions are legally possible and how narratives of preservation, stewardship, or restitution may be articulated. As a result, legal and policy regimes operate not simply as background conditions but as communicative infrastructures that frame institutional legitimacy and structure public debate.

Digital platforms further complicate this communicative environment. On Xiaohongshu, museum artifacts circulate through images, captions, and commentary that transform institutional displays into participatory narratives. Users combine historical commentary, emotional reflection, humor, and visual storytelling to reinterpret heritage objects. Tropes such as 'national treasures wanting to go home' often appear alongside admiration for conservation craftsmanship, creating hybrid narratives that both challenge and reinforce institutional authority. In this sense, digital publics participate actively in shaping how museum objects are understood. Their contributions extend intercultural communication beyond the physical gallery into networked spaces where heritage narratives are continually reinterpreted.

The theatrical methodology adopted in this study helps make these intersecting dynamics visible. By staging composite voices representing institutional actors, historical perspectives, visitors, and digital publics, the analysis preserves the simultaneity of competing claims that characterize museum encounters. Rather than reducing complexity to a single analytical voice, the theatrical format highlights how multiple interpretive scripts coexist and interact. This approach resonates with traditions of performance ethnography and ethnodrama that seek to capture the polyphonic character of social discourse (Conquergood, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Saldaña, 2005; Madison, 2011). In the

context of museum communication, such methods make it possible to represent tensions between conservation, restitution, national identity, ecological responsibility, and public interpretation without prematurely resolving them.

These observations suggest that intercultural competence in heritage environments may involve more than the ability to interpret cultural difference. Instead, it may require the capacity to recognize and navigate layered histories, institutional constraints, material entanglements, and affective narratives that shape interpretive possibilities. Visitors encountering contested artifacts are therefore not simply comparing cultures but participating in ongoing negotiations about legitimacy, responsibility, and historical memory. Intercultural communication in such contexts becomes an ethical practice of acknowledging asymmetries and historical accountability while remaining open to multiple perspectives.

The study also offers several practical implications for museum professionals and educators. First, museum interpretation may benefit from acknowledging the coexistence of multiple interpretive scripts rather than presenting singular narratives of heritage. Exhibitions that address contested histories explicitly may encourage more reflective forms of visitor engagement. Second, restitution debates can be understood not only as legal or diplomatic processes but also as communicative negotiations shaped by affect, public discourse, and institutional legitimacy. Third, museum-based intercultural education may need to move beyond models of cultural comparison toward approaches that foreground historical power relations, material histories, and ecological responsibility.

Importantly, the arguments developed here do not suggest that the British Museum represents all intercultural encounters globally. Rather, the case illustrates how contemporary heritage institutions increasingly operate within relational networks shaped by colonial histories, environmental awareness, and digitally mediated publics. The concept of planetary interculturality should therefore be understood as an analytic horizon rather than a universal model. It invites further research into how communication emerges through interactions among humans, objects, institutions, technologies, and planetary histories.

Taken together, the findings reposition the museum not merely as a repository of artifacts but as a communicative forum in which legitimacy, belonging, and responsibility are continually negotiated. Intercultural communication in such spaces is less about achieving consensus than about recognizing the coexistence of competing claims and histories. By foregrounding script intersections

and planetary entanglements, this study contributes to extending intercultural communication scholarship beyond interpersonal dialogue toward a broader understanding of how meaning is produced within complex material and institutional environments.

6. CONCLUSION

This article has explored the museum as a communicative environment in which objects, visitors, institutions, policies, and digital publics interact to shape contested meanings. Through the concept of script intersections, the analysis has shown how different interpretive warrants – including scientific preservation, ancestral dignity, restitution justice, ecological responsibility, philanthropic legitimacy, and consumer spectacle – can appear together within museum encounters. Rather than leading to stable interpretations, these scripts often overlap and compete, shaping how legitimacy, responsibility, and belonging are negotiated in heritage spaces. Such intersections became visible, for example, in debates around the mummy's personhood, donor narratives of global access, digital tropes of 'national treasure' homecoming, and institutional explanations concerning restitution and human remains.

Presenting the findings through academic theatre also illustrates how creative analytic approaches can capture the simultaneity of these competing claims. The theatrical format allows multiple voices to appear alongside one another without forcing their tensions into a single interpretive frame. In this sense, theatricalization functions not merely as a narrative style but as a methodological device that makes it possible to hold empirical material, affective responses, and analytical interpretation together.

The study therefore contributes in three main ways. First, it proposes planetisation as a conceptual horizon that expands intercultural communication beyond interactions between human actors to include the entanglements of objects, institutions, digital platforms, and planetary histories. Second, it develops the notion of script intersections as an analytic framework for examining how competing interpretive

narratives organize attention, circulate affect, and shape legitimacy in heritage encounters. Third, it demonstrates how academic theatre can operate as a qualitative research method capable of representing complex communicative environments while retaining multiple perspectives.

These observations also suggest implications for museum practice and intercultural education. Museums increasingly operate in contexts shaped by restitution debates, digital publics, and heightened awareness of historical and ecological responsibility. Acknowledging the coexistence of multiple interpretive scripts may help institutions design exhibitions and public narratives that address historical complexity rather than presenting singular accounts of heritage. Similarly, intercultural education in museum contexts may benefit from approaches that foreground historical asymmetries, material entanglements, and ethical accountability alongside cultural appreciation. At the same time, the analysis emerges from a particular institutional and cultural context. The British Museum provides a highly visible example of how planetary histories, colonial legacies, and digital discourse intersect, but similar dynamics may unfold differently across other museums and cultural settings. Future research could therefore apply this framework to other heritage institutions, digital platforms, and cross-cultural contexts in order to examine how script intersections and planetary perspectives shape museum communication in diverse environments.

Framing the museum in this way encourages a shift in intercultural communication research. Rather than focusing primarily on interpersonal dialogue, attention turns toward the wider relational networks through which meaning is produced. Museums can thus be understood not only as repositories of objects but as arenas where historical memory, institutional authority, public discourse, and planetary awareness converge. Intercultural communication, in this broader sense, becomes concerned with how these entangled presences interact and how cultural institutions might curate not only wonder but also responsibility in a time of ecological strain and historical reckoning (Chakrabarty, 2021; Haraway, 2020).

Appendix A
Characters and data sources

Character	Representative scripts	Primary data sources
Bronze Vessel	scientific preservation; cultural heritage; colonial acquisition; ecological extraction	exhibition labels and catalogues; heritage studies on Chinese bronzes; media debates on restitution; field notes
Mummy	ancestral dignity; scientific curiosity; tourist spectacle; personhood	British Museum labels; DCMS guidance on human remains; Manchester Museum public consultation on Asru; field notes
Visitor	tourist consumption; ethical unease; intercultural learning	reflexive field notes; overheard comments; media reviews
Curator	stewardship; conservation; institutional legitimacy	institutional policies and statements; collections management policy; Code of Ethics (British Museum, 2018; Museums Association, 2016)
Government Official	restitution justice; sovereignty; colonial history	parliamentary debates and policy papers; Human Tissue Act; recent return cases (Horniman; University of Aberdeen; Jesus College)
Donor	philanthropic legitimacy; global access	media reports on major donations; institutional press releases
Environmental Advocate	ecological responsibility; planetary ethics	NGO campaigns; environmental humanities; museum decolonization resources
Collector, 1840s	universal museum; rescue archaeology; imperial science	scholarship on imperial collecting and debates around the Parthenon Marbles (St. Clair, 1998; Hamilakis, 2007)
Public Sphere, 2020s	platform publics; vernacular curation; 'national treasures want to go home' trope	Xiaohongshu posts and creator notes; studies of Chinese platform cultures and authenticity

Appendix B
Platform corpus and analytic categories (Xiaohongshu, 2023-2025)

Category	Typical post formats	Illustrative tropes (paraphrased)	Primary scripts activated	Notes on circulation
Homecoming/ 'national treasure.'	photo-text notes; short videos with captions	'国宝想回家'; '走出大英博物馆, 笑不出来'	restitution justice; ancestral dignity; consumer spectacle	high repostability via stitched videos; comment threads cluster around grievance and pride
Conservation-as-care	before/after repair shots; label close-ups	'修复好细致'; '保护也是一种回家'	scientific preservation; conditional repair; philanthropic legitimacy	often tags conservators; draws 'craft awe'; sometimes tempers restitution calls
Comparative display	side-by-side exhibits; cross-museum compilations	'世界看见中国'; '同场不同命'	restitution justice; consumer spectacle; scientific preservation	posts in this category juxtapose artifacts across museums or national collections within a single visual frame. They often carry secondary tendencies of diasporic pride or cosmopolitan comparison, but the dominant interpretive work usually turns on visibility, comparison, and claims about ownership, value, or preservation.

Legal/policy explainer	text-over-video; infographic notes	‘法律不允许归还吗’; ‘人类遗骸不同规定’	policy governance; institutional legitimacy	links to official docs; frames law as ‘speaking actor.’
Satire/meme remix	humor, lip-sync, stitched reactions	‘馆藏开口说话’; ‘青铜器内心独白’	consumer spectacle; restitution justice	high engagement, typically showing approximately 800–3,000 likes and 100–400 comments within the sampled corpus, with frequent reposting through stitched video reactions.
Visitor self-narration	first-person vlog; itinerary	‘第一次来BM’; ‘复杂心情’	tourist consumption; ethical unease	blends travel content with moral stances; gateway into other genres

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