"Escape from the British Museum:" The role of short videos in public pedagogy and social movements

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the potential of short videos as tools for public pedagogy that advance museum decolonization discourses, driving social movements for heritage restitution. Focusing on the viral Chinese video series "Escape from the British Museum," the research combines a close reading of the media text with a content analysis of audience comments on social media. By applying Dieter Rucht's (2017) social movement framework, it examines how these videos mobilize public discourse for social change, build online networks with a collective identity, and inspire public protest against colonial legacies. While celebrating the series' effectiveness in enhancing public understanding about museum decolonization and restitution, the article also addresses the challenges posed by short videos, including their limitations in prompting direct action and fostering sustained international collaboration.

KEYWORDS: museum decolonization, restitution, public pedagogy, short video, social movement, storytelling, social media


On August 16, 2023, the British Museum disclosed that items from its collection had been missing, stolen, or damaged, with later reviews estimating around 2,000 affected artifacts and leading to the dismissal of a senior staff member (British Museum, 2023a, 2023b). The incident intensified public skepticism about the museum's credibility as a steward of cultural heritage and prompted widespread internal and external criticism (Higgins, 2025; Marshall, 2023). Less than two weeks later, Director Hartwig Fischer resigned, acknowledging the institution's failure to act appropriately in response to the losses (Wang, 2023).

The events of August 2023 were not the first time the British Museum has faced public criticism. In recent decades, there has been growing

attention towards its significant number of objects acquired during colonial conquests (Duthie, 2011; Hicks, 2020). Take, for instance, the Museum's collection of Chinese antiquities. With over 23,000 objects, the collection is the largest of its kind in the West and includes invaluable items looted from China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as the "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies" (Wang, 2023). Not a single object has been returned to China from the British Museum, reflecting a broader resistance against correcting historical injustices within major global institutions.

This article explores how visual art, specifically a series of short videos titled "Escape from the British Museum" on Chinese social media, serves as a form of public pedagogy, which Sandlin et al., (2011, p.338) describe as "processes and sites of education beyond formal schooling", by envisioning a future where looted artifacts are returned to their homelands. Using Dieter Rucht's (2017) framework of social movement, it examines how these videos advance social change on museum decolonization, build online networks, foster collective identity as restitution advocates, and inspire public protest against the British Museum. By analyzing the connections between media, culture, and social activism, the article highlights the potential of short videos as tools for public pedagogy and social movements focused on museum decolonization and restitution (See Figure 1).

Figure 1
Structure of Analysis Created by Author
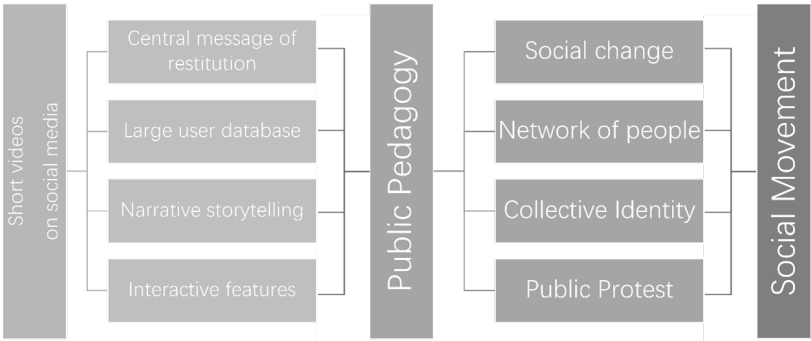
Decolonial Theory

The term "decolonization" originally referred to struggles for political independence in the 20th century; over time, its meaning has ex-

panded to include the lasting impacts of anti-colonial struggles and the socio-cultural changes in former colonies as they shape their new, contemporary identities (Thomas & Thompson, 2014). This broader understanding is influenced by global movements such as decolonization efforts in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, the U.S. civil rights movement, and equality campaigns by First Nations in New Zealand, Australia, and North America (Wintle, 2016). Yet, coloniality remains embedded in global power structures (Whittington, 2022).

To address this persistence, this study draws on decolonial theory, which originated in Latin America in the late 20th century as a critique of continuing colonial domination beyond formal independence (Quintero et al., 2019). A key concept is the *coloniality of power*, introduced by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, which has "concentrated all forms of the control of subjectivity, culture, and especially knowledge and the production of knowledge under its [Eurocentric] hegemony" (Quijano, 2000, p.540). Western epistemologies are still treated as universal values and standards, marginalizing alternative worldviews and reinforcing historical inequalities (Dunford, 2017; Dussel et al., 2000). Scholars like Mignolo and Walsh (2018) argue that modernity itself is inseparable from coloniality and call for a radical "delinking" from Eurocentric systems to make space for plural forms of knowledge and being (Mignolo, 2007, 2017). Decolonial theorist thus adopt a more radical stance, directly challenging established practices through protest and confrontations (Noxolo, 2017).

Decolonizing Museums

Discussions about "decolonizing" museums have been raised at least since the 1970s. Research like the *Plundered Past* by Karl Meyer (1973) initiated a series of publications that tracked the unethical collecting practices of major Western museums. Many collections trace back to colonial origins and are tied to patrons whose wealth came from imperial ventures, for instance the British Museum (Shoenberger, 2024). The 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act in the U.S. also marked a pivotal moment, compelling museums to return ancestral remains and sacred objects to Native American tribes and making consultation with source communities a required practice (Indian Affairs, n.d.). Discussions around museums increasingly adopted decolonial frameworks to advocate for approaches that respect Indigenous epistemologies (Simpson, 1997; Smith, 1999).

Museums around the world have experimented with various strategies to decolonize their practices. Examples include revising interpretive language or providing provenance history in object panels to eliminate colonialist biases and improve accessibility (Shoenberger, 2024).

Institutions are also embracing collaborative exhibition development with source communities rather than imposing top-down narratives (Maranda, 2021; Whittington, 2022). More foundational decolonizing actions rest on the restitution of cultural artifacts acquired through colonial violence. Restitution involves acknowledging the wrongful acquisition, ownership, or storage of items and returning them to their countries or communities of origin. It also seeks to restore power, authority, and voice to these communities (Rassool & Gibbon, 2023). One of the most prominent cases is the Benin Bronzes. Germany became the first country to return over 20 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria in 2022; and in 2025 the Netherlands agreed to repatriate 119 Benin Bronzes, the largest such return to date (Lawson-Tancred, 2025).

Unlike the imperial trophies from Africa, some of which are gradually being returned (Lawson-Tancred, 2025), Chinese artifacts with problematic provenances in Western museums continue to await meaningful action. Some of the British Museum's collections stem from violent episodes during China's Second Opium War (1856–1860) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) (Kraus, 2009). In 1860, British and French forces extensively looted the imperial garden Yuanmingyuan, and the eight-national alliance further looted Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion, taking vast numbers of imperial treasures as war trophies (Hevia, 1994; Tythacott, 2018). Beyond warfare, artifacts were also taken through coercive treaties and exploitative expeditions, exemplified by the controversial removal of Dunhuang manuscripts in the early 1900s (Wang, 2019).

The British Museum often remains silent when facing critique or defend their collections as legitimately acquired, citing legal frameworks such as the British Museum Act, which restricts repatriation efforts (Duthie, 2011). For instance, the Museum's official website briefly notes the controversial acquisition of "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies," as a legal purchase from "Captain Clarence Johnson (1870–1937) who was in Beijing in 1900 during the Boxer Rebellion" without addressing the ethically problematic context (British Museum, n.d.-a).

While there remains little prospect of looted artifacts in the British Museum returning to China due to legal and institutional constraints, grassroots and community-generated initiatives continue to propel decolonial discourses forward. The short video series examined in this article, "Escape from the British Museum," inverts the traditional museum narrative, transforming artifacts from passive objects in Western collections into active protagonists seeking their own return home. This imaginative counter-narrative becomes a form of public pedagogy, especially how popular culture can "decode and interrupt dominant

ideologies" (Sandlin et al., 2011, p.347). By challenging the legitimacy of colonial ownership and aligning with decolonial efforts to "delink" cultural heritage from Eurocentric frameworks (Mignolo, 2007), it lays the groundwork for continuous social movements.

Public Pedagogy and Social Movement

In understanding how decolonial ideas and social movement ideas spread in society, the concept of public pedagogy is particularly useful. Public pedagogy expands the concept of education beyond formal schooling. It examines how learning happens through various social and cultural practices and settings (Desai & Darts, 2016). This article focuses specifically on public pedagogy manifested through popular culture and everyday life (Sandlin et al., 2011). In other words, the short videos and social media clips examined here, though originally did not have an explicit educational goal, still do the work of influencing the public opinions and convey messages through narratives.

This approach demonstrates how various cultural elements contribute to societal learning and challenge the status quo through critical engagement (Sandlin et al., 2011). It emphasizes real-world, corporeal interactions among citizens that disrupt traditional notions of community and cooperation, suggesting that popular culture not only reflects society but also offers opportunities for resistance and change (Desai & Darts, 2016; Schuermans et al., 2012).

Finally, this article utilizes Dieter Rucht's (2017) four-element framework to define a social movement, which he describes as "a network of individuals, groups, and organizations that, based on a sense of collective identity, seek to bring about social change primarily through collective public protest" (p.45). This framework emphasizes the importance of a "we-feeling," or collective identity lacking hierarchical or centralized power, which distinguishes between *us* and *them* (Rucht, 2017). Rucht's framework aligns well with the aims of the short videos at the center of this article. Such videos serve as powerful instruments for public pedagogy and social change, particularly in the context of museum restitution. These videos forge networks via social media to cultivate a collective identity among Chinese citizens as protectors of their heritage, and fuel video activism that prompts public protests against the British Museum.

Methodology: Qualitative Case Study of "Escape"

This study is guided by the central research question: "How can short video content on social media function as a form of public pedagogy and mobilize social movements?" A qualitative case study design is ad-

opted. This approach allows for an in-depth examination of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, making it especially appropriate for exploring the complex interplay between media, education, and activism (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The selected case is the viral Chinese short video series "Escape from the British Museum" (hereafter "Escape"), a three-episode online mini-series totaling approximately 16 minutes. Directed by influencer @JianBingGuoZai and co-starring @SummerSister, the series debuted on August 30, 2023, across multiple Chinese social media platforms, including BiliBili, Douyin, Rednote, Weibo, Kuaishou, and Mango TV (BaiduBaike, n.d.). This series was purposefully selected due to its exceptional reach and cultural resonance. Upon its release, "Escape" rapidly gained widespread popularity, accumulating hundreds of millions of views within weeks. As of April 10, 2024, the series has achieved over 500 million views on Douyin alone (Douyin, 2024).

This trilogy uses anthropomorphism for storytelling. The videos feature a Chinese Jade Teapot (See Figure 2) that transforms into a lively girl determined to escape the British Museum and return to China. During her journey, she meets Zhang Yongan (See Figure 3), a disheartened Chinese journalist living abroad. Initially skeptical, Zhang comes to believe that the girl is indeed the jade teapot carved with delicate branch patterns from the British Museum.

Figure 2
Teapot. The British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

Note: From https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2017-3036-1

Figure 3
Screenshot of "Escape." Left: Zhang Yongan; Right: Little Teapot

Together, they travel back to China, exploring Chinese culture along the way. They practiced Taiji, drank tea, enjoyed opera, and visited pandas. Their journey ends at the Henan Museum, where the Jade Teapot reads out letters written by other artifacts from the British Museum.[1] These letters express their longing to return home and convey heartfelt messages to their "friends" and "family" in the Chinese museum. As the Teapot reads, the series brings the artifacts to life, giving them unique personalities and ages.

The videos reach an emotional climax as the artifacts speak together a collective plea: "May our nation, our motherland, be forever peaceful." Despite the joy of her homecoming, the Teapot ultimately chooses to

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1   For instance, a letter from a porcelain horse: "Tang Da Ma, brother. It is Me, Tang Xiao Ma! In the blink of an eye, we haven't seen each other for 163 years. Each day, after the foreigners leave, I run laps around this cage. And as I run, I am reminded of centuries past, of our vow to race across the vast and beautiful landscapes together;" A letter from a spherical sachet: "Brethren of my heart, my sibling was whisked away by foreign hands amidst war's fierce blaze. Together, we were halves of a whole. Should he find his way back before me, oh, do promise to whisper his tale to my soul."

return to the UK, holding onto the hope of a future dignified return to China. Inspired by this journey, Zhang decides to continue his journalistic work, which dedicates to advocating for the restitution and protection of plundered artifacts. The viral sensation of this video series ignited public discourse on the critical issue of restitution, spotlighting the plight of looted Chinese artifacts displayed in foreign museums.

Data Collection and Analysis Method

The primary data for analysis consisted of the "Escape" video trilogy itself. I conducted a close reading of the three short video episodes, employing this analytical approach that involves a "detailed examination, deconstruction, and analysis of a media text" (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2024, p.294). This method allowed me to delve into the finer points of the video content, analyzing aspects such as narrative structure, visual symbolism, and dialogue. To assess audience reception and emergent social movement themes, I also analyzed user comments from the video platform BiliBili associated with the "Escape" series. Specifically, on April 10, 2024, I manually collected the top 50 most liked comments for each episode from BiliBili, resulting in a total of 150 comments. I compiled all the comments into a Word document, totaling 8,012 Chinese words. Focusing on top-liked comments ensured that the analysis captured prominent or resonant audience sentiments.

Qualitative content analysis was adopted for processing the data, a method particularly appropriate for systematically interpreting textual data to identify explicit categories as well as implicit meanings and patterns (Schreier, 2012). I first used a free web tool called "LZL" to perform a word frequency analysis, identifying the top 40 most frequently occurring phrases, all consisting of two or more characters (See Table 1). To capture a more nuanced understanding, I used the initial results as a thematic guide to further search for significant single characters, such as *family* 家 and *tear* 泪, in the Word document via the "look up" function. This manual lookup allowed me to count hits more accurately for characters and phrases with similar meanings. Additionally, this direct lookup linked me back to the context of each phrase, helping to integrate the comments with the broader themes of my analysis. Codes and categories were then assigned to the comments, using Dieter Rucht's (2017) four-element social movement framework as a guideline. The outcome of this analytic process was a set of themes that synthesizes the messages of "Escape" and viewers' response.

Table 1
Word Frequency Analysis Result by LZL (Top 40 Hits)

Chinese phrase	English Translation	Hit	Chinese phrase	English Translation	Hit
玉壶	Teapot	59	说话	Speak	7
文物	Artifacts	55	堂堂正正	Upright and dignified	7
回家	Return Home	33	思念	Miss	7
中国	China	27	大家	Us	7
我们	Us	23	茶叶	Tea leaves	6
他们	They	23	感觉	Feel	6
大英博物馆	The British Museum	22	风风光光	With great honor and splendor	6
永安	Eternal Peace	21	声音	Voice	6
家人	Family	18	大哭	Cry	6
希望	Wish	16	回来	Return	6
家国	Home and Country, motherland	14	感动	Moved	6
看到	See	13	觉得	Feel	6
可爱	Cute	13	开始	Begin	6
文化	Culture	12	回到	Return	6
知道	Know	11	历史	History	6
自己	Myself	11	故事	Story	6
中华	Chinese	10	博物馆	Museum	6
海外	Oversea	8	黄皮肤	Yellow skin	6
在外	Outside	8	黑眼睛	Black eyes	6
眼泪	Tears	7	你们	You	6

Element 1: Short Videos as Public Pedagogy for Social Change

This video series introduces audiences to the topics of looted artifacts and museum restitution on a humanistic level through accessible and engaging storytelling. According to one of the most frequent words used in comments, such as the description of the Teapot as "cute" 可爱 13 times, an effective aspect of the video series was the creators' choice to use anthropomorphic techniques. By personifying the artifacts, "Escape" breathes life into objects and events that might otherwise feel

distant to viewers and turns them into tangible experiences. This narrative technique deepens the symbolic significance of the artifacts and enhances the historical weight they carry. The result is a more intimate, personal relationship between viewer and object, one that extends far beyond the typical museum visitor's experience of viewing objects in a case and reading about their plundered history on a text panel.

In addition to being immersive and easy to follow, the storytelling experience of the video is multivalent in its message that calls for restitution, including the use of subtle visual signals. For instance, Little Teapot appears with a dirty face, symbolizing how some artifacts in the British Museum are not protected by glass shields and can be freely touched (See Figures 5 to 7). Little Teapot's frequent assertion, "I am a 'Chinese Thin-Walled Jade Teapot with Branching Patterns'" (Episode 1, 1'28''), further highlights that many Chinese artifacts at the British Museum are merely numbered, not named. This genericization is echoed on the British Museum's official website (British Museum, n.d.-b), where the Jade Teapot is often referred to simply as "Teapot." Another poignant line from Little Teapot occurs when she enters Zhang's apartment: "Wow, this is your home? A huge cabinet for just two people?" (Episode 1, 2'00''). This brief line reflects how numerous artifacts are placed into limited display space in the museum (See Figure 8).

Figure 4
Screenshot of "Escape" Videos with Little Teapot Introducing her name

Figure 5-6
Object display at the British Museum.

Note. Photos taken by the author in the Egyptian Gallery in the British Museum on Nov. 7th, 2021. Even with the "Do Not Touch" sign, multiple visitors are leaning on artifacts or touching them for photographs.

Figure 7
Chinese Ceramics Gallery. The British Museum, London, United Kingdom.

Note: Johnbod. (2016, October 6). Percival David Collection, British Museum, Room 95 [Photograph]. Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Percival_David_Collection_DSCF3188_02.jpg

Storytelling, a more open and less structured genre, encourages listeners to reconsider established ideas, stereotypes, and social remedies (Kidd, 2015). Through the perspective of the character in the narrative, viewers receive a vivid depiction of the current condition of the artifacts held in the British Museum. This portrayal fosters empathy and builds a compelling argument against the continued retention of artifacts with problematic provenance in the British Museum, which has usually been celebrated as a secure and reliable custodian of heritage (Duthie, 2011). When viewers come across the video series while browsing on social media, they are subtly educated about the unethical practices of Western museums and may develop a desire for the restitution of looted artifacts.

Element 2: Social Media for Building Networks

The viral appeal of these videos and the amplification of their messages also owes much to the platforms on which they are disseminated. Social media platforms are unique in their multimedia capabilities, immediate content dissemination, and support for grassroots creators (Askanius, 2014). These platforms extend the content's reach and thereby play an essential role in fostering social movement by generating a network that promotes viewer participation and facilitate dialogue (Li & Prasad, 2018).

Recent trends in social media activism focus on fostering engagement and building community connections. Activists use social media platforms to connect with audiences and supporters who are often inaccessible through traditional media channels (Li & Prasad, 2018). Statistics as of September 2023 show a staggering active user base of 1.088 billion, predominantly frequented by a younger demographic, across major Chinese platforms like Douyin, BiliBili, and Weibo with a penetration rate of 88.9% (QuestMobile, 2023).

With this significant user profile, the "Escape" videos have garnered over 500 million views and 2.5 million comments on the Douyin platform alone as of April 10, 2024 (Douyin, 2024). This surge in popularity signifies a shift in the narrative surrounding restitution—from a topic once confined to official discourse to one that is widely accessible to the general public. Additionally, restitution, traditionally of interest primarily to older generations, now captivates a broad and youthful audience active on social media, illustrating its expanding relevance and appeal.

The intensive use of social media has become a social norm, with users engaging deeply not only online but also carrying these interactions into their offline lives through shared languages and social behaviors

(Lu & Lu, 2019). This engagement highlights how social media has transcended traditional communication methods to cultivate a vibrant, interactive public sphere where activism can flourish.

Element 3: Shaping Collective Identity

"Escape" and its viral impact exemplify the concept of *collective identity* as established by Rhys H. Williams (1995). The effect of the videos is not the result of any one person, even the creator, but depend on the formation of a "we" by reaching millions through social media platforms (Biesta, 2012). This process of forming collective identity involves not only defining who "we" are but also distinguishing ourselves from "others." The boundary work establishes a sense of belonging and differentiates the group from outsiders through reciprocal identification. Members express shared characteristics and values, which are contrasted against those of reference groups (Flesher Fominaya, 2010).

As evidenced by the comments, this construction of a "we" is an effective strategy for activating a broader public who might otherwise have no awareness of Chinese artifacts in Western museum collections. Take, for instance, the conversation between Zhang and Little Teapot when Zhang agrees to take her back to China (Episode 2, 3'46"):
Zhang: "Why do you call me your family? Aren't you afraid I'm a bad person?"

Little Teapot: "Other artifacts have told me: 'Those with black eyes and yellow skin who can understand my words are my family.' …As long as I encounter someone from my family, I am safe. I can trust them, and they will definitely help me return to China."

In the case of this conversational exchange, Zhang advances the idea of a collective identity among Chinese people, portraying them as a unified family by suggesting that physical traits emblematic of the Chinese identity like black hair and yellow skin are integral to the community no matter where we are. The lines oppose these characteristics with those of foreigners, who can potentially be "bad people" who won't help Little Teapot.

In the end of the video, as Little Teapot choose to return to her glass case rather than stay in China, her last words to Zhang are: "China is a great nation. Chinese people do not engage in those sneaky, underhanded acts. One day, we will return home in glory and with dignity" (Episode 3, 8'00"). These lines once again sharply contrast the collective identity of the Chinese as upright and honest with that of foreigners who plundered Chinese heritage centuries ago and continue to deny their wrongdoing and refuse to return the artifacts to China.

Viewers' comments indicate that this message about collective Chinese identity has been well received and embraced. The formation of a collective identity is articulated through a shared language (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Repetition of discourse and sense of consistency generated are essential, helping individuals align the movement's messages, practices, and objectives with their personal values, experiences, and emotions (Beins, 2015). The terms related to identity of *me/myself/us* 我/自己/我们 appear most frequently in the comments, with 118 mentions. It is followed by the terms related to family 家 (*returning home* 回家/归家, *family members* 家人, *and home country* 家国), with 107 mentions. This high rate of repetition of words demonstrates the formation of a collective identity of Chinese passionate about heritage restitution among the short videos' viewers.

Furthermore, affective ties and emotional factors are crucial in collective identity formation (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). In the comments, a common theme among the audience is tears/feeling moved with 42 hits (*cry* 哭 *19; tears* 泪 *16 - tear drops* 眼泪，泪水 */eyes filled with tears* 泪目，流泪; *feeling moved/touched* 感动触动 *7*). The approach of personified storytelling by the artifacts themselves, expressing the wish to return home, fosters a deeper level of viewer engagement with the content. It creates a strong emotional bond between individuals and the social movement, solidifying their identification with the social movement's goals and values towards the restitution of looted artifacts by Western museums.

Element 4: From Interactions to Collective Public Protest

Social media platforms are celebrated as powerful drivers of political mobilization and radical change (Harlow, 2012; Jost et al., 2018; Zhuravskaya et al., 2020). "Escape" can be viewed as a form of *video activism*, or videos creation by a grassroots community advocating for social change (Askanius, 2014). With advancements in technology that leads to the advent of platforms like YouTube, ordinary people now have the capability to both view and produce videos for online sharing. This development has fostered an alternative video culture where amateur videographers can upload raw or roughly edited cellphone footage, effectively placing the power of video production into the hands of everyday users. This shift has democratized access to media creation, broadening the landscape for how and by whom visual content is made (Askanius, 2014).

Created by amateur content makers and social media influencers rather than professional actors, "Escape" adopts a less mediated and informal approach that diverges from the polished productions typical of state or institutional media. The creators' work introduces a grassroots

perspective to the discussion on restitution and the decolonization of museums, topics that were previously covered mainly by official channels. These short videos on social media reflect the desires of ordinary Chinese citizens as per the comments posted about the video. The series' widespread impact further led to engagement from official media, with outlets like China Daily and The Global Times entering the conversation and advocating for the return of looted Chinese artifacts (China Daily, 2023). The BBC has also reported on the series (Wang, 2023). The shift from grassroots efforts to international media coverage highlights its great success. It presents an alternative, optimistic vision of artifacts returning home, in contrast to the grim reality that many looted items continue to reside in Western museums.

Moreover, social media platforms can function as spaces where individuals and communities gain visibility and avenues for influence, reshaping how they connect with one another and engage with cultural discourse. This redefines traditional roles, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, and artists and audiences (Li & Prasad, 2018). This potential for agency is conceptualized as *mediation*—an interactive process where individuals and marginalized groups recognize their ability to influence power relations by combining interpersonal interactions with technological channels (Kidd, 2015).

Viewer comments on the video series reflect this sense of agency and empowerment. Commenters describe feeling motivated to act within their own professional or educational spheres. For example, one viewer expressed renewed commitment to their journalism career, writing, "You really give me energy for pursuing what I am doing, Journalism. I thought about giving up, but now I believe what I am doing has power." Another mentioned their intention to educate others, saying, "I am a teacher. I will share this video series with my students to help them learn about our cultural heritage." One viewer shared their academic aspirations: "I want to study Cultural Heritage studies for my college degree, hoping that one day I can contribute to the museum decolonizing process!" These comments reflect the impact of the short videos in inspiring individuals to engage with and contribute to cultural and professional realms.

Furthermore, the concept of *mediation* is extended through *remediation,* where users can modify, adapt, and remix media content according to their needs (Kidd, 2015). Accessible platforms and editing tools enable individuals to act simultaneously as storytellers and audiences, engaging with existing narratives while infusing their own through annotation, appropriation, and redistribution (Li & Prasad, 2018). This dynamic process of video creation has become a pivotal aspect of con-

temporary online cultures, serving as a powerful tool for collective empowerment and social activism (Askanius, 2014).

For example, following the phenomenal success of the "Escape" video series, social media users launched the video activist campaign #PersonificationOfArtifacts 文物拟人 on Douyin. Influencers adopted the approach of the original series, dressing in costume and makeup to personify artifacts similar to the Little Teapot character. The typical plot features a poignant story of artifacts being looted, followed by their transformation into human characters (See Figures 9 to 16). These creators often tag the "Escape" series in their captions to maximize visibility. This campaign has nearly 10,000 participants whose video content has accumulated over 560 million views as of April 10, 2024—60 million more than the original video series. A single video series has catalyzed a public protest through widespread video activism, all unified by a shared demand for the restitution of looted artifacts from Western museums.

Figure 8-15
Screenshots of videos uploaded to the #PersonificationOfArtifacts campaign by Douyin users dressed as Chinese artifacts.

Note. A total of four videos are presented here, with two screenshots from each video grouped together in the same grid. Douyin users are featured dressed as a traditional Chinese kite, an ancient painting, a folding screen, and a Buddhist mural.

Remaining Challenges

While the short video series "Escape" has ignited a social movement aimed at decolonizing museums and advocating for restitution, several challenges remain. Key among these is the miscommunication of the central message, exacerbated by the brief engagement times typical of social media content, and the obstacles to achieving impactful actions that truly advance the decolonization of Western museums.

One of the chief misunderstandings of the original video series is that the Jade Teapot is a looted artifact, adding to the growing albeit misguided demand for the restitution of all Chinese artifacts in foreign collections, regardless of their provenance. This is made clear in viewers' comments, with the term *teapot* 玉壶 appearing 59 times in top comments, highlighting the intense audience focus on this artifact. However, the necessary brevity of the videos omits an explicit explanation for why this teapot was chosen as the main character. At the beginning of the first episode, Little Teapot exclaims to Zhang Yongan: "I've been wandering outside for a long time. I'm lost, and I don't know how to find my way home!" (Episode 1, 1'00''). Viewers who engage superficially with the content, as is common on social media, might easily misinterpret this to mean the teapot as a looted artifact when it was instead legally purchased by the British Museum in 2017 from a practitioner of intangible heritage of Jade Carving. Its maker, Yu

Ting, intended the 2011-made teapot as a celebration and recognition of a delicate and precious traditional craft (British Museum, n.d.-b). The "Escape" producers revealed in an interview that they have chosen the teapot as the major character because its provenance is clear, represents the continuation of the ancient craft of jade carving, and promotes Chinese culture abroad. When the teapot transforms into a girl, she is young and innocent, and can remember the way home (China Daily, 2023). However, without additional context, insights necessary for the accurate interpretation of the narrative may be lost, underscoring the limitations of conveying complex messages through short-form video.

Moreover, activism should transcend merely representing or describing societal inequalities by addressing cultural, economic, and political power structures through direct actions (Desai, 2017). However, video activism in online environments faces a significant challenge: videos often lose their power to spur actual action on the ground. Once uploaded to social media platforms, videos can be stripped of their original context. Unless videos explicitly incorporate calls to action within their content, they tend to disconnect from practical steps for viewer engagement outside the platform (Askanius, 2014). Regarding "Escape", while it effectively promotes the four key elements that drive a social movement advocating for museum decolonization and restitution, the campaign's reach is confined to the Chinese community on online platforms. Decolonization and the restitution process inherently require collaborative efforts from multiple international entities, at minimum involving China and the countries of the Western museums housing plundered artifacts. All three episodes are narrated in Chinese without English subtitles. Consequently, this significant advocacy effort remains largely inaccessible to non-Chinese speaking audiences, limiting its potential to galvanize broader international support for the decolonization of museums.

Furthermore, the campaign #PersonificationOfArtifacts inspired by "Escape," with creators dressing up as artifacts, often emphasizes costume and makeup over deeper engagement with the artifacts' provenance. While this trend reflects the series' cultural reach, it can sometimes shift attention away from the original decolonial message. As Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us in "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," meaningful decolonization involves material action and structural change, not just symbolic gestures. Their caution highlights the importance of grounding such creative expressions in historical context to ensure the message remains aligned with decolonial aims.

Conclusion

The "Escape" video series has not only become a viral sensation but has also inspired a social movement toward the decolonization of museums and the restitution of looted artifacts. In just 16 minutes, the series has successfully utilized social media to reach a wide audience. It has fostered a sense of collective identity among viewers while building awareness and emotional connections to the issue of heritage restitution.

However, challenges remain in translating this online enthusiasm into sustained, tangible action. To address this gap, future initiatives could foster collaborative partnerships between content creators, museum professionals, educators, and activist groups. For example, museums and cultural institutions might partner with influential content creators to produce follow-up educational material that enhances viewers' understanding of artifact provenance and colonial histories. International collaborations could specifically focus on illuminating the historical pathways through which artifacts were removed from China, bringing attention to the often-overlooked narratives of colonial exploitation in 20th-century China.

In sum, the "Escape" videos demonstrate the potential of short videos in public pedagogy and their role in driving social movement. The storytelling strengths observed could be applied to other forms of activism. Emotionally compelling, accessible narratives that translate abstract issues into relatable, personal stories paired with effective social media strategies can shift viewers from passive consumption to active participation. Ultimately, harnessing the power of storytelling and digital media not only enriches public discourse but also paves the way for meaningful and sustained social transformation.

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