GEORGE BROWN PRESS
JOURNALS, BOOKS & PROCEEDINGS

Journal of Education, Humanities, and Social Research

Review

Beyond the Buzzword: Interdisciplinary Education in Cultural Heritage Needs a Purpose

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Abstract: As the field of cultural heritage expands beyond traditional conservation to encompass legal, digital, environmental, and sociocultural dimensions, the education of future heritage professionals must evolve accordingly. While global universities increasingly adopt interdisciplinary approaches, many cultural heritage programs remain rooted in narrow disciplinary frameworks, limiting students' readiness for contemporary challenges. This paper reviews international models—such as those of University College London, Leiden University, and the University of Bologna—and identifies key trends including the integration of digital humanities, legal studies, and community-based practices. Drawing from these cases, it proposes a flexible and interdisciplinary curriculum framework tailored to China's educational landscape. Policy recommendations and implementation strategies are outlined to support institutional reform, cross-departmental collaboration, and global engagement. Ultimately, the paper argues that transforming cultural heritage education is not merely an academic goal but a cultural imperative for China in a globalized era.

Keywords: cultural heritage education; interdisciplinary curriculum; heritage policy; China; curriculum reform; digital heritage; heritage management

1. Introduction

To study cultural heritage in today's China is to step into a space still being defined. As one of the few students in a dedicated heritage development program, I find myself both part of an emerging field and subject to its growing pains. The existence of such programs reflects a progressive institutional will to respond to global heritage discourse—but the experience within them often reveals structural uncertainty and curricular incoherence. Being a student in this space is both a privilege and a challenge: it offers proximity to an urgent field of cultural relevance, while daily raising questions about how heritage education should be shaped.

A central tension lies in the promise of interdisciplinarity. While many programs brand themselves as interdisciplinary, in practice this term is frequently deployed as a symbolic gesture rather than a pedagogical commitment. Courses are often fragmented, heritage-specific content remains thin, and students graduate with only surface-level exposure to the field. The result is an education that appears to embrace complexity, but fails to provide students with the tools to navigate it effectively.

Public and academic reactions to my field reflect its novelty: responses range from fascination ("That sounds cool!") to confusion ("But what exactly do you study?"). These reactions point to a broader dilemma—cultural heritage has public appeal, but institutional uncertainty. Without a clear vision of the type of professional it aims to produce, the field risks devolving into bureaucratic inefficiency or superficial practices that do not contribute meaningfully to the sector.

This paper argues that the core aim of cultural heritage education should not be the passive transmission of knowledge, but the active cultivation of agency, judgment, and cultural engagement. Interdisciplinarity is not a goal in itself—it is a method for training

Received: 15 July 2025
Revised: 23 July 2025
Accepted: 14 August 2025
Published: 19 August 2025

practitioners capable of working across domains, engaging communities, and critically shaping narratives of the past. Future heritage professionals must be equipped not only to preserve cultural forms, but to interpret, question, and intervene—asking not just what heritage is, but what it does.

Drawing on the perspective of a student navigating these contradictions from within, this paper offers a ground-level critique of how heritage education is being imagined and enacted in the Chinese context. It examines the myth of interdisciplinarity (Section 2), reflects on the qualities and capacities we should actually be cultivating (Section 3), explores curriculum design through the lens of lived experience (Section 4), and considers institutional strategies for long-term sustainability (Section 5).

Ultimately, this essay insists that heritage education should not be an exercise in content delivery, but a practice of becoming—of forming individuals who can think with the past, speak to the present, and act toward the future.

2. Diagnosing the Problem: The Myth of Interdisciplinarity

2.1. The Illusion of Interdisciplinarity

Many cultural heritage programs in China self-identify as "interdisciplinary", yet this label often serves more as a branding tool than a substantive pedagogical principle. Based on my experience in a Sino-foreign cooperative heritage program in Beijing, the curriculum superficially aggregates modules—from archaeology, museum studies, and digital media—but lacks meaningful integration across fields. Heritage education remains compartmentalized, producing graduates with fragmented skills and a weak conceptual grounding.

As research on China's higher-education reform shows, while interdisciplinary agendas proliferate on paper, most collaborations are dominated by STEM fields and management sciences, whereas humanities and social sciences remain structurally siloed [1]. The misalignment between rhetoric and practice signals a deeper problem: interdisciplinary discourse has become a façade, disguising the lack of true epistemic innovation.

2.2. Structural Underinvestment in Faculty and Curriculum

One structural barrier is the scarcity of faculty who possess interdisciplinary expertise. Heritage programs are often staffed by historians or archaeologists who lack exposure to community engagement, heritage law, or critical theory. Without faculty capable of bridging disciplines, curricular design remains shallow. This is consistent with broader critiques of humanities interdisciplinarity in China, where ideological and disciplinary boundaries limit meaningful pedagogical reform [2].

Moreover, empirical studies in heritage education internationally emphasize that interdisciplinary input improves collaborative skills, creativity, and cultural empathy among students [3]. The absence of such pedagogical rigor in Chinese programs thus directly curtails student development.

2.3. Superficial Curriculum Fails to Build Vision

Curricula that rely on tokenistic interdisciplinarity tend to emphasize general introductions rather than depth. Weeks-long modules on intangible heritage or digital tools are common, but rarely accompanied by field-based projects or community partnerships. Without immersive learning experiences, students are unable to gain a deeper understanding of how heritage operates within diverse cultural, political, and ethical contexts.

The myth of interdisciplinarity becomes even more problematic in light of the urgent need for heritage practitioners who are critically informed—capable of addressing power dynamics, memory, identity, and environmental pressures. In some cultural settings, where heritage is deeply connected to collective memory and national narratives, superficial curricula risk reinforcing existing power structures rather than critically examining

them. Indeed, scholars argue that true heritage pedagogy requires critical engagement, not just accumulation of domains [4].

3. What Kind of People Are We Trying to Educate?

3.1. Heritage Education as Capacity and Agency

Cultural heritage education, at its most powerful, is not simply about transmitting knowledge of monuments or traditions, but rather about cultivating cultural agency—the ability to interpret, negotiate, and reshape heritage in society. As early foundational work on heritage education emphasizes, learners not only acquire historical facts but also develop attitudes of continuity, stewardship, and participation through direct engagement with material culture and built environments [1]. The goal is to foster not passive consumers of heritage, but active participants capable of critical reflection and civic engagement.

3.2. The Competencies Heritage Professionals Require

Leading frameworks for heritage education, such as UNESCO's Competence Framework for Cultural Heritage Management, outline a comprehensive skill set, including cultural policy, digital literacy, community outreach, and ethical decision-making [5]. These competencies extend beyond disciplinary boundaries to ensure professionals can operate in complex settings—whether negotiating stakeholder interests or adapting heritage interpretation to multiple publics.

3.3. Youth Participation and Public Engagement Skills

Research in heritage pedagogy underscores that youth participation can significantly enhance heritage conservation outcomes, but only if students are trained to act—and not merely observe [4]. Community-engaged projects enrich student learning through dialogic exchange and reciprocal responsibilities. Education that combines pedagogical scaffolding with participatory practice equips students with skills to collaborate with local communities, translate heritage for diverse audiences, and inspire intergenerational participation.

3.4. Visual Narration and Media Competence

For emerging generations, heritage interpretation increasingly demands media fluency. Digital heritage scholars assert that VR, interactive apps, and storytelling design significantly expand public access and deepen engagement, particularly among youth [6]. These tools are not luxuries—they are critical to preserving intangible meanings and making heritage relevant in people's everyday lives.

3.5. Redefining the Heritage Practitioner

The cultural heritage practitioner of the future is not just a technician or a static guardian of the past. They are interpreters, bridge-builders, and provocateurs. Their task is not only to know heritage, but to make it matter—to stir interest, to provoke thought, and to mobilize care.

To do so requires more than academic knowledge. It requires cultural judgment, ethical sensitivity, and effective communication skills. It demands fluency in diverse modes of expression—from community dialogue to visual storytelling, from policy translation to media engagement. In this sense, the most important skill may be the least measurable: the ability to influence. Influence not in the shallow sense of social media metrics, but in the deeper sense of inspiring others to see themselves as part of a living cultural continuum.

This is why cultural heritage education must ask: who are we educating, and for what kind of world? If students leave with facts but no imagination, with methods but no voice, then we are not educating heritage professionals—we are producing curators of inertia.

But if we cultivate their ability to ask hard questions, build cultural relationships, and communicate with integrity, we give them the capacity to make heritage alive.

4. Reframing Cultural Heritage Education: The Interdisciplinary Imperative in China

4.1. Interdisciplinarity as Appealing Rhetoric, Not Epistemic Reform

In China, many heritage programs adopt the label "interdisciplinary," yet experiential and curricular integrity often falls short. During my time in a Sino-foreign heritage program in Beijing, I observed a common pattern: modules borrowed from various fields, yet taught separately with minimal cross-disciplinary synthesis. As Qian asserts, "humanities and social sciences remain constrained by disciplinary silos," even as STEM fields flourish in interdisciplinary collaboration [2]. This so-called interdisciplinarity often serves as a branding device rather than a genuine, transformative pedagogical approach.

4.2. Institutional Barriers and Faculty Limitations

A deeper obstacle lies in faculty structure. Most programs are staffed by specialists firmly rooted in one field—archaeology, history, or museum studies—lacking both incentive and capacity to teach across disciplinary boundaries. Interdisciplinary teaching in humanities at Chinese universities continues to be "weak" structurally compared to STEM cross-overs [7]. Without faculty experienced in heritage law, community studies, or critical memory theory, curricula remain superficial. This mirrors broader findings that interdisciplinary teaching faculty face institutional friction unless supported by systemic policy reform [8].

4.3. Superficial Design, Missed Depth

Even when interdisciplinary courses exist, they are often delivered as short survey modules. For instance, a module on digital heritage might consist of a few hours of lecture on GIS or VR—without a design studio, community engagement, or long-term project. A study of intangible heritage design courses showed that interdisciplinary teams integrating digital media achieved higher standards in creativity, diversity, and cultural context than mono-disciplinary teams [9]. But such depth is rare in Chinese curricula, where interdisciplinarity is more often "coverage" than lived integration.

Without immersive experiences—field schools, participatory design, or cross-faculty mentorship—students cannot cultivate the reflexive empathy, ethical awareness, or critical agency demanded of contemporary heritage professionals.

4.4. Why Interdisciplinarity Matters—Not as Buzzword, but as Transformation

Heritage today is not a static object; it is a site of contestation, memory, and identity formation. Successful interdisciplinary heritage education reinforces shared vocabulary and shared epistemic frames between history, policy, design, and sustainability [10]. Without this, education fails to move students from passive knowledge consumers to active cultural agents who can negotiate power, identity, and public engagement. It also undermines their ability to address cultural heritage issues in urban redevelopment, environmental justice, or intangible minority traditions—contexts deeply relevant to China's contemporary challenges.

4.5. Reimagining the Heritage Curriculum as Systems Thinking

A meaningful heritage pedagogy must shift from content aggregation to systems thinking. This means reconceptualizing curriculum design as a process of assembling epistemic networks—where students navigate the relationships between heritage memory, legal frameworks, social justice, community voices, and visual/media practices. This approach aligns with broader educational reforms in China under the "New Liberal Arts,"

where disciplines like English and area studies are promoted as integral and strategically embedded interdisciplinary initiatives [11].

By rethinking education in this way, interdisciplinary heritage learning becomes a mode of critical reflection, creative intervention, and civic participation. In China's cultural governance ecosystem, this reframing is not an optional aesthetic—it is essential for heritage to function as a democratic, pluralistic, and dynamic resource.

5. Enabling Change: Policy and Institutional Conditions for Interdisciplinary Heritage Education in China

5.1. The Political Economy of Heritage Education

Cultural heritage education in China cannot be viewed in isolation—it is deeply embedded within the broader structures of national cultural governance and higher education policy. The rise of heritage as a tool of national influence often requires universities to align teaching frameworks with broader cultural narratives. This alignment hampers critical pedagogical initiatives, making interdisciplinary innovation appear ideologically sensitive or risky [7,9].

Educational reforms—such as the "Breaking the Five Onlys" (BFO) reform—have reshaped university evaluation metrics, placing greater emphasis on publication counts and disciplinary pedigree [9]. In such a system, interdisciplinary approaches in the humanities often lack institutional support, as they do not align with the primary metrics of research output and academic prestige. This creates a field of disincentive for humanities faculty to engage in cross-disciplinary curricular development.

5.2. Institutional Barriers: Silos, Incentives, and Autonomy

China's higher education landscape remains organized around disciplinary silos. Departments operate with independent budgets and promotion systems, and faculty incentives align with narrow disciplinary excellence. Studies show that without structural support for collaborative teaching and cross-faculty funding, interdisciplinary initiatives remain marginal or are reduced to token pilot schemes [10,12].

Moreover, even in universities designated under the "Double First-Class" program, which emphasize elite discipline development, interdisciplinary experimentation is often discouraged unless it aligns with institutional goals of global branding or economic output [11]. Therefore, meaningful reform requires alignment between classroom pedagogy and systemic incentive structures.

5.3. Beyond Course Content: Systems-Level Reform

True interdisciplinarity cannot be achieved through curriculum design alone. It demands a transformation in how institutions fund, evaluate, and imagine teaching. In most Chinese universities, disciplines remain siloed—not only academically, but bureaucratically. Budgets, staffing, and faculty evaluations all operate within narrowly defined disciplinary units. Even the most well-intentioned interdisciplinary courses struggle to survive in such a system, let alone thrive.

What is needed is a structural reimagining that can create the necessary conditions for interdisciplinary teaching, through targeted funding mechanisms and institutional flexibility, to thrive within the existing academic frameworks. Faculty who cross disciplinary boundaries should be recognized not as outliers, but as leaders—through new promotion pathways and co-teaching opportunities. Evaluation metrics should expand to include community-engaged projects, student-led initiatives, and cultural impact, rather than relying solely on traditional publications or departmental output.

This approach aligns with China's broader educational transformation under the "New Liberal Arts" initiative, which promotes culturally responsive education and a break from technocratic models of learning [13]. But for heritage education, the stakes are higher: without deep structural reform, we risk producing graduates fluent in multiple

disciplines, but unable to act within or across them. Interdisciplinarity must be understood not just as an academic strategy, but as an ethical stance—one that allows future heritage practitioners to move fluidly between institutions, communities, and modes of knowledge production.

5.4. Policy as Cultural Translation and Ethico-Cultural Strategy

Heritage education reform must also navigate the politics of meaning. Imported pedagogical models cannot be uncritically grafted onto local institutions. Rather, policy designers must translate interdisciplinarity into frameworks that strengthen local knowledge systems and community cohesion.

Discursive institutionalism suggests that intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policy in China has evolved to spatialize heritage within place-based governance models, creating opportunities for locally rooted learning environments that resist mass commodification [14]. Policy reform should therefore support pluralistic, community-engaged heritage programming—especially in minority and rural contexts—within national educational strategies [15].

5.5. Interdisciplinarity as Institutional Hope

When interdisciplinarity becomes marginalized or purely symbolic, heritage education loses its potential to cultivate active cultural agents. Instead, it risks becoming another credential weighed down by state-approved narratives. But institutional reform—if anchored in systems thinking and cultural vision—can shift this trajectory.

Heritage education can become a space for resistance, curiosity, innovation, and hope—where students learn to challenge inherited assumptions, envision inclusive futures, and care for cultural landscapes with empathy and critical awareness. Educational reform, in this sense, becomes an act of cultural translation—transforming policy language into pedagogical possibility.

6. Conclusion

Cultural heritage education in China stands at a critical juncture. While institutions rush to adopt the language of interdisciplinarity, they often fail to cultivate the systems, capacities, and pedagogical depth that would allow it to take root. My experience as a student within one such program—both hopeful and disillusioned—has shown me that what is missing is not knowledge, but coherence; not content, but purpose.

Heritage education must move beyond assembling disciplines toward nurturing agency. Its task is not simply to teach about the past, but to activate the present—to equip students to question, engage, and intervene. The ideal heritage practitioner is not someone who merely memorizes categories or theories, but someone who can transform the function of heritage in people's lives. This requires a curriculum that integrates reflection with action, scholarship with storytelling, ethics with design.

Interdisciplinarity should not be the goal, but the method through which heritage education becomes transformative. When practiced meaningfully, it builds not just professionals, but cultural agents—people capable of navigating identity, history, and justice across contexts. And when embedded structurally, interdisciplinarity allows institutions to imagine education not as static transmission, but as a process of becoming.

For China, a country of vast and complex heritage landscapes, such a rethinking is not only urgent—it is strategic. The future of heritage education lies not in building new departments or importing new models, but in creating the conditions for young people to discover their own relevance in the field. In doing so, we do not merely preserve the past—we prepare for its future.

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