

Heritage and Ontological Security: A Mirror for the Future

—Minutes of the Cambridge Heritage Research Symposium

By Huidi Ma

(12 May 2026)

The 26th Cambridge Heritage Symposium, held under the theme Heritage and Ontological Security, was jointly organized by the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre and the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures. It took place on 8-9 May 2026 in the McDonald Institute building on the Downing Site of the University of Cambridge. About sixty scholars and researchers from different countries attended the symposium. Twenty scholars in heritage studies, archaeology, and cultural anthropology presented completed or ongoing research, and twelve posters were displayed. The speakers addressed the symposium theme from multiple perspectives and discussed the history, situated realities, and lived presence of heritage and ontological security. The symposium was marked by thematic diversity, cross-cultural exchange, interdisciplinary engagement, and methodological openness.

1. Continuity and Development of Academic Thought

About seventy percent of the speakers drew substantially on the theory of ontological security proposed by the British sociologist Anthony Giddens. This theory was formally published in 1991 and remains highly forward-looking. Ontological security, which may also be understood as existential security or a basic sense of security in being, refers to an individual's fundamental trust in the continuity, consistency, and predictability of self-identity and the surrounding social environment. It differs from philosophical discussions of ontology, while retaining certain points of connection with them.

The concept of ontological security reminds us that human beings are shaped through routine, habit, and practice. Its theoretical value lies in the psychological defense it offers to individuals and communities, enabling them to live without constant vigilance. The symposium's focus on this issue has strong contemporary significance. It helps explain heritage protection in conflict, international conventions, post-disaster reconstruction, and the contemporary life of communities. Human society now faces multiple challenges, including climate change, disruptive technological development, increasing uncertainty under globalization, rapid changes in production and everyday life, and information overload of uneven quality. These pressures are weakening traditional sources of ontological security. The discussion of this theme generated broad understanding and resonance among participants, demonstrating the foresight, practical relevance, and field-oriented engagement of Cambridge heritage studies.

2. Thematic Diversity, Openness, and Inclusiveness

Most participants had academic backgrounds in archaeology, anthropology, or heritage studies. The majority had completed doctoral training or were engaged in related research projects. Over two days, seven panels addressed a broad range of topics, with particular attention to art, war sites, historical memory, and methods in heritage research. Twenty doctoral researchers introduced their research projects, and two keynote presentations were also delivered.

The speakers examined war-related heritage from different perspectives. These included the traumatic memory of comfort women, the occupation of Lushun Port more than a century ago, the Nanjing Massacre, the Korean War, archaeological research on First and Second World War remains in Palau, representations of war in artistic works, reconsideration of historical memory from the Yugoslav period, the deep pain caused by wartime destruction of heritage, cultural wounds left by the former Soviet period, and concerns about the commercialization of heritage. Other themes included the conservation of Sanxingdui, the role of

football heritage in social connection, social identity, and the affirmation of self-worth, as well as anthropological research tools and methods.

Dr. Ross, Director of the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre, interpreted the resilience, openness, and justice-oriented dimensions of heritage research through the analysis of artistic works. The twelve posters presented conceptual frameworks by scholars and doctoral researchers from Italy, Japan, India, China, Kenya, and other countries. Their topics covered art, craft, natural ecology, and the safeguarding of living heritage.

3. Reconsidering Anthropological Tools and Methods

This theme emphasized circulation, sensory experience, hybridity, and vulnerability in heritage development and protection. The speaker argued that traditional Environmental Impact Assessment and Heritage Impact Assessment methods have limitations because they often privilege quantification or static description. A four-step approach was therefore proposed.

The first step is to map relational networks, with attention extending beyond inventories of assets. The second step is to map Actor-Networks and identify the relationships of dependence within an ecosystem. A key question deserves attention: once an ecological supply chain is broken, can memory continue to survive? The third step is to record a Sensory Baseline. On the basis of sensory epistemology, visual drawings alone are insufficient. Sound, smell, and touch should also be included so that a sensory threshold can be established. It is also necessary to identify Keystone Actors within the system. Their disappearance may cause systemic collapse and can be more destructive than the demolition of a building. The fourth step is to assess metabolic interruption rather than physical damage. The purpose is to provide early warning of Ecological Gentrification, where a space appears to resemble heritage while its internal living networks have been replaced. This research is highly specialized and offers significant inspiration for interdisciplinary research pathways.

4. Returning to the Essence of the Symposium and Upholding Rational Questioning

The symposium adhered closely to the academic core of the symposium tradition. It emphasized professional depth, interaction, a focused scale, sustained inquiry, and freedom from excessive ceremony. The opening session consisted only of a brief five-minute welcome by Dr. Liliana, Executive Director of the Heritage Research Centre. The agenda avoided formalism and upheld academic equality.

Doctoral students from the University of Cambridge took turns chairing sessions. They guided questions, stimulated debate, and summarized key issues. The meeting also adopted a mechanism of equal time for teachers and students, with strict intervention when presentations exceeded the allotted time. This effectively upheld the tradition of criticism and questioning that began in ancient Greece, flourished in the Middle Ages, and was carried forward within the British educational tradition. Vigorous discussion ran through the symposium. In both panel presentations and poster sessions, questions and responses were closely connected. The closing session also departed from a one-way summary format. Experts and early-career faculty jointly guided participants in raising questions, making comments, and drawing conclusions, thereby fully incorporating the intellectual outcomes of the meeting.

5. The Academic Landscape of the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre

Although the Cambridge Heritage Research Centre has been established for only twenty-six years, it has already become deeply involved in global and British heritage policy-making and in the construction of assessment systems for heritage protection. Its academic influence should not be underestimated. The new project led by Dr. Ross, Heritage Ecosystems, is of pioneering significance. This research focuses on the interaction between people and place and seeks to develop a Heritage Ecosystems Impact Assessment tool. Its aim is to quantify the deeper role of environments in constructing and sustaining community identity.

Against this background, my poster, *The Decline of Living Heritage and Ontological Security: Open-Air Markets as Relational Spaces, An Examination of the Decline of Open-Air Markets in China*, received attention and was displayed at the symposium. The topic appears to resonate with the Centre's newly launched project. It reflects the alignment of micro-level research with macro-level questions and also reflects the inclusive academic tradition of the University of Cambridge.

6. Academic Mission and Responsibility

Cambridge professors have long valued substantive achievement and avoid empty titles. There were not many scholars with the title of professor at this symposium. Only four appeared on the meeting list, and I was honored to be among them. This prompted many reflections. In the final session of the symposium, I therefore decided to stand up and speak. After expressing my gratitude to the organizers, I shared what I had learned and my own reflections.

I stated that ontology and security could be understood as two independent concepts. The safety of individuals, communities, nations, and the world ultimately rests on the morality, responsibility, inclusiveness, and connectedness of each individual. Only by emphasizing the subjectivity and agency of individuals can a sense of security take root. Heritage runs through history, the present, and the future, and it is characterized by mobility. The highest value of heritage lies in taking history as a mirror. The truth, goodness, and beauty we practice today constitute precious heritage for the future. I especially appreciated the research of Dr. Nina, a scholar from Slovenia. Her work showed a remarkable example. Even under the extensive influence of the Soviet system, the Slovenian people preserved solidarity, kindness, and social connection, and jointly assumed responsibility for national security. The essence of heritage extends beyond a quiet investigation of the past. It provides a spiritual support linking the present and the future.

These remarks unexpectedly resonated with colleagues present and received empathetic applause. After the meeting, Dr. Nina sent me an email to express her thanks. She said that this interpretation of the essence of heritage was highly significant for the doctoral dissertation she was completing.

Concluding Reflections

The University of Cambridge was founded in 1209. Its Latin motto, *Hinc lucem et pocula sacra*, carries meanings that extend beyond enlightenment and wisdom. In my understanding, the deeper meaning of this motto is that education has a sacred vocation and illuminates humanity's devout pursuit of truth. Through this interdisciplinary symposium, I witnessed the university spirit of Cambridge in its pursuit of truth and cultivation of moral character. I also deepened my understanding of the value of heritage. Heritage is not only a physical space that carries human history. It is also a spiritual medium that evolves through historical trial, correction, reflection, and survival. Both grand historical narratives and the organic connections of micro-level systems are inseparable from the ontological security sustained by peace, social resilience, and constructive human interaction.

1. The Relationship Between Heritage and Ontological Security

Giddens's concept of ontological security depends on stable spatial and temporal coordinates in order to resist the fragmentation and dispersion of existence. Heritage embodies time. It transforms abstract linear time into tangible space, participatory practice, and shared memory. It connects the flowing present with a coherent past, thereby helping human beings avoid falling into a condition without foundation under social change and technological iteration.

2. Relational Ontology and the Reconstruction of Heritage Value

Traditional heritage studies often treat heritage as an object known by a human subject. The symposium's discussion of Actor-Networks, Sensory Baselines, and metabolic interruption points to another understanding: heritage is a relational assemblage of people, things, places, and contexts. The disappearance of an old open-air market removes more than a trading space. It severs chains of trust between buyers and

sellers, production and distribution links between city and countryside, and intergenerational transmission of everyday experience. The significance of war sites also lies in enabling different groups to confirm, within shared narratives of memory, the relational contract that guides how people should live together. From this perspective, the ontological security function of heritage lies in sustaining the foundations of human beings as relational beings. People are not isolated individuals; their sense of security derives from the capacity to maintain stable connections with others, with history, and with nature.

3. Heritage Practice Oriented Toward an Ethics of Responsibility for the Future

Heritage practice has a prospective orientation. When we look at war, art, cities, ecology, and architecture from the perspective of heritage, we are preserving room for future choice. If all old markets are demolished, all contested historical memories are erased, and all original ecologies are replaced, people in the future will lose a clear understanding of how we once lived, what mistakes we made, and what possibilities we once possessed. Such loss deprives humanity of the capacity to locate itself within history. This gives heritage a deep ethical extension in relation to responsibility toward future others, as discussed in Hans Jonas's *The Imperative of Responsibility*.

Taking history as a mirror does not mean repeating the past. It means allowing the past to become a reserve of possibilities for the future. The University of Cambridge has existed for more than eight hundred years without walls, yet its spiritual tradition has not been lost. British markets have survived for nearly a millennium because they have continually responded to people's connection with nature, the ordinary vitality of daily life, and the protection of existential certainty. Britain's reflection on its colonial plunder allows the afterglow of the empire on which the sun once never set to remain visible. The deeper meaning of heritage is to leave a mirror for the future through which people may consider how human beings ought to exist.

Appendix. Abstract and Poster

The Decline of Living Heritage and Ontological Security: Open-Air Markets as Relational Spaces

An Examination of the Decline of Open-Air Markets in China

Huidi Ma

Abstract. The decline of traditional street markets marks a fundamental transformation of everyday life in China's urbanization process. Beyond a shift in commercial form, it undermines the foundations of urban ontological security embedded in routine social practices. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's theory of modernity, this paper conceptualizes street markets as relational spaces that sustain everyday routines, embodied trust, and localized social interaction, and examines how their systematic deconstruction generates existential anxiety within the urban fabric.

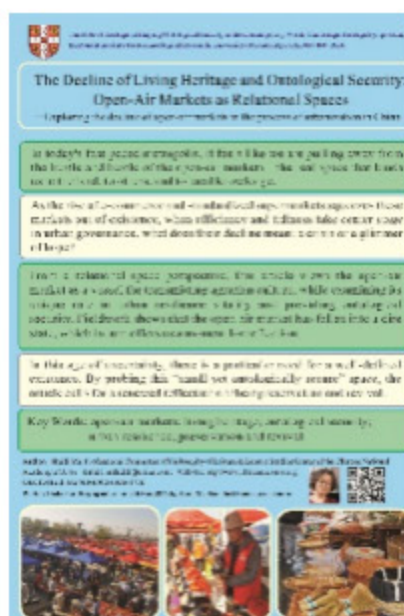
The study argues that spatial relations are grounded in long-term cultural bonds of stability, trust, and security, formed through repeated human-place interactions. The erosion of these relations is driven by two intertwined forces: technological capital and administrative governance. Fresh-food e-commerce platforms and chain supermarkets promote delocalized consumption models that strip everyday life of social interaction, local knowledge, and ecological connection. Simultaneously, administrative discourse stigmatizes street markets as dirty, chaotic, and substandard, while spatial interventions dismantle informal economies and urban-rural reciprocity networks. Together, these forces accelerate the disappearance of street markets as living heritage embedded in daily practice.

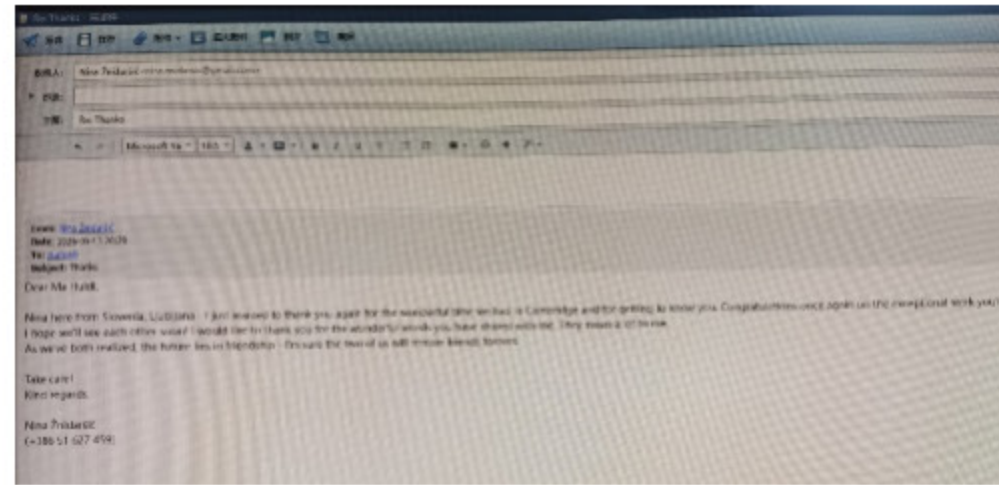
This process weakens ontological security, understood by Giddens as reliance on the continuity and predictability of daily routines, thereby producing feelings of rootlessness and pervasive existential anxiety. The temporary resurgence of street markets during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed their latent community resilience and affective value in moments of crisis.

The paper concludes that the decline of open-air markets reflects both insufficient recognition of heritage value and a neglect of ontological security in urban policy. By clarifying the intrinsic link between living heritage and ontological security, this study highlights the importance of preserving and reconstructing relational spaces, offering theoretical insight and practical implications for balancing modernization with social cohesion and psychological stability. Protecting street markets ultimately means preserving collective historical memory and shared sites of ontological security.

Keywords: open-air markets; living heritage; relational space; ontological security; urbanization; existential anxiety

Poster





Images above, from left to right: the poster submitted to the symposium, the poster display area, and a photograph with Dr. Nina from Slovenia. The image below shows the email Dr. Nina sent after the symposium.

Nina here from Slovenia, Ljubljana. I just wanted to thank you again for the wonderful time we had in Cambridge and for getting to know you. Congratulations once again on the exceptional work you are doing. I hope we will see each other soon. I would like to thank you for the wonderful words you have shared with me. They mean a lot to me. As we have both realized, the future lies in friendship. I am sure the two of us will remain friends forever.

Postscript

1. The Traditional Strength and Social Functions of British Markets and Fairs

After the symposium, I visited and observed markets in London, Cambridge, and several small towns along the coast of East Anglia. My strongest impression was that markets in Britain have a long history, with some origins traceable to nearly a thousand years ago. Borough Market near the London Eye, for example, can be traced to the eleventh century. Despite rapid industrialization and urbanization, most markets have been preserved. In spatial terms, they are often located in central urban squares, especially in small towns. This centered urban arrangement preserves a channel of connection between people and nature, facilitates urban life, integrates urban and rural cultural contexts, shortens production and distribution chains, and helps ensure the freshness of food. Based on observations of more than ten markets, British markets show a high level of management. They reflect humanistic care for both market participants and the daily needs of citizens. The markets themselves have become living urban cultural heritage and historical landscapes, as well as important channels for contemporary economic development and employment, although I did not directly collect relevant statistical data.

2. Internationalization and Cultural Exchange in Markets

British markets are highly internationalized. In both metropolises and small towns, food stalls from China, Korea, Japan, India, Thailand, Turkey, Mexico, Arab countries, and other places can be found. This reflects the importance of food as a pathway for cultural transmission. In the square in front of King's College, Cambridge, I observed a Chinese jianbing stall from Shandong. The vendor mentioned that local acceptance was high because people considered the food affordable, nutritious, and good value. In the square in front of Norwich City Hall, a Hunan-born vendor who had operated there for twenty years sold Chinese fried rice, spicy diced chicken, sweet and sour pork, and other dishes that were popular with local people. Although modern supermarkets with complete product lines are nearby, local residents still prefer the distinct everyday atmosphere of market food. Many people have established long-term trust with vendors, and food has become a window for understanding Chinese culture. The ten-year operation of the Shandong jianbing vendor and the twenty-year operation of the Hunan vendor show that quality assurance, distinctive taste, genuine value, and honest dealing form the basis for mutual trust and social connection. This also confirms the social value of markets as zones of cross-cultural contact and public service.

3. British Historical Heritage and the Living Archive

Britain may not be an ancient civilization in the conventional sense, yet it is one of the most advanced countries in terms of historical remains, cultural collections, and conservation systems. The British Museum holds precious cultural objects from ancient Egypt, ancient Greece, Mesopotamia, ancient China, ancient India, and many other parts of the world. Even the seats once used by thinkers such as Marx and Saint-Simon have been preserved. Although issues concerning the ownership of cultural objects collected under colonial conditions remain controversial, the scale of its collections and its conservation system are among the world's most significant. The British Library preserves written records dating back three thousand years, the First Folio of Shakespeare, early editions of the Bible, early musical scores, displays of recent technological achievements, and more than one hundred million items. Readers can access the day's newspapers, blogs, videos, and other materials. Even traces of the present are being recorded. For example, the Money Gallery preserves coins from many countries over the past century. This practice of immediately incorporating the present into heritage archives reflects a strong consciousness of heritage continuity.

Libraries, museums, large parks, and similar public spaces are almost all open free of charge. Continuous flows of domestic and foreign visitors gain broad exposure and experience diverse cultural heritage. The Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, the Polar Museum, and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology of the University of Cambridge are all located on the Downing Site and are free to visit. Although they are not vast in scale, they are highly professional and effective for public education. Only at the geological museum did I learn that Darwin was not only the founder of the theory of biological evolution, but also a founder of geological science.

4. The University of Cambridge as a Model of the Coexistence of Cultural Heritage and Educational Spirit

The University of Cambridge itself is an outstanding example of cultural heritage protection in Britain. Cambridge's first college was established in the early thirteenth century, in 1209. Since then, thirty-one colleges have been founded, including King's College, Trinity College, St John's College, Clare College, and Downing College. The university has trained great scientists such as Newton, Darwin, and Hawking, as well as more than one hundred Nobel laureates. The tradition of college autonomy continues to this day. All historical buildings are carefully maintained, and the campus is filled with old trees and lawns, creating an atmosphere that is ancient, solemn, and dignified. The university has a well-preserved and extensive library system, as well as a modern bookshop that has existed for 150 years. A sense of cultural solemnity permeates daily life. Inside King's College, by the River Cam, stands a stone inscription of lines from Xu Zhimo's poem *Second Farewell to Cambridge*. Punting on the River Cam, the boat race with the University of Oxford, and encouragement for students to participate in social service all continually reshape the spirit and ideas of the university. Cultural heritage here renews itself through time, while the spiritual tradition continues to grow brighter.

British universities traditionally had no enclosing walls. With the development of tourism, however, many campuses now adopt limited visiting hours. May is the examination or graduation season for students, and most colleges display signs stating that entry is not permitted. King's College opens only limited areas to visitors.

5. Naturalist Traditions and the Distinctiveness of Urban and Rural Planning

Britain is one of the birthplaces of Romantic literature and naturalist writing. In the eighteenth century, Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, published in 1789, recorded rural ecology in epistolary form and founded the British tradition of nature writing. In the same period, William Wordsworth, as a Romantic poet, regarded nature as a moral teacher and viewed it as a force for healing the mind. At the end of the nineteenth century, Ebenezer Howard, a social reformer and master of urban planning, published *Garden Cities of To-morrow* and proposed the Town-Country Magnet, which became a classic program in

modern urban planning. Today, Kew Gardens has advanced the idea that the future of the world is botany. These ideas have shaped a pervasive pastoral landscape and a dual heritage of nature and culture.

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is among the world's largest botanical gardens, with exceptional richness of species and seed conservation. There, large trees, grasses, wildflowers, and even dead wood are recorded and protected without hierarchical distinction. Although Kew is a national scientific conservation institution, it also expresses values of freedom, equality, and fraternity. Even London, a modern metropolis, contains abundant natural space, including Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens, and St James's Park around Buckingham Palace, as well as community green spaces distributed throughout the city.

6. Observations on Ageing and Social Participation in Britain

During my visits and observations, I also paid attention to ageing in Britain. Available data indicate that in 2019 the population aged 65 and above in the United Kingdom was about 12.3 million, accounting for 19 percent of the total population, and is expected to reach 24 percent, or about 17.41 million people, by 2043. In 2021, 97.3 percent of people aged 65 and above in England and Wales lived in private households, and about 30 percent lived alone. From my conversations with older people, I sensed that British older adults have a strong sense of independence. Many participate in volunteer activities to support their physical and mental well-being while serving society. In front of Norwich City Hall, I met five older volunteers. The youngest was 72 and the oldest was 80, and they had been engaged in voluntary work for ten years.

In some forms of activity, there are similarities with older people in China. Markets serve both as social places and as places where knowledge is transmitted across generations. Britain's model of ageing at home and relying on community support is relatively mature. At the same time, this seemingly independent yet not isolated form of ageing society faces many difficulties. In 2018, the British government established the position of Minister for Loneliness to strengthen care and concern in this area. In a recent visit to the Isles of Scilly, Prince William focused on local medical care for older people and the upgrading of aged-care facilities, and pledged special support through the Royal Foundation. I believe that markets, as social capillaries, may become increasingly important. This has meaningful implications for decision-makers, administrators, investors, and researchers.

The above observations and experiences are limited and inevitably incomplete. Given the limits of my knowledge and capacity, partiality and insufficiency remain unavoidable.

Revised final draft, 25 May 2026