

Pathways Through Time: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Heritage

A Synthesis of the 2025 Seminar Series at Hong Kong Shue Yan University

Introduction: The Interdisciplinary Mandate

In 2025, the Contemporary China Research Center (CCRC) at Hong Kong Shue Yan University organised a seminar series entitled “Pathways Through Time: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Heritage”. Directed by Professor Hui Yew-Foong and coordinated by Dr. Xie Jieyi, the seminar series, supported funding from the University, was structured around three interconnected themes: Technology, Art, and Culture. Bringing together international scholars and practitioners, the seminars examined how digital tools, theoretical frameworks, and socio-economic strategies can deepen our understanding and stewardship of cultural heritage.

The series aligns with HKSYU’s research focus on cultural heritage, as well as CCRC’s growing expertise in Chinese intangible cultural heritage (ICH), critical heritage studies and digital heritage. Over ten seminars, the series fostered dialogue between traditional craftsmanship and emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), Extended Reality (XR), and blockchain.

I. Foundations of Digital Preservation and Ethical Documentation



The series opened in September with two sessions by Prof. Mario Santana Quintero of Carleton University, Canada. As Co-Chair of the UNESCO Chair on Digital Twins for World Heritage Conservation and a faculty member at the Carleton Immersive Media Studio (CIMS), Prof. Quintero offered a global perspective on the technical and ethical dimensions of heritage documentation.

The Ethics of the Digital Twin

On September 10, 2025, Prof. Quintero's opening lecture, "Cultural Heritage Documentation: Ethical Considerations, Technologies, and Challenges", established that documentation was essential for preserving sites threatened by environmental factors, armed conflict, and neglect. He outlined the complexities of planning, data acquisition, and tool selection, while emphasising that technical proficiency must be accompanied by ethical considerations — among them community engagement, data ownership, and the responsible use of digital technologies. These documentation methods, he argued, were not ends in themselves but served broader strategies of resilience and adaptive reuse.

Frameworks for Narrative Engagement

On September 11, 2025, Prof. Quintero turned to the presentation of digital assets in "Frameworks for Digital Storytelling in Enhancing the Interpretation and Presentation of Historic Sites". Drawing on his fellowship at the International Centre for the Interpretation and Presentation of World Heritage Sites (WHIPIC), he presented case studies including Venus Mill in the Yukon and UNESCO's "Dive into Heritage". He proposed that digital storytelling can enrich visitor engagement and cultural understanding, and offered conceptual frameworks for designing digital experiences that address sustainability and audience accessibility — ensuring that technology complemented rather than replaced traditional interpretive approaches.

II. Plasmatic Perspectives: Heritage, Memory, and Tourism



In April 2025, the series featured Prof. Chin-Ee Ong from the Macao University of Tourism. In his talk, "Illuminating Collective Memories, Heritage and Tourism: A Plasmatic Perspective", Prof. Ong offered a theoretical framework that moved beyond treating heritage as either static structures or fluid networks.

Prof. Ong proposed "plasmatic thinking", a theory that conceptualised the world as being composed of plasmas — charged sociomaterial clusterings of objects, humans, and the processes between them. These plasmas are fragile and impermanent, disintegrating once they are discharged. Drawing on cases from Indonesia, Singapore, and the Netherlands, he examined three dimensions: luminosity, or how collective memories and amnesia shaped the

production and consumption of specific sites; power relations, interrogating the forces behind remembering and forgetting in locations ranging from cultural parks to refugee camps; and contingency, highlighting the forces that sustained the interplay between social interactions and material contexts.

III. Data-Driven Conservation and Sustainable Development



On October 28, 2025, Prof. Yang Chen, Associate Professor at Tongji University, delivered a seminar on “Data-Driven Cultural Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Development”. Prof. Yang traced the evolution of heritage conservation over the past three decades into a discipline that engaged with social and cultural concerns alongside technical ones.

Prof. Yang presented the work of the Tongji University Scenic Heritage and Cultural Landscape Conservation Innovation Team, which had been developing experimental digital heritage projects since 2010. The team focuses on building theoretical frameworks and technical systems for digital conservation that connect natural and cultural heritage, as well as tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage. Through case studies, Prof. Yang demonstrated how technology could document the interaction between humans and nature, and reflected on the particular characteristics and challenges of cultural heritage in the Asia-Pacific region.

IV. Heritage and Tourism: Conflict or Symbiosis?



On November 3, 2025, Dr. Chen Zhaoyu Vicky, Assistant Professor at the Macao University of Tourism, delivered a seminar on “Conflict or Symbiosis between Heritage & Tourism”. Dr. Chen brings professional experience from UNESCO Bangkok and Beijing.

Dr. Chen explored the relationship between the preservation of historically significant sites and the rise of modern replicas. She examined how tourism could function as a symbiotic force — providing economic benefits and fostering community pride — while also posing challenges through overcrowding and commercialisation. She argued that heritage professionals needed to manage this dynamic strategically, balancing conservation with accessibility to ensure a sustainable future for shared cultural assets.

V. Traditional Craftsmanship as Embodied Heritage

Two sessions connected directly to the “Art” theme of the series, examining traditional artistic and craft practices as forms of embodied heritage.

Classical Painting as Intellectual Expression



On October 14, 2025, Dr. Zhu Wanzhang, curator at the Hong Kong Palace Museum, delivered a presentation on *Ge Zhichuan Moving His Dwelling* (《葛稚川移居圖》), focusing

on its cultural and philosophical significance. This session connected to the “Art” theme of the series by examining classical painting as a medium of intellectual and spiritual expression.

The presentation explored how figures, landscapes, and symbolic elements such as deer carts constructed a layered visual language. Centred on Ge Hong’s relocation to Mount Luofu for alchemical practice, the painting reflects ideals of reclusion, transcendence, and the pursuit of an ideal spiritual home. Situated in the late Yuan dynasty, the work conveys a literati response to social uncertainty, while also illustrating the integration of Confucian and Daoist values within Chinese cultural tradition.

Dyeing Craftsmanship and Hakka Culture



On November 11, 2025, Dr. Li Yingguang, Associate Professor at Guangzhou University, delivered a seminar titled ““燉頭藍” (Duntou Blue): Dyeing Craftsmanship and Hakka Culture”. The session gave participants hands-on experience with traditional dyeing techniques, foregrounding the importance of embodied practices and traditional craftsmanship in the study of Chinese intangible cultural heritage. By linking the physical act of dyeing to the broader narrative of Hakka culture, the session illustrated how everyday cultural practices form essential components of heritage worthy of study and preservation.



VI. Critical Thinking in the Era of AI

On November 13, 2025, Prof. Wang Gerui of Lingnan University presented a seminar on “How to Foster Critical Thinking with Arts in the Age of AI?”. Prof. Wang, whose work in digital humanities is archived by Stanford Libraries, asked how individuals and institutions can cultivate independent thinking when tasks — from coding to filmmaking — were increasingly delegated to AI systems.

She proposed a three-step approach: adopting a holistic mindset that critically engaged with AI rather than simply resisting or relying on it; maintaining historical perspective by treating AI as one of many technological shifts; and practising personal imbuelement — infusing AI-generated outputs with deep personal care and experience. The session underscored the continuing relevance of the humanities in ensuring that technology served human development.

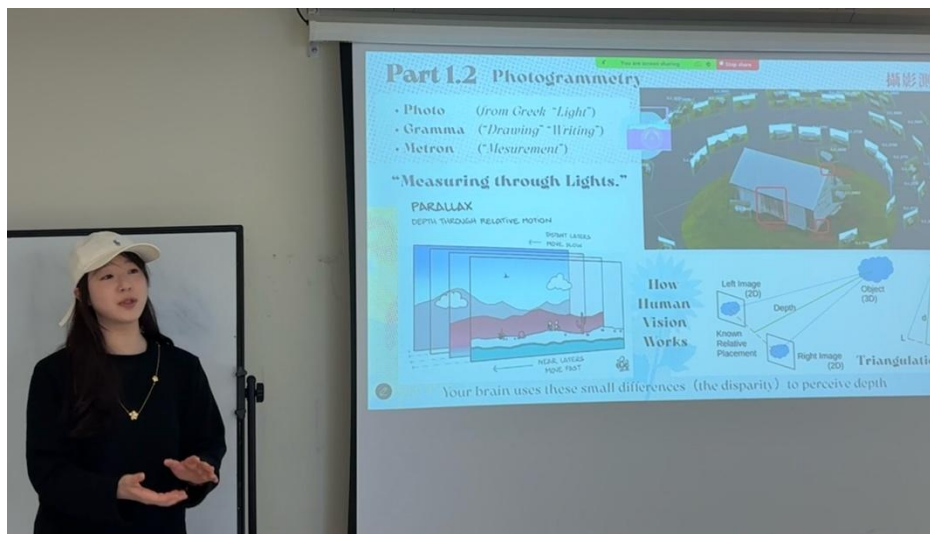


VII. Phenomenology and the Hybrid Museum Experience

On November 17, 2025, Dr. Song Zhennuo presented a seminar on “From Heritage to Hybrid: A Phenomenological Study of XR in the Museum of Digital Things”. Dr. Song, a researcher in human-computer interaction, applied phenomenological frameworks to reconceptualise Extended Reality (XR) objects and experiences.

Drawing on 22 specialist interviews, Dr. Song used Heidegger's fourfold concept — integrating mortals (visitors), earth (activities), sky (ideas), and divinities (emotions) — to analyse the museum experience. She argued that XR interactions can amplify artifact narratives, shifting the museum experience from passive observation to active participation and fostering deeper emotional engagement with heritage.

VIII. Co-Creation and Cultural Ownership through Emerging Technologies



The final session, held on November 26, 2025, featured Dr. Cheng Danzhao, Senior Product Manager at Ant Group, who has led projects in crowdsourced 3D cultural reconstruction. Her talk, “From ‘Do Not Touch’ to ‘Co-Create’: How Emerging Technologies Empower Cultural Heritage”, explored changing modes of cultural engagement.

Dr. Cheng described approaches in which audiences become active participants rather than distant observers. She highlighted several technological drivers for this shift: crowdsourcing, which enabled the public to contribute to the reconstruction of cultural artifacts from fragmented data; blockchain, which could give individuals a stake in cultural ownership and identity-making; and XR and AI, which integrated fragmented data into accessible, lived histories. She concluded that the real measure of technological innovation laid in whether people felt they could participate in and shape their own culture.

IX. Contributions to the Research Centre

The “Pathways Through Time” series has contributed to the development of the Contemporary China Research Center at HKSYU in several respects. By engaging with scholars from institutions in Canada, mainland China, Macao, and Hong Kong, the Center has broadened its research networks and laid the groundwork for future collaboration.

The series has also strengthened the Center’s research capacity along its three thematic pillars: Technology, through discussions on VR/AR applications and digital curation; Art, through engagement with traditional craftsmanship and creative practice; and Culture, through the refinement of heritage theory and attention to everyday cultural practices. Together, these exchanges provide a foundation for developing new approaches to heritage documentation and interpretation that connect technological, artistic, and cultural inquiry.

Conclusion: Toward Sustainable Heritage

The 2025 seminar series at Hong Kong Shue Yan University demonstrated that heritage is a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study. From the ethical dimensions of digital documentation to the participatory possibilities of emerging technologies, the series examined how technology could support efforts to preserve, interpret, and engage with shared cultural histories. By fostering research networks and connecting diverse domains of inquiry, the “Pathways Through Time” series provides a basis for continued collaboration and scholarship in heritage studies at HKSYU.