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# Culture, Community, and the WeChat Platform in a Time of Crisis

By Jinglin Lu

**Abstract:** Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, museums have been considered crucial institutions for the preservation and transmission of Chinese culture, civilization, and history. As social and political environments change, the ways that museums support their audiences also transform. Recently, as museums in China reopen after months of closure due to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, museum directors find themselves deluged with too much information and too many concerns about the post-Covid world to make informed decisions about how use online platforms. This article offers suggestions about how Chinese museums can use WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China, during and after Covid-19. It focuses on how WeChat offers opportunities for museums to foster equal participation in the museum, develop engaging programs, and make collection resources more accessible. The hope is to reimagine Chinese museums to meet the needs of audiences in the post-Covid world.

**Keywords:** *WeChat, public engagement, social media strategies, COVID-19 and museums*

As museums in China are gradually reopening after months of closure due to the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, museum directors find themselves deluged with too much information and too many concerns about the post-Covid world to make informed decisions. How can museums keep supporting their audiences during this hard time? How can museums use online platforms to keep serving the public? And, what do communities expect from museums through online interactions? In response to these questions, I aim to review the topics of culture, community, and online platforms related to museums in China. In addition, I will give some possible suggestions about how Chinese museums can use the WeChat platform during and after Covid-19.

Museums are crucial institutions for the preservation and transmission of human culture, civilization, and history. They bridge the past, the present, and the future. In recent years, “museum fever,” has become a highlight of China’s rapid socio-economic development. According to data released by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage in China, as of April 2019, there were 5354 museums nationwide. Of this total, 3766 are state-owned, and 1398 are privately owned. As a whole, state-owned museums are the majority of museums in China, as they account for more than 70% of the total.<sup>i</sup>

In 2008, the aforementioned administration implemented the free admission policy for all state-owned museums and memorial halls.<sup>ii</sup> This policy demonstrates how the state feels that it is necessary to meet the growing spiritual and cultural needs of the people. It is partly because of the state’s economic support that these museums survived the Covid-19 pandemic. The situation in China contrasts with other countries like the United States where, according to the American Alliance of Museum’s data, 33% of museums are likely to close by fall 2021 due to the

economic pressure caused by the pandemic.<sup>iii</sup> All of these statistics have raised global awareness about the importance of adapting museums to online platforms.

Since the 2010s, China has entered a digital era in which information and communications technologies play a prominent role in almost every aspect of Chinese citizens' lives.<sup>iv</sup> The government proposed a new term "Internet +" in 2020 that helps institutions like museums to accelerate their recovery from Covid-19 by focusing on internet-based programming.<sup>v</sup> Nanjing University professor Yunhao He said that,

"Everyone is talking about 'Internet + Something else,' but I think that the 'something else' in the phrase is the most important. The emphasis is on the context... Since the internet is a technology, the real focus needs to be on how to achieve value by showing content of the museum and its exhibitions."<sup>vi</sup>

One important means through which museums can develop their internet presence is social media. Among social media applications, Tencent's WeChat is the most-used app in the Chinese digital communication landscape.<sup>vii</sup> WeChat provides users a seamless connection to a one-stop cybernetic space and is equipped with diverse services such as instant messaging, shopping, and blogging. It is a medium to interact, exchange, and share among Chinese netizens. It has the advantages of fast, broad coverage and low operating costs. WeChat is also a timely communication tool with strong interactions and high intimacy between its users.

One of WeChat's major functions is the public account. In WeChat, the public account allows both institutions and individuals to share articles and other information to their subscribers in a social media feed format. According to the 2019 data released by Jing Travel, among the 945 million WeChat monthly active users, more than 80% of them follow public accounts.<sup>viii</sup> Furthermore, it is common for people to follow the public accounts of institutions that they like, so that they can keep up with their latest news.

In the contexts of "Internet + Museum," and the growing influence of WeChat, museums need to more thoroughly consider the possibilities for using WeChat public accounts to disseminate information. Since 2012, some museums in China have actively explored WeChat platforms for education and promotion. The National Museum of China (Beijing) was the first museum to open its official WeChat public platform in 2012.<sup>ix</sup> Since then, other major museums have opened their own official WeChat public accounts. At present, the Palace Museum (Beijing) and the Dunhuang Museum are leading institutions that use WeChat for educational and promotional purposes.

However, the general trend in museums using WeChat public accounts remains immature. In comparison to public accounts that publish daily news, humorous stories, and short fiction, these museum public accounts fall short of attracting attention from the general public outside the art field. In addition, when audiences visit museums in smaller urban areas, such as those in a third-tier city,<sup>x</sup> it is usually hard for them to find any information about these museums online. These smaller local museums have rarely established or operated WeChat public accounts.

For public museums, WeChat has advantages over other forms of media. Many museums develop their own applications that have similar functions, but need to be downloaded separately from the app store. These apps require large development and maintenance costs.<sup>xi</sup> Most visitors do not download cell phone software specifically for one-time visits, so the user rates are also low. For example, as one of the biggest museums in China, the Shanghai Museum launched its own application, but it has received a low user rating of two points.<sup>xii</sup> Many of the reviews in the comment section discuss the complicated registration process, slow running speed, and the limited information available through the application.

In contrast, WeChat public accounts are free to make and do not require visitors to download a separate app. WeChat public accounts are relatively simple to build, easy to operate, have low development costs, and have more comprehensive plug-in features. It is also easier for the viewers to share the museum's content to their friends. These advantages make it both suitable for museums and convenient for visitors.

Through the WeChat public account platform, museums can display basic information about their institution, such as visiting instructions, tour information, and ticketing information. This helps facilitate the audience's visit prior to their arrival to the physical museum. It also reduces the pressure on museum professionals to personally provide visitors with this information.

However, museums must also maintain that they convey information clearly, and that means that the public account's interface must be accessible and intuitive. Each section and subsection of the account's menu bar needs to relay its characteristics to the audience. This means that the name of each section needs to be concise. A catchy section header could also attract the audience's attention. Finally, the sub-sections within each menu section should have a unified classification standard.

One of the primary functions of museums is to educate. According to the American Alliance of Museums' 1992 report *Excellence and Equity*, "...the public dimensions of museums lead them to perform the public service of education—a term that in its broadest sense includes exploration, study, observation, critical thinking, contemplation, and dialogue."<sup>xiii</sup> The means of museum education are diverse and flexible, and the effects of museum education are subtle and pervasive. The way that the WeChat public account engages audiences is compatible with the means and effects of museum education.

With the number of visitors to museums increasing, audience demands to know about museum exhibitions and collections will also increase, and the museum's educational staff will become overwhelmed. Although museums often provide interpretive materials such as labels and gallery guides to aid visitors, it can still be difficult for some visitors to engage with the museum in these ways. As the need to address this issue increases, personalized programs, such as museum tour guide services, become short supply. To help meet these demands, the WeChat public account's interface offers different functions such as browse, guide, feedback, etc., that museums can use to offer detailed classifications and interpretations of the museum's collection and exhibitions.

The Big Bell Temple Museum, famous for its collection of big bells, in Beijing serves as a good example of a museum using WeChat for this purpose. Their WeChat public account offers an online panoramic virtual exhibition hall. Through this program, visitors can browse through several of the museum's ancient bells, including the Pailin Temple Bell, the Crane Bell, and the Tanzhe Temple Bell, one by one, in real scenes. They also have audio information to which users can listen by clicking on the individual bells.

A possible addition to this program would be to include a "Guided Tour" section that the visitors can read at their leisure. This could provide an opportunity for the visitor to deviate from the museum's traditional script, which is often limited by imposed curatorial interpretations of the objects, and draw their own conclusions about the works. A "Guided Tour" section could include the background of a certain artwork and raise questions that might help the audience to think independently about the object. This could become a precious learning experience for the visitor and at the same time give the audience a chance to interpret the objects for themselves. This would correlate with Hilde Hein's suggestion that, "the [museum's] objective is to induce

museum visitors to be guided by the experience rather than a prescriptive label.”<sup>xiv</sup> Having a social media program dedicated to this type of free-thinking would relinquish intellectual control of the artworks from the museum to the visitors.

Museums can publish articles on their WeChat public account to convey even more information to their audiences. However, the user groups engaging with WeChat public accounts do not passively receive information, instead, they have their own choices in whether or not to follow and view the public account’s content. The audience’s interests primarily determine their choices; therefore, the audience will choose to continuously follow the content if they like it, but avoid and ignore the content if it does not match their preferences. Thus, in the process of branding and promoting a museum’s WeChat public account, it is important to consider whether the content meets the audience’s interests.

The articles published on the WeChat public accounts are usually both visual and textual, so playful writing styles and interesting dynamic pictures can help increase the impact of an article. Articles can also incorporate audio, video, and interactive elements to increase views. For example, a comment section allows audiences to write down their thoughts and suggestions to the museum. Perpetual feedback from visitors will help the museum to determine the effectiveness of its exhibitions and digital programs.

The Palace Museum’s WeChat public account exemplifies how a museum should consider both its audience’s interests and the effects of multimedia when creating articles. In September, 2013, after the Palace Museum opened its official “Palace Museum Taobao” public account on WeChat, the museum’s early articles were serious, and only introduced the history of the museum in an academic tone. This lasted until August 1st, 2014, when the museum published an article called “Yongzheng: I think I am very cute.”<sup>xv</sup> The article included classic depictions of



the emperor that fans of the museum turned into GIFs and memes, including Yongzheng walking, washing his feet in a river, fighting with tigers, playing with monkeys, and fishing. The Yongzheng WeChat emoji package's cover picture "cute emperor" became a huge hit, and netizens continued to create and disseminate their own Yongzheng-inspired images. The average viewing count before this article was in the thousands, however, this article about Yongzheng has reached a hundred thousand views

Since this article about Yongzheng, the Palace Museum has consistently posted articles about other emperors. This has helped to popularize the museum, and the history that the museum teaches. In this way, the Palace Museum established a closer relationship with the public, who in turn, came to understand better the value of the museum as an educational institution.

To continue to attract the audience's attention, and to meet the needs of its diverse audiences, the Palace Museum started to make calculated decisions regarding its official public account. The Palace Museum created its "micro-Palace" WeChat account to help audiences familiarize themselves with the culture of the Palace and learn about objects in its collection. The museum has also continued to promote its "Palace Museum Taobao" account to maintain its sales platform. These different WeChat public accounts have been in operation for a long time and now have a wide fan base. They serve as the virtual window into the Palace Museum. Thus, other museums can draw inspiration from the Palace Museum's use of WeChat to connect with their own audiences.

Museums in China must pay attention to the use of WeChat as it becomes an extension of the museum. Not only will WeChat help museums meet the public's desire to continue learning, but it will also allow museums to continue to develop their own digital education

operations. Through WeChat, museums can therefore change from their traditional model to one responsive to the digital era that is more flexible, accessible, and equitable. The use of the WeChat public platform can break through the constraints of time and space to show the museum's message to the public anytime and anywhere.

In recent years, museums are taking a more "visitor-centered" approach to their functions. The Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO Ernesto Ottone stated that, "museums are more than just places where humanity's heritage is preserved and promoted. They are also key spaces of education, inspiration, and dialogue. At a time when billions of people around the world are separated from one another, museums can bring us together."<sup>xvi</sup> During the pandemic, Chinese museums can use WeChat's public account function to stimulate the public's interest, achieve an increase in their audience, and meet the public's demand for information. The pandemic has accelerated the digitization of museums, raising expectations about the shape and service content of museums in the future. Will the concept of the museum of the future change in this wave of digitization? A museum is a complex system, but it seems that new technologies can contribute to making the system work better.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>ii</sup> “The Bureau of Cultural Heritage Issued a Notice on the Free Opening of Museums and Memorials Nationwide, [*wen wu ju fa bu guan yu quan guo bo wu guan ji nian guan mian fei kai fang tong zhi*],” The Central People’s Government of the People’s Republic of China, Proclamation No. 2, January 23, 2008, [http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2008-02/01/content\\_877540.htm](http://www.gov.cn/gzdt/2008-02/01/content_877540.htm).
- <sup>iii</sup> American Alliance of Museums, “United States May Lose One-Third of All Museums, New Survey Shows,” press release, July 22, 2020, <https://www.aam-us.org/2020/07/22/united-states-may-lose-one-third-of-all-museums-new-survey-shows/>.
- <sup>iv</sup> For more on China’s digital age, see: Jonathan Woetzel, “How China Pressed Start on the Digital Age: Greater China,” McKinsey & Company, last modified on April 23, 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/cn/our-insights/our-insights/how-china-pressed-start-on-the-digital-age>.
- <sup>v</sup> Bo Pang, “Digital Technology Helps the Tourism Industry to Speed up by Using ‘Internet +’, Bringing a New Kind of Travel Experience, [*shu zi ke ji zhu li lv you ye jia kuai fu su hu lian wang jia, dai lai chu you xin ti yan*],” The State Council, The People’s Republic of China, *People’s Daily*, last modified on March 24, 2021, [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-03/24/content\\_5595239.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-03/24/content_5595239.htm).
- <sup>vi</sup> Xue Xie, “Let’s Hear What the Expert Says about Museums in the Post-Covid Period, [*‘hou yi qing shi dai’ de wen bo guan ting ting zhuan jia zen me shuo*],” *zhong guo nan jing hong se zai xian*, last modified on June 21, 2020, <https://www.rednanjing.cn/article/2001.html>.
- <sup>vii</sup> Rocco, “Importance of WeChat in Chinese Consumer’s Life. Chinese Social Media,” *China Social Media*, last modified on May 4, 2017, <https://chinasocialmedia.net/wechat-in-chinese-consumers-life/>.
- <sup>viii</sup> Peter Huang and Richard Whittington, “Decoded: WeChat Official Accounts for Cultural Destinations,” *Jing Travel*, last modified on May 11, 2017, <https://jingculturecommerce.com/decoded-wechat-official-accounts-service-account/>.
- <sup>ix</sup> Yuan Li, “A Guide to Online Exhibitions in China, [*Na xie “yun zhan lan” “gan huo” zui duo? Xian shang kan zhan you men dao*],” *China.org.cn*, last modified on April 16, 2020, [http://iot.china.com.cn/content/2020-04/16/content\\_41124862.html](http://iot.china.com.cn/content/2020-04/16/content_41124862.html).
- <sup>x</sup> This is an unofficial system that classifies Chinese cities hierarchically according to their commercial, medical, educational etc. development in mainland China. For more about the system, see: Dorcas Wong, “China’s City-Tier Classification: How Does It Work?” *China Briefing*, last modified on February 7, 2019, <https://www.china-briefing.com/news/chinas-city-tier-classification-defined/>.
- <sup>xi</sup> Artyom Dogtiev, “App Development Cost,” *Business of Apps*, last modified on March 26, 2021, <https://www.businessofapps.com/app-developers/research/app-development-cost/>.
- <sup>xii</sup> For more about the App, see “Shang Hai Museum,” *App Store*, accessed on April 28, 2021, <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/%E4%B8%8A%E6%B5%B7%E5%8D%9A%E7%89%A9%E9%A6%86-%E5%8D%9A-%E8%89%BA/id1227430180>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*, 2008 ed. (Washington D.C.: The American Alliance of Museums, 1992), 9.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Hilde Hein, “Looking at Museums from a Feminist Perspective,” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Museums*, ed. Amy K. Levin, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 60.
- <sup>xv</sup> Yongzheng is the third emperor (reigned 1722–35) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911/12), during whose rule the administration was consolidated and power became concentrated to the emperor; Wenying Ma, “Yongzheng: I Think I am Very Cute, [*Yong Zheng: gan jue zi ji ‘meng meng da’*],” *Chinadaily.com.cn*, last modified on August 8, 2014, [https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201408/08/WS5b2cb21fa3103349141de1e3\\_1.html](https://language.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201408/08/WS5b2cb21fa3103349141de1e3_1.html).
- <sup>xvi</sup> “Museums Facing COVID-19 Challenges Remain Engaged with Communities,” *UNESCO*, last modified on April 4, 2020, <https://en.unesco.org/news/museums-facing-covid-19-challenges-remain-engaged-communities>.

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