

# **RE-EXAMINING THE DESIGN OF ONLINE DOCUMENTATION: PLATFORM FOR DISPLACED OBJECTS**

Mingshi Cui\*

*School of Museum Studies, PhD graduate, University of Leicester,  
United Kingdom, [mc672@le.ac.uk](mailto:mc672@le.ac.uk)*

(\*Main presenter and corresponding author)

## **ABSTRACT**

There has been exacerbated discussions in recent years about the future of objects that were obtained from other cultures under contexts of disempowerments in history. While digital technologies are being increasingly used as interim measures of display for virtual restoration, potential improvements on the narratives been adopted in telling the cultural representations and values of this group of objects deserves meticulous examination. Although technically digital documentation systems ensure a spectrum of object information from multiple sources can be captured, entered into the database and provide the public with online access to the objects data, the sociotechnical nature of their underlying data schemes constrains them from traversing a single ontology. This creates potential hindrances in reclaiming a more comprehensive cultural identity of the displaced object. Under such context, this presentation focuses on exploring the potential of adopting biographical approach to create digital online documentation platform to exhibit displaced objects more dialogically, in ways that extend the debates on virtual repatriation and restoration. This research employs qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews, observations, and archival studies to collect contextual information about the object's social life to create its biography and to better understand the collection management system adopted by the museum that shaped the narration of the object's story online.

This presentation is based on my research that examined how information of a piece of mural fragment, originally from China, is currently depicted on the V&A's website. My findings suggest that narratives shaped around the object is confined by the museum's overall mission, its database structure and the limited object records it possessed. This limitation is further evidenced when comparing with how the custodian agency of the heritage site where the object originated collect, manage and preserve data about the fragment driven by a different intention of "bringing the object home" as the nation's cultural heritage. The lack of detailed information of the object's provenance and the different intention of managing and displaying the fragment's information prevented the presentation of alternative versions of the object's identity. This makes it hard to read the fragment's meanings and values from multiple cultural perspectives and to retrieve the object's multi-layered cultural identities accumulated throughout its social life.

Facing this conundrum, I will examine how the approach of creating object biography informs the construction and evaluation of a more culturally inclusive online database. I will illustrate the polysemic nature of displaced object by highlighting the cultural representations of the same historical object as well as its diasporic journey are portrayed differently from different perspectives. Guided by an aim to restore the object's social life, a platform whose design complies with this approach would empower voices from various agents that played a key role in shaping the object's identity and value. I will demonstrate the effectiveness of the conceptual design of such platform is evidenced by its ability to support the creation of culturally inclusive online platforms that allow different taxonomies and interpretations of an object to be exposed in parallel, while making transparent the multiple cultural and knowledge structures within which these interpretations and taxonomies are embedded. Adopting this design mindset to evaluate the effectiveness of current platforms in enriching and enhancing the accessibility of displaced object data, I will also briefly analyze the contents of two existing online platforms-- the Digital Benin and the Reciprocal Research Network that function as online data repositories and as facilitators of communication between the communities of origin and the holding institutions. By reviewing these two cases, the presentation would reach a conclusion that the online databases that cover the objects' biographical information can contribute to the enrichment of the displaced object's cultural representations. It does so by allowing different taxonomies and interpretations of the object to be exposed in parallel, while making transparent the multiple cultural and knowledge structures within which they are embedded.

The major contribution of this research is that it enriches our understandings of the social affordances of digital technology in addressing the under/misrepresentation of the originating culture, the past conflicts and power-imbalances between nations. On the one hand, by unpacking the predigital world as a social construct, the research foregrounds a different motive to utilize the object to connect narrators from different cultures by initiating their intercultural dialogues about the value of the object and its life story. On the other hand, I explore the capacity of digital technology to construct ideal environments for the exchange of views that emplace the displaced object within diverse socio-historical contexts and knowledge management schemes. This would make it possible to encode multi-layered meanings and values to the object, to connect the museum professionals with the originating culture across time and space, and to extend their imagination of the object within relational cultural and knowledge frameworks.

**Keywords:** object interpretation, digital documentation, object biography, displaced object, cultural inclusion