

Negotiating Cultural Identity in the Digital Age: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Resource Integration Practices in a Chinese University Library



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Abstract: Purpose – The digital transformation of university libraries in China presents a complex terrain where institutional mandates for cultural education intersect with the affordances of emerging digital technologies and the rich tapestry of local heritage. This paper examines how practitioners navigate these intersections through reflexive, collaborative practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Adopting a collaborative autoethnographic approach, this study critically examines a three-year initiative to integrate regional culture (e.g., Great Wall heritage) with institutional characteristics (e.g., metallurgical engineering legacy) in a Chinese university library. Data include narrative accounts, 33 semi-structured interviews, and participatory observation. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 12.

Findings – Three core tensions emerged: (1) authenticity vs. accessibility in digitisation; (2) institutional narrative vs. local voice in curation; and (3) technological enthusiasm vs. user agency in interactive design. Successful integration is reconceptualised as ongoing negotiation rather than seamless fusion.

Originality/value – This study contributes to LIS by theorising the academic library as a dynamic “cultural negotiation space,” highlighting the socio-technical complexities of heritage work in non-Western contexts. It challenges techno-optimistic models of digital integration and foregrounds relational, reflexive practice.

Keywords: university library, cultural heritage, digital integration, collaborative autoethnography, technological mediation, China

1. Introduction: Libraries at the crossroads of culture and technology

The role of the university library as a cultural institution is undergoing a profound reconfiguration in the digital age. In China, this transformation is accelerated by national imperatives for cultural confidence (*wenhua zixin*) and holistic education (*Sanquan Education*—a national framework emphasizing whole-person development through all staff, all processes, and all dimensions), which task libraries with becoming active agents of cultural transmission. Simultaneously, the influx of emerging digital technologies—ranging from AI-driven recommendation systems to immersive augmented

reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) experiences—promises new avenues for user engagement with cultural heritage. However, this convergence is not a simple matter of technological adoption. It unfolds within a complex socio-technical ecosystem where institutional logics, local cultural identities, and user practices intersect and often collide.

University libraries in China are increasingly expected to serve not only as repositories of knowledge but also as hubs of cultural identity formation. This expectation is embedded in both national policy documents and institutional strategic plans. For instance, the Ministry of Education’s

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“Guidelines for Strengthening Campus Cultural Construction in Higher Education Institutions” (2020) explicitly calls upon libraries to “integrate local historical and cultural resources into campus life.” At the same time, students—digital natives raised in an era of algorithmic curation and interactive media—bring new expectations about how culture should be encountered: not passively consumed, but actively co-created and personalized.

Prior research on library cultural services has tended to focus on either the macro-level policy framework or the micro-level design of specific events, often overlooking the meso-level organizational practices that mediate between these poles. Furthermore, studies that propose integration models frequently treat technology as a neutral tool and culture as a static resource, neglecting the dynamic, contested, and embodied nature of information work in cultural contexts. This paper seeks to address this gap by drawing on a rich tradition of ethnographic and practice-based research in Library and Information Science (LIS). We engage with theories of information worlds, which conceptualize social groups as having their own distinct information norms and boundaries (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010), and sociomateriality, which argues that social and material elements are constitutively entangled in practice (Orlikowski, 2007). From this perspective, the library is not merely a container for culture but an active site where cultural meaning is continuously negotiated through the interplay of people, objects, technologies, and discourses.

Our central research question is: How do practitioners in a Chinese university library navigate the tensions between institutional mandates, local cultural heritage, and digital technologies in their everyday work of fostering cultural engagement? To answer this, we present a detailed, reflexive account of a three-year initiative at Northeastern University at Qinhuangdao Library.

2. Literature review: Bridging theory and practice in cultural heritage work

To situate our study, we draw on three

interconnected strands of scholarship: (1) the evolving role of academic libraries in cultural programming, (2) critical perspectives on digital heritage and technological mediation, and (3) methodological innovations in LIS research.

First, recent literature reconceptualizes the academic library as a “third space” (Oldenburg, 1989)—a neutral ground distinct from home and classroom where informal learning and community building occur. In the Chinese context, this idea is amplified by state-led discourses on cultural revitalization, positioning libraries as custodians of socialist core values and national memory (Wang & Liu, 2021). However, critics caution against romanticizing the library as a harmonious public sphere, noting that its cultural functions are shaped by institutional power, funding priorities, and professional ideologies (Gorichanaz, 2020).

Second, scholarship on digital heritage highlights the paradoxes of technological mediation. While digitisation can enhance access and preservation, it also risks decontextualizing artefacts, flattening complexity, and privileging visual over tactile or oral forms of knowledge (Cameron, 2007; Parry, 2010). The notion of “digital authenticity” remains contested: is a high-resolution scan of a Ming dynasty map more “authentic” than a community elder’s recollection of navigating by it? Such questions underscore the need for participatory approaches that center lived experience alongside archival fidelity.

Third, methodologically, there is growing interest in qualitative, reflexive methods in LIS. Traditional survey-based or bibliometric approaches often fail to capture the affective, ethical, and political dimensions of information work. Collaborative autoethnography (CAE), in particular, offers a powerful alternative by blending personal narrative with collective sense-making (Chang et al., 2013). CAE aligns with feminist and postcolonial critiques that challenge the myth of researcher objectivity and instead value situated knowledge and emotional labor as legitimate forms of inquiry (Ellis et al., 2011).

This study builds on these literatures by empirically examining how these theoretical tensions manifest in the daily practices of a Chinese university library, offering a grounded account that bridges macro-policy and micro-interaction.

3. Methodology: Embracing reflexivity through collaborative autoethnography

To capture the nuanced, situated, and often tacit knowledge involved in this complex work, we employed a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) design. CAE is particularly powerful for studying professional practice as it allows the insider-researcher to leverage deep contextual understanding while subjecting their experiences to systematic, critical analysis through dialogue with others. Unlike traditional ethnography, which positions the researcher as an external observer, CAE embraces the researcher's embeddedness as a source of insight rather than a methodological flaw. This approach aligns with recent calls in LIS for more reflexive, practice-oriented methodologies that foreground the lived experiences of information professionals (Gorichanaz, 2021; McKenzie, 2021).

As the lead librarian and project coordinator for the "Culture@NEUQ" initiative, I occupied a dual role as both practitioner and researcher. My positionality is that of an "insider-outsider": deeply embedded in the institutional culture and daily operations, yet critically distanced through my research training and commitment to reflexivity. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document my assumptions, emotional responses, and evolving interpretations. This journal served not only as a data source but also as a tool for ongoing self-interrogation, helping me to surface and challenge my own biases—for instance, my initial tendency to prioritize technological novelty over community resonance.

Data collection spanned from January 2022 to December 2024 and involved three primary sources. First, I produced 12 detailed narrative accounts, each focusing on a critical incident or decision point (e.g., the initial community partner meeting, the launch of

the AR treasure hunt, a contentious exhibit review session). These narratives were written in a first-person, reflective style and ranged from 800 to 1,200 words each, capturing not only what happened but also how it felt and what it meant in context. Second, we conducted 33 in-depth interviews to triangulate and challenge my insider perspective. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure a diversity of viewpoints: 20 students (12 undergraduates and 8 postgraduates), 8 library staff (including 2 senior librarians, 3 subject librarians, and 3 technical support staff), 3 academic faculty (from History, Materials Science, and Digital Humanities), and 2 community partners (a senior archivist from the Qinhuangdao City Archives and the director of a local NGO dedicated to Great Wall preservation). Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Third, I observed and took detailed field notes at six key project events, including planning meetings, public launches, and user workshops. These notes documented interactions, spatial arrangements, technological setups, and emergent dynamics that might otherwise go unnoticed.

All data—narratives, transcripts, and field notes—were imported into NVivo 12 for management and analysis. We followed a rigorous thematic analysis process inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006): repeated reading of all data for familiarization; generating succinct labels for relevant features (initial coding); collating codes into potential themes; reviewing themes against the dataset for coherence; and finally defining and naming themes with vivid data extracts. Throughout this process, my co-researchers—a doctoral student in LIS and a community partner—reviewed my coding and thematic maps to enhance trustworthiness and mitigate researcher bias, embodying the collaborative spirit of CAE. This iterative dialogue helped refine our understanding of key concepts such as "authenticity" and "agency," which proved highly context-dependent.

Ethical considerations were paramount. All participants provided written informed consent, and

pseudonyms were used throughout reporting to protect identities. Special care was taken when working with community elders, ensuring that oral histories were collected with cultural sensitivity and that permissions were obtained for any public use of their stories. The project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Northeastern University at Qinhuangdao (Ref: NEUQ-REC-2021-09).

4. Findings: The three axes of cultural negotiation

The analysis reveals that the library's integration work was fundamentally a process of ongoing negotiation across three key dimensions.

4.1 Authenticity vs. accessibility in digital heritage

A primary tension arose in the digitisation and presentation of fragile cultural artefacts, such as ancient metallurgical texts and local chronicles. "We scanned the original metallurgical ledger at 1200 DPI," explained Li, the technical lead, "but when we put it on the screen, students just scrolled past. So we created an AR layer that highlights the chemical formulas and links them to modern alloys they study in class. It's a bridge, not a replacement." However, Zhang, a history major, commented: "I felt like I was looking at a museum piece behind glass, even though it was on my phone. The real connection came later, when the old steelworker told us how his hands would burn from handling the hot metal. That's the story I remember."

This contrast illustrates a fundamental epistemological divide: while the library team viewed digitisation as a means of preservation and pedagogical enhancement, many users experienced it as a form of distancing. True engagement emerged not from high-resolution scans alone, but from the affective resonance of embodied storytelling. This finding resonates with Zijlema's (2018) work on tactile memory, suggesting that digital surrogates, no matter how sophisticated, cannot fully replicate the phenomenological weight of physical interaction with heritage objects.

This tension was further complicated by practical constraints. Digitising rare materials

required specialized equipment and conservation expertise that the library did not initially possess. Partnerships with the provincial archives provided access to scanners and metadata standards, but introduced new challenges around intellectual property and data sovereignty. One agreement stipulated that digital copies could be used for educational purposes only within the university network, limiting public access. Such institutional gatekeeping revealed how digitisation, often celebrated as democratizing, can inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies of access. The library had to navigate these legal and ethical complexities while maintaining its commitment to open cultural exchange—a balancing act that demanded constant negotiation with multiple stakeholders.

Moreover, the very definition of "authenticity" shifted depending on the stakeholder. For historians, authenticity resided in textual fidelity and provenance. For students, it lay in emotional truth and relatability. For community elders, it was tied to lived experience and intergenerational transmission. The library's role thus became one of translation—mediating between these competing regimes of value without privileging one over the others.

4.2 Institutional narrative vs. local voice in exhibit curation

Curating exhibits that simultaneously celebrated the university's brand and honoured authentic community stories proved challenging. An early draft of an exhibit on "Industry and Heritage in Qinhuangdao" was critiqued by community partners for presenting a sanitized, top-down narrative that prioritized the university's connection to industrial progress over the lived experiences of local workers. One community partner noted, "It reads like a corporate brochure, not a history." This feedback triggered a significant revision process, leading to a co-curated exhibit featuring oral histories from retired steelworkers alongside archival documents from the university.

Workshops were held where students interviewed elders, transcribed stories, and

co-designed display panels. This shift highlighted that “integration” was not just about content, but about power—who gets to tell the story? It also revealed the library’s evolving role from curator to facilitator, a space where multiple voices could converge without being subsumed under a single institutional logic. This aligns with Jenkins’ (2006) notion of participatory culture, where cultural production becomes a collective, bottom-up endeavor rather than a top-down broadcast.

The co-curation process itself became a pedagogical intervention. Students enrolled in a special topics course titled “Memory, Place, and Technology” worked directly with community members to collect, interpret, and present stories. Through this experiential learning, they developed critical media literacy skills and a deeper appreciation for local history. Faculty from the Department of Sociology contributed theoretical frameworks on collective memory, while librarians provided training in oral history methodology and digital storytelling tools. This interdisciplinary collaboration exemplified the library’s potential as a nexus for cross-departmental innovation.

Yet it also exposed structural barriers: scheduling conflicts, divergent assessment criteria, and uneven recognition of service-learning in tenure evaluations. Sustaining such collaborations required persistent advocacy and administrative support, underscoring that cultural programming is as much about institutional politics as it is about content creation. The library had to strategically frame the initiative not just as a cultural project, but as a contribution to student employability, civic engagement, and institutional reputation—languages that resonated with university leadership.

4.3 Technological enthusiasm vs. user agency in interactive design

The library team’s initial enthusiasm for deploying cutting-edge AI and AR tools sometimes clashed with the goal of fostering genuine user agency. An early AI-powered chatbot designed to answer questions about local history generated overly generic responses that failed to capture

community-specific nuance. Student participants noted they felt like passive recipients of pre-packaged information. As one computer science student remarked, “It’s smart, but it doesn’t know our street names or family names—it speaks in abstractions.”

In response, the library pivoted its strategy, using technology not to provide answers, but to pose questions and facilitate user-driven inquiry. For example, the AR treasure hunt was redesigned so that the final “reward” was a prompt for students to contribute their own reflections to a communal digital archive. This archive, hosted on the library’s platform, became a living repository of student-generated cultural commentary, blurring the line between user and creator. This shift reflects a broader move in human-computer interaction from user-centered design to participatory design, where end-users are co-creators of meaning (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010).

The redesign process also involved technical iteration. The initial AR app suffered from poor geolocation accuracy and high battery consumption, leading to user frustration. Feedback from beta testers prompted a switch from GPS-based triggers to QR code activation at physical landmarks, improving reliability and accessibility for users with older devices. This pragmatic adjustment illustrates how technological implementation is never purely technical—it is shaped by user demographics, infrastructure limitations, and institutional resources.

Moreover, the decision to use open-source platforms for the digital archive ensured long-term sustainability and interoperability, reflecting a growing awareness among librarians of the importance of digital stewardship beyond the pilot phase. The library also implemented a lightweight annotation system that allowed users to tag entries with personal memories or corrections, transforming the archive into a dialogic space rather than a static repository.

5. Discussion: The library as a cultural negotiation space

This study moves beyond the dominant discourse of seamless “integration” to reveal the university library as a dynamic, contested space of cultural negotiation. Our findings demonstrate that the successful blending of local culture, institutional identity, and digital technology is not a matter of applying a pre-defined model, but of engaging in continuous, reflexive work to manage inherent tensions. The core contribution to information research lies in this reframing. By focusing on the process of negotiation rather than the product of a model, we uncover the socio-technical complexities that are often hidden in success narratives.

The tensions we identified—between authenticity/accessibility, institutional/local, and technology/agency—are not problems to be solved, but fundamental conditions of cultural work in the digital age. They reflect deeper epistemological and ontological divides about what culture is, who it belongs to, and how it should be transmitted. The library, in this view, functions less as a neutral platform and more as a relational infrastructure—a space that enables diverse actors to meet, contest, and co-construct meaning.

This perspective has important implications. For practitioners, it suggests that a key competency is not just technical skill, but the ability to facilitate dialogue, manage ambiguity, and remain critically aware of the power dynamics embedded in their work. Librarians must become cultural mediators who can hold space for multiple truths and conflicting values. This requires new forms of professional development that blend information science with anthropology, design thinking, and community organizing.

For researchers, it calls for more studies that adopt critical, ethnographic methods to understand the lived reality of information practice in complex cultural institutions. As Orlikowski’s (2007) sociomateriality framework reminds us, technologies are never neutral; they enact particular ways of being and knowing. Therefore, every design choice—from

interface layout to metadata schema—carries ethical weight.

6. Implications for policy and practice

Our findings offer actionable insights for library administrators, policymakers, and funding bodies. First, funding mechanisms should prioritize process over product. Grants that reward rapid deployment of digital tools often incentivize superficial engagement. Instead, funders should support long-term, relationship-based projects that allow time for trust-building, iterative design, and community co-creation.

Second, institutional evaluation metrics must evolve. Current performance indicators in Chinese universities emphasize quantifiable outputs (e.g., number of events, user visits). However, the most impactful cultural work is often qualitative and relational. Libraries need protected space to experiment, fail, and reflect—activities that resist easy measurement but are essential for meaningful integration.

Third, interdisciplinary collaboration should be structurally supported. The success of “Culture@NEUQ” depended on informal networks and personal goodwill. To scale such initiatives, universities should create formal mechanisms—such as joint appointments, shared teaching loads, or cross-departmental seed grants—that incentivize sustained partnerships between libraries, academic departments, and community organizations.

Finally, digital platforms must be designed for openness and adaptability. Proprietary systems may offer short-term convenience but create long-term dependencies. Investing in open standards, modular architectures, and user-editable interfaces ensures that cultural projects can grow, change, and be maintained beyond the lifespan of any single grant or staff member.

7. Limitations and future research directions

As a single case study, our findings are context-specific. Future research could conduct comparative studies across different types of

universities—e.g., elite research universities versus regional comprehensive institutions—to explore how institutional prestige shapes cultural programming. Longitudinal designs could track how these tensions evolve over time, especially as generative AI reshapes user expectations around personalization and interactivity.

Additionally, further investigation into the role of non-human actors (e.g., algorithms, platforms, archival objects) in shaping cultural encounters would deepen our understanding of the library as a sociomaterial assemblage. Finally, expanding the participant pool to include alumni, city officials, and K–12 educators could illuminate the library’s broader civic role in regional cultural ecosystems.

8. Conclusion

In an era marked by both digital saturation and cultural fragmentation, the university library stands at a unique crossroads. It is neither a temple of timeless knowledge nor a tech startup chasing the next trend, but a living laboratory for negotiating identity, memory, and belonging. By embracing its role as a cultural negotiation space—one that holds space for tension, ambiguity, and multiplicity—the library can fulfill its highest calling: not to preserve culture as a relic, but to animate it as a shared, evolving practice.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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