



Heritage in Two Tenses

How China and the UK turn the past into luxury

DR YAN SUN · ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR
OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY, UK
ESPM · 18 AUGUST 2026 · 11:15 AM

THE THROUGH-LINE

Both sell their past — but in opposite tenses.

CHINA

Revival

the past made new

BRITAIN

Preservation

the past kept

First the idea · then China · then Britain · then what the comparison teaches us

THE IDEA

Where this sits — and what I am asking

THE CONVERSATION

Critical Luxury Studies — Clark & Lezama (2022), Decentring Luxury

Heritage studies — Lowenthal (1985); Harvey (2001) on heritage as process

Consumer culture & value — Appadurai (1986); MacCannell (1973)

THE QUESTIONS

RQ1 How do societies convert cultural heritage into luxury value?

RQ2 What makes heritage-based luxury legitimate — and to whom?

RQ3 What happens when legitimation logics travel between markets?

The gap: heritagization and luxury legitimacy are rarely compared across value regimes.

THE IDEA

Two tenses of heritage

PAST TENSE

what we inherit

History

Tradition

Craftsmanship

Memory



PRESENT TENSE

what we keep producing

Reinterpretation

Storytelling

Innovation

Luxury value

*Markets do not just use heritage — they help define what counts as heritage.
Brands edit it, curate it, tell stories about it.*

Four ideas, one line each

Heritagization · Harvey (2001)

Turning living tradition into a marketable resource — heritage as a process, not a possession.

Staged authenticity · MacCannell (1973)

Authenticity as something produced and performed — not simply found.

Regimes of value · Appadurai (1986)

Value is culturally constructed; it differs across contexts.

The formal machinery · UNESCO (2003)

Intangible Cultural Heritage and geographical indications — heritage turned into protected value.

The evidence behind the talk

Consumer studies

Qualitative research with younger Chinese consumers on heritage revival and national brands.

Digital & platform materials

Douyin, Xiaohongshu and livestream commerce as field sites — where revival is performed, priced and policed.

Brands, institutions & policy

Case analysis of brand archives and campaigns; China's ICH (Intangible Cultural Heritage) lists and the UK's GI (Geographical Indication) registers read as parallel machineries.



China

Turning tradition into a market offering

THE ENGINE

From guochao to zìxìn

The driver is a shift in confidence. Guochao, the ‘national trend’, has matured into zìxìn: cultural self-confidence.

Value is no longer conferred from Paris or Milan. It is generated internally by young consumers and digital communities who have become the new arbiters of the desirable.

guochao → *zìxìn*



Image sources: The Palace Museum — dpm.org.cn · stock photography

THE LOGO ERA

European brands as proof of arrival

2018 · THE PIVOT

‘China Li-Ning’ storms New York Fashion Week

POST-2020

guochao stops being a trend, becomes a default

Reviving dress — the Hanfu movement



Image: the Hanfu revival — community photography

Reconstructed historical dress, worn in the street as identity — not costume.

The infrastructure

— a whole market of makers, rental studios, photography and festivals has grown around the revival.

The claim

— worn as self, not performance — heritage as everyday identity.

The wearers

— young, urban, female-led — organised through Douyin and Xiaohongshu communities.

The institution as brand — the Palace Museum



Image source: The Palace Museum — dpm.org.cn

600 years of imperial culture, speaking to twenty-somethings.

The transformation — a sacred imperial site deciding to become a design brand.

The product machine — lipsticks, tape, collaborations — cultural-creative products selling out repeatedly.

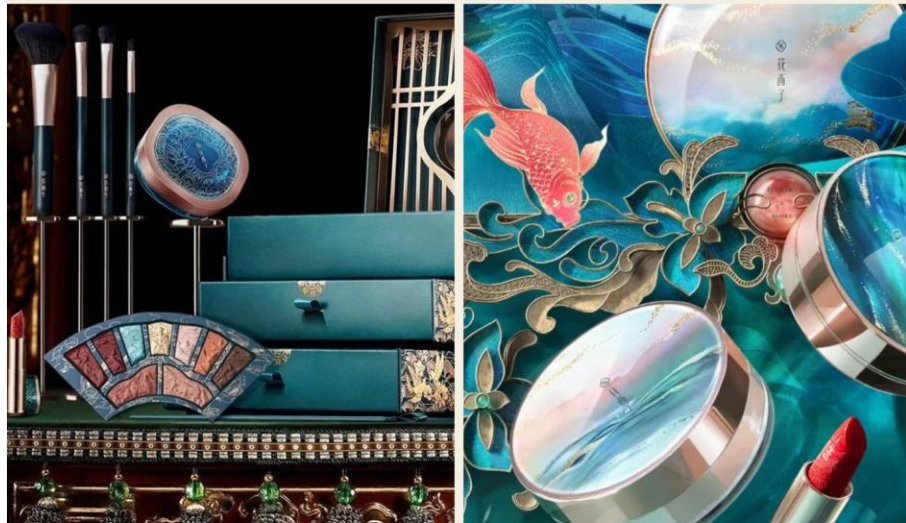
The signal — when the state's most sacred heritage site plays, everyone else is allowed to.

The national label — Li-Ning & Florasis



‘China Li-Ning’ — Chineseness as the point, not the apology.

The moment — 2018, New York Fashion Week: ‘China Li-Ning’ printed large, in characters.



The build — Florasis constructs premium beauty from engraved compacts and Chinese motifs — priced and desired as luxury.

The contrast — the old strategy hid Chineseness to sell; the new one leads with it.

Craft & intangible heritage — Jingdezhen, embroidery, tea



Image sources: China Intangible Cultural Heritage — ihchina.cn

Centuries-old crafts re-packaged for contemporary lifestyle and gifting.

The machinery — China's Intangible Cultural Heritage system — a deliberate state apparatus for converting craft into value.

The migration — Jingdezhen's 'porcelain youth', young makers moving to a 1,000-year-old kiln town.

The extension — tea culture feeding luxury hospitality, lifestyle and gifting.

Four ways tradition becomes desirable



Reviving dress

The Hanfu movement — reconstructed historical dress worn as identity, with a market of makers, rentals and events.



The institution as brand

The Palace Museum — 600 years of imperial culture turned into sell-out cultural-creative products.



The national label

Li-Ning storms fashion weeks as 'China Li-Ning'; Florasis builds beauty on engraved compacts and Chinese motifs.



Craft & intangible heritage

Jingdezhen porcelain, embroidery and tea — centuries-old crafts re-packaged for contemporary lifestyle and gifting.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE

The revival tense

Fast

Youth-led

Digital

Reinvented

The past is desirable because it has been made new.



The United Kingdom

Heritage as the mirror

Heritage worn as continuity — Burberry, Barbour, Savile Row



Image sources: [burberry.com](https://www.burberry.com) · [barbour.com](https://www.barbour.com)

The trench and the check, sold as unbroken lineage — not revival.

The origin story — the trench coat's military history deployed as a marketing asset.

The message — 'we have always done things this way' — continuity over reinvention.

The purchase — consumers buy access to a long narrative, not novelty.

Provenance as law — Harris Tweed



Image source: Harris Tweed Authority — harristweed.org

The only fabric protected by its own Act of Parliament (1993).

The statute — to bear the Orb mark, it must be handwoven in the Outer Hebrides, at the weaver's home.

The move — authenticity literally written into law — provenance you can litigate.

The object — the Orb, stitched into every genuine length — the mark is the value.

Terroir on a plate — protected-origin foods



Image sources: comishpastyassociation.co.uk · stiltoncheese.co.uk · thedalmore.com

Value anchored to place through protected status.

The cases — Melton Mowbray pork pie and Cornish pasty (PGI — Protected Geographical Indication), Stilton, Scotch whisky.

The machinery — the geographical-indication system — the legal engine of provenance.

The mirror — the GI system is Britain's (and Europe's) answer to China's ICH system — law versus revival.

Preservation as product — the National Trust & the monarchy



Monetising the past by keeping it exactly as it was.

The scale — the National Trust, one of Europe's largest membership organisations.

The crown — the royal brand as the ultimate continuity asset.



The ritual — the National Trust car park on a Sunday; afternoon tea — preservation as a way of life.

The same move, an older logic



Heritage worn as continuity

Burberry, Barbour, Savile Row, tartan — the trench and the check sold as unbroken lineage, not revival.



Provenance as law

Harris Tweed — protected by its own Act of Parliament (1993); the Orb mark requires hand-weaving in the Outer Hebrides.



Terroir on a plate

Melton Mowbray pork pie and Cornish pasty (PGI), Stilton, Scotch whisky — value anchored to place through protected status.



Preservation as product

The National Trust and the monarchy — stately homes, heritage tourism and the royal brand: the past kept exactly as it was.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE

The preservation tense

Slow

Institution-led

Provenance

Nostalgic

The past is desirable because it has been kept.

Same destination, opposite directions

	China	United Kingdom
TENSE	Revival — the past made new	Preservation — the past kept
AUTHENTICITY	Reinvention & cultural confidence	Age, continuity & provenance
LEAD AGENT	Young consumers & digital communities	Institutions, brands & the state’s GI system
SPEED	Fast, trend-driven, recent (post-2018)	Slow, incremental, long-established
GUARDRAIL	Platforms, fandom, national sentiment	Acts, appellations, the Orb mark

Both commodify heritage — what scholars call heritagization. What differs is the mechanism.

Britain protects heritage to keep it *still*.

China reinvents heritage to keep it *moving*.

When the two tenses meet

Preservation, exported

Chinese consumers are among the biggest buyers of ‘authentically British’ heritage.

Preservation borrows revival

British houses reinvent themselves for the Chinese market — Lunar New Year collections, guochao-adjacent collaborations.

Revival builds institutions

Chinese heritage brands are starting to build the slow institutions — museums, archives, protected crafts — that look distinctly like the British playbook.

The tenses are learning each other's grammar.

Why now — three global shifts

1

The authenticity search

Consumers increasingly seek meaning and provenance — heritage is the richest raw material for both.

2

The experience economy

Luxury has become experiential rather than purely material — people buy stories, rituals and identities.

3

Sustainability

Longevity, craftsmanship and local production have become virtues — heritage as the original slow luxury.

Ironically, the future of luxury increasingly depends on carefully reinterpreting the past.

What the two-tenses framework contributes

Temporalises heritagization

Legitimation logics differ by temporal orientation — revival and preservation as two distinct routes to authenticity, not degrees of it.

Decentres luxury legitimacy

Value regimes beyond the European canon — China read as the clearest case of a broader shift, not as imitation or catch-up.

Pairs the machineries

ICH and GI systems as functionally equivalent institutions that manufacture different authenticities — a comparative research site in itself.

A framework to be tested — on Brazil as much as on Britain or China.

IN CLOSING

Which tense is the future?

*I research China from the UK — so I spend my days between these two tenses of heritage:
one that preserves, one that reinvents. Luxury's future may belong to whoever learns to speak both.
Perhaps that is what decentring really means.*

Dr Yan Sun · Associate Professor, Oxford Brookes University (UK)

DISCUSSION

Q&A

Which tense does your own country speak in?

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

Appadurai, A. (1986) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

Clark, J.P. & Lezama, N. (eds) (2022) *Canadian Critical Luxury Studies: Decentring Luxury*. Bristol: Intellect — the field this talk speaks into.

Harvey, D.C. (2001) 'Heritage pasts and heritage presents: temporality, meaning and the scope of heritage studies', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7(4).

Lowenthal, D. (1985) *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge University Press.

MacCannell, D. (1973) 'Staged authenticity: arrangements of social space in tourist settings', *American Journal of Sociology*, 79(3).

UNESCO (2003) *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

Selected sources — full list and papers available on request