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Co-Creating Anthropology: Relational Knowledge and Collaborative Practice in China

Yujie Zhu and Fei Li

Within a global discipline still marked by uneven epistemic hierarchies, collaborations in Chinese anthropology provide a revealing lens for examining how knowledge can be produced relationally. This article analyses partnerships between Western and Chinese anthropologists from the 1990s to the 2020s to show how knowledge co-creation operates in practice. Using Nelson Graburn's long-term engagements in China as an ethnographic point of entry, it traces how collaborative relationships developed through shared fieldwork, mentorship, institutional exchanges, and co-authorship. These practices enabled Chinese scholars, including those working in minority regions, to pursue research agendas grounded in local histories, philosophical traditions, and socio-political conditions. Across domains such as heritage, museum studies, ethnic tourism, foodways, and art, co-created scholarship generated analytical questions that extend beyond the Chinese context. While structural asymmetries persist, the article argues that relational forms of knowledge production emerging from these collaborations broaden anthropology's conceptual repertoire and offer insights for rethinking collaborative practice in global anthropology.

Keywords: Co-creation; Chinese Anthropology; Collaborative Ethnography; Global Anthropology; Relational Knowledge

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of global knowledge production, anthropology still confronts the epistemic hierarchies that have shaped the discipline since its colonial formation. Despite sustained critique, Euro-American centres of theory-making continue to dominate, while Anglophone publication regimes often position non-

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Western contexts as sites of data extraction rather than sources of conceptual innovation (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Purcell 1998; Shohat and Stam 1994; Connell 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Mbembe 2016).¹ These hierarchies are not abstract. They take concrete form in the institutional, linguistic, and epistemic asymmetries that structured the revitalisation of Chinese anthropology after the 1980s, shaping what kinds of scholarship gained visibility, how knowledge travelled, and whose voices carried interpretive authority.

In response, organisations such as the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES) and the World Anthropological Union (WAU) have promoted visions of anthropology that move beyond the dominance of metropolitan centres and recognise multiple intellectual traditions within the discipline. IUAES, one of the largest global associations of anthropologists, has long provided an important platform for scholarly exchange across political and linguistic boundaries. Its congresses, such as the 2009 meeting in Kunming, have brought together Chinese scholars and international colleagues in ways rarely possible within national academic structures. Closely connected to these efforts is the WAU, which emerged from debates on ‘world anthropologies’ and seeks to foster dialogue among diverse anthropological traditions beyond Euro-American centres (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). These initiatives do not call for a wholesale disciplinary overhaul; rather, they emphasise recognising the plurality of intellectual traditions already shaping contemporary anthropology and creating institutional spaces in which they can engage one another.

Against this backdrop, co-creation has emerged as a methodological and epistemic practice that illuminates how collaborative knowledge-making can unfold under conditions of inequality (Edmundson and Haviland 2025). Co-creation is not a solution to disciplinary hierarchy, nor a normative ideal. Instead, it foregrounds the relational work through which theory-making becomes a shared endeavour, shaped by long-term companionship, multilingual dialogue, and the frictions of cross-cultural engagement. Yet we still lack empirical accounts of how such practices take shape within specific historical and institutional contexts.

China provides a particularly revealing site for examining these dynamics. Since the 1990s, rapid modernisation, university expansion, and state-supported investment in the social sciences created new possibilities for transnational exchange. At the same time, Chinese anthropology developed through a distinctive genealogy combining translation of Western social science with deep-rooted philosophical, historical, and ethnographic traditions (Zhu, Jin, and Graburn 2017). Persistent asymmetries—between coastal and inland universities, majority and minority regions, and global and local epistemologies—shaped who could participate in these exchanges and on what terms. As China pursued pathways of modernisation distinct from Euro-American trajectories, anthropologists confronted pressing questions: What kind of anthropology does China need? What forms of theory might emerge from Chinese histories, landscapes, and intellectual lineages? And how might these contributions reconfigure wider anthropological debates?

It is within this historically specific configuration that the collaborative work of Nelson Graburn—and of many Chinese and international scholars alongside him—becomes analytically revealing. Rather than serving as a transmitter of Western frameworks, Graburn's long-term partnerships in China exemplify how co-creation can enable scholars to articulate research agendas, theoretical concepts, and methodological innovations grounded in local epistemologies. His collaborations with institutions ranging from major coastal universities to minority-region colleges demonstrate how knowledge-making unfolds across uneven terrains of access, power, and linguistic mediation. In this sense, co-creation offers a lens for understanding how anthropology can cultivate more plural, relational, and context-sensitive modes of producing knowledge.

Nelson H. H. Graburn (1936–2025) has long been recognised as a key figure in the anthropology of tourism and heritage. Educated at the University of Chicago and later based at the University of California, Berkeley, he worked within an institutional environment that encouraged global intellectual exchange and interdisciplinary collaboration. Although he did not work primarily through Chinese-language scholarship, Graburn cultivated long-term relationships with Chinese anthropologists through field visits, joint conferences, editorial collaboration, and mentorship. Berkeley's longstanding connections with Asian studies and its openness to international scholarly exchange provided an important institutional platform that facilitated these engagements. Graburn's own intellectual trajectory—from early work on Indigenous peoples in the Arctic to later research on tourism, heritage, and cultural representation—also shaped his interest in China as a site where rapid social transformation and heritage politics created new possibilities for anthropological collaboration.

This article does not provide a biographical account of Graburn. Instead, it uses his collaborations as an ethnographic entry point into broader questions about epistemic authority, disciplinary transformation, and the practice of anthropology in a non-Western setting. Through the concept of co-creation, the article argues that Chinese anthropology—shaped by its own philosophical traditions, socio-political conditions, and historical trajectories—is not merely adopting global theory but actively reshaping it. These developments must be understood within the specific historical moment of China's intellectual opening from the 1990s to the 2020s, when new institutional networks made unprecedented forms of collaborative scholarship possible. Through these processes, co-creation in China has generated theoretical insights that extend beyond local concerns, contributing to the gradual diversification of epistemic authority within global anthropology.

Historical Context of Scholarly Exchange (1990s–2020)

The period from the 1990s to 2020 represents a pivotal moment in the anthropology of knowledge in China. Following the 'open-door' reforms of the late 1970s, the country entered an era marked by unprecedented flows of people, ideas, and

institutional partnerships. These developments formed part of broader state-led efforts to modernise the social sciences and humanities, efforts that were unevenly implemented across institutions and often accompanied by new forms of dependence on external academic models. From an anthropological perspective, what emerged was not simply an expansion of universities but the formation of a dynamic epistemic field in which global and local knowledge practices were continually negotiated, differentially circulated, and creatively reworked (Zhu 2024).

International collaborations flourished, supported by higher education reforms and by universities' strategic ambitions to 'catch up' with global academic standards (Marginson 2018; Zheng 2025). Yet as scholars of global cultural circulation such as Lisa Rofel (2007), Noel Salazar and Alan Smart (2011), and A. J. Mbembe (2016) remind us, circulation is always structured by inequality. Western institutions, languages, and publication regimes retained disproportionate epistemic authority, shaping what counted as legitimate theory and method. Chinese scholars were frequently positioned as translators or adapters of Western paradigms rather than as theorists in their own right. The widespread translation of canonical anthropological texts into Chinese during this period signalled intellectual openness but also reproduced older hierarchies within the global economy of knowledge.

These dynamics interacted with China's own distinctive genealogies of anthropological thought. The discipline's early formation drew heavily on Soviet nationality theory, while Fei Xiaotong translated and indigenised British social anthropology into a framework that emphasised local histories, social organisation, and grounded rural fieldwork. Anthropology's re-establishment in the 1980s—following decades of institutional suppression—carried these legacies into the reform era. As a result, contemporary Chinese anthropology developed through entanglements with ethnicity (*minzu*) studies, rural reconstruction thought, and longstanding debates over modernity, tradition, and cultural transformation.

Circulation within China was similarly uneven. Coastal and metropolitan universities—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xiamen—became key nodes in transnational academic exchange due to advantages in funding, infrastructure, and internationalisation policies. By contrast, universities in provinces such as Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi—regions with rich ethnographic diversity and many ethnic minority communities—faced persistent structural disadvantages (Xiong, Yang, and Shen 2022). Early-career scholars and minority academics were particularly affected. These intra-national disparities mirrored global asymmetries, shaping which scholars gained access to international networks and whose contributions remained more locally circumscribed.

Global theories travelled along channels of power, yet their translation into Chinese contexts also generated what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005) calls 'friction': the productive misalignments through which concepts are reworked, redirected, or unsettled as they encounter different intellectual and historical trajectories. Elements of this history echo first Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to 'provincializing Europe', not by rejecting Western theory but by showing how processes of translation, appropriation,

and friction generate alternative analytic pathways that exceed Euro-American intellectual frames (Chakrabarty 2000). These debates also resonate with the ‘world anthropologies’ initiative, which calls for recognising multiple intellectual traditions within anthropology and challenging the discipline’s historic concentration of theoretical authority in Euro-American centres (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006).

It is within this historically situated and uneven field that the collaborations of Nelson Graburn, and of many Western and Chinese scholars alongside him, took shape. Their work unfolded within both the openings enabled by China’s global turn and the constraints that limited who could participate in such exchanges. These conditions help explain why co-creation emerged not merely as a methodological preference but as an epistemic intervention: a way of challenging inherited hierarchies, redistributing interpretive authority, and enabling new forms of theory production grounded in the specificity of Chinese intellectual and regional contexts. The history of this period therefore provides not just background but the conditions of possibility for the collaborative anthropology examined in this article.

Knowledge Co-Creation and Transfer

Graburn’s practice of knowledge co-creation in China was grounded in his broader anthropological training and long-standing commitment to understanding how communities generate, reshape, and reinterpret culture. His early work with Inuit artists—examining how Indigenous communities mobilised artistic expression to negotiate identity, modernity, and colonial pressure (Graburn 1982; 1987; 1998; 2004)—cultivated in him a deep attentiveness to local agency and situated knowledge. This sensibility carried into later collaborations in Japan and New Zealand and, from the 1990s onward, into China, where his engagement became a sustained relational project rather than a vehicle for exporting Western theory.

Co-creation, as enacted through these collaborations, was not simply a matter of ‘supporting’ Chinese scholars; it was a methodological practice grounded in reciprocity, long-term relationality, and shared ethnographic labour. It resonates with broader anthropological conversations about collaborative ethnography (Lassiter 2005), friction (Tsing 2005), and the ‘education of attention’ (Ingold 2001), foregrounding the idea that knowledge emerges not in isolation but through co-presence, exchange, and mutual recognition. For young scholars and ethnic minority researchers working within China’s uneven academic landscape, co-creation became a means not only of accessing resources but also of articulating locally grounded theoretical insights that might otherwise have remained unrecognised.

Although Graburn was part of a wider cohort of Western anthropologists—such as Stephan Feuchtwang, Stevan Harrell, Louisa Schein, and James Watson—who contributed to the development of anthropology in China, his approach was distinctive in its breadth, continuity, and commitment to enabling scholars to theorise from their own communities and ethnographic experiences. Yet co-creation was never frictionless. Differences in institutional incentives, publication expectations, and

the structural dominance of English-language journals shaped what forms of co-authorship, training, and scholarly circulation were possible. Uneven access to research funding, varying degrees of institutional autonomy, and the political sensitivities of research in minority regions also introduced constraints. These tensions do not diminish the relational labour involved; rather, they highlight how co-creation unfolded within asymmetrical conditions that had to be continually negotiated rather than transcended.

Many of these collaborations were facilitated by institutional networks connected to the University of California, Berkeley, where Graburn was based. Berkeley's Asian Studies programmes and long-standing international partnerships provided an important platform for sustained academic exchange between Chinese and international scholars.

Training and Knowledge Transfer

Recognising the limited access many young Chinese scholars had to anthropological training, bibliographic resources, and international networks, Graburn approached academic exchange as a form of anthropological praxis. From the early 2000s onward, he facilitated long- and short-term visiting fellowships at the University of California, Berkeley, for more than a dozen emerging scholars from universities ranging from major coastal research hubs to institutions in ethnic minority regions. Rather than the list itself being important, what matters is how these exchanges—distributed across highly uneven academic landscapes—revealed the differentiated conditions under which Chinese scholars accessed international networks and intellectual resources.

During these fellowships, scholars observed Western academic practice first-hand: participating in seminars, engaging in discussion groups, and gaining access to library and archival resources that were difficult to obtain at home. Equally important, however, was the selective appropriation of these experiences. The purpose was not to 'Westernise' their research trajectories but to expand the conceptual and methodological repertoires available for theorising from Chinese contexts. For many early-career and ethnic minority scholars, these exchanges provided rare opportunities to situate their work within global debates while refining questions grounded in local histories and ethnographies.

Rather than focusing on individual career outcomes, the significance of these exchanges lies in how they exposed—and partially mitigated—the structural conditions shaping intellectual mobility in China. By creating spaces where young and minority scholars could engage global debates while refining locally grounded questions, these exchanges helped cultivate the conditions under which new forms of theory-making could emerge. Training and mentorship thus operated not as the transfer of Western frameworks, but as the building of infrastructural and relational support through which Chinese scholars could articulate their own conceptual contributions.

Fieldwork and Collaborative Research

Fieldwork constituted a second core dimension of co-creation. Graburn approached ethnographic engagement in China as a collaborative process grounded in co-presence and mutual learning rather than the application of external theoretical models. His initial involvement began in the late 1990s at the 'International Academic Symposium on Anthropology, Chinese Society, and Tourism' in Kunming (Salazar, Graburn, and Zhu 2019), which catalysed more than two decades of fieldwork in diverse regions. Yet these collaborations were never perfectly symmetrical: differences in language, access, institutional pressures, and political sensitivities shaped both the possibilities and limits of joint fieldwork.

Much of this work took place in Yunnan and Guizhou, where Graburn collaborated with Chinese researchers, local practitioners, and museum curators. Field sites became shared spaces of inquiry in which research questions were shaped as much by Chinese scholars' long-term commitments and community knowledge as by external comparative perspectives. In projects such as the Zhenshan Ecomuseum in Guizhou, the Anji Ecomuseum in Zhejiang, or Mile County's wine industry, intellectual direction increasingly came from Chinese collaborators, whose situated expertise grounded the research in local histories, political economies, and cultural practices.

This approach generated research that spoke simultaneously to local experiences and to global anthropological debates. Studies on ecomuseums (Graburn 2018), ethnic arts (Graburn 2007), and food and wine (Zheng X. and Graburn 2019) were grounded in specific community concerns yet situated within wider theoretical conversations about authenticity, ritual, performance, and heritage. At the same time, the forms of theorisation that could circulate internationally remained conditioned by English-language publication norms and the uneven visibility of China-based scholarship. Co-creation did not eliminate these constraints, but it altered the terms on which collaboration could generate conceptual insight.

Dissemination and Empowerment

Co-creation also unfolded through patterns of scholarly circulation. Graburn supported the international visibility of Chinese scholars through co-authorship and by facilitating their participation in academic meetings such as the IUAES and AAA. Notable examples include the co-chaired tourism anthropology session with Professor Peng Zhaorong at the 2009 IUAES Congress and the award-winning paper with Zheng Xiangchun at the 2019 'International Conference on Wine Market and Cultures of Consumption'. These opportunities mattered not simply because they brought Chinese researchers to global stages, but because they revealed how linguistic, institutional, and financial barriers shaped who could participate in the international anthropological conversation. Circulation thus became both an enabling condition and a reminder of the persistent asymmetries structuring global knowledge production.

The collaborative trajectory did not follow a straightforward progression from translation to co-authorship. Rather, it shifted as institutional conditions changed and as Chinese scholars increasingly articulated their own conceptual priorities. Early engagements centred on making canonical texts accessible in Chinese (Graburn 2007; Graburn 2008); subsequent collaborations emphasised reflexive dialogue about disciplinary histories (Graburn and Peng 2006; Xu and Graburn 2011; Zhang X., Graburn, and Zhang L. 2012); later co-authored work foregrounded locally generated concepts that entered comparative debates (Peng, Graburn, and Li C. 2012). These shifts reflect not only evolving partnerships but also transformations in China's academic infrastructures and the growing confidence of China-based anthropologists as theory-producers.

Across these encounters—in universities, rural regions, museums, and field sites—collaborative relationships accumulated into durable intellectual networks. These networks enabled early-career scholars to develop independent trajectories while engaging global debates on their own terms. Yet their emergence also highlights a central point of this article: co-creation may reconfigure aspects of global anthropological practice, but it does not eliminate the structural inequalities in which that practice remains embedded. It expands the spaces in which China-based scholars can generate theory, while revealing how epistemic authority is always negotiated within uneven landscapes of power, language, and institutional access.

Transforming Research Agendas: Outcomes of Co-Creation in Chinese Anthropology

Building on long-term practices of collaboration and mentorship, the model of co-creation developed between Western scholars such as Nelson Graburn and their Chinese counterparts has contributed—alongside other developments—to the reconfiguration of anthropological inquiry in China (Graburn 2001; Peng 2004). Rather than reinforcing a one-way movement of theory from West to East, these collaborations enabled research agendas grounded in China's own philosophical traditions, historical trajectories, and socio-political conditions. Co-creation thus operated as an epistemic intervention: not by overturning structural hierarchies, but by expanding the conditions under which Chinese scholars could articulate theoretical concepts rooted in local ethnographic and intellectual histories.

The emergence of new research platforms, long-term fieldwork partnerships, and expanding international networks further consolidated this shift. These collaborations, together with broader institutional reforms and expanding fieldwork networks, generated conditions in which new lines of inquiry could take shape, grounded in Chinese philosophical traditions, regional histories, and ethnographic specificities.

In what follows, we highlight four domains—heritage and museum studies, ethnic tourism and rural development, food anthropology, and the anthropology of art—through which co-created scholarship can contribute to the gradual decentralisation

of epistemic authority, not as a singular solution, but as one important pathway among others for expanding the intellectual horizons of global anthropology.

Heritage and Museum Studies

Heritage and museum studies constitutes an important domain in which collaborative scholarship between Western and Chinese researchers has contributed to shifting research agendas, without implying singular causality. Globally, heritage discourse emerged from specific European and Australian trajectories—industrial decline, museum expansion, and the consolidation of UNESCO’s international heritage regime (Harrison 2013). China adopted elements of these frameworks through translation and institutional borrowing (Zhu and Maags 2020), yet heritage-making in China also draws on much older cultural logics concerning time, value, and cultural reproduction embedded in Chinese philosophical and artistic traditions. This plurality of genealogies makes China an especially productive site for analysing how global frameworks encounter friction and are reworked through local epistemologies.

Graburn’s longstanding interest in museums and heritage, shaped in part by his comparative work in Japan, intersected with these developments in ways that opened new lines of inquiry within Chinese scholarship (Graburn 2009; 2021a). Collaborative work with Chinese researchers contributed to early analyses of the ecomuseum model, which emphasised community participation and challenged conventional museum hierarchies. Joint research with Jin Lu, for example, examined the ‘museumification’ of urban space, showing how parks, squares, and heritage precincts are curated through the intersecting pressures of globalisation, identity politics, and commercial redevelopment (Graburn and Jin 2017). Another collaboration with Luo (Luo and Graburn 2024) developed an analytical vocabulary for understanding urban redevelopment as a form of heritage production, illuminating how state imperatives and local cultural practices jointly configure cityscapes.

A key contribution of these collaborations was not the application of Western models but the expansion of conversations that enabled Chinese scholars to theorise heritage within their own intellectual lineages. The concept of authenticity—central to Euro-American heritage debates—was reconsidered through the prism of Chinese philosophical discourse, particularly the long-standing debate on *ming-shi* (names and realities) (Li 2020). While Western scholarship often locates authenticity in representation or preservation, Chinese researchers have shown how authenticity is authorised through moral cultivation, aesthetic discernment, political legitimacy, and the rhythmic reproduction of cultural forms (Zhao and Li 2012; Zhao and Dong 2012; Zhu 2018). These works reframe authenticity as a relational and historically contingent process shaped by specific institutional and ideological conditions.

Related studies on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) (Graburn 2012; Zhu and Liu 2021) further demonstrated how embodiment, performance, and transmission complicate preservationist agendas and reveal tensions between global ICH regimes and locally grounded moral and aesthetic frameworks. These inquiries highlight how

heritage debates in China are inflected by long-standing ideas about creativity, ritual reproduction, and social order—ideas that structure how communities and institutions claim, curate, or negotiate cultural value.

What this body of work makes visible is not simply the adaptation of global heritage paradigms but the emergence of analytical questions that would not have taken shape without engagement with China's own intellectual histories. Co-creation did not dissolve the asymmetries embedded in global heritage regimes, but it opened experimental spaces in which Chinese scholars could articulate alternative problematics—such as *ming-shi* reasoning, relational authenticity, and the politics of museumification—that now circulate beyond China. In this sense, these collaborations exemplify how regionally grounded scholarship can gradually expand the conceptual horizons of anthropology of heritage and cultural representation.

Ethnic Tourism and Rural Development

Ethnic tourism and rural development offer another instructive example for examining how co-creation interacted with China's shifting political economy and its diverse local epistemologies. The growth of ethnic tourism since the late 1990s unfolded within state-led strategies of rural revitalisation, in which tourism, especially in minority regions, was promoted as a vehicle for poverty alleviation, cultural promotion, and nation-building (Oakes 1993; Fraser 2022). These developments positioned ethnicity (*minzu*), rurality, and heritage as focal points where state planning, market forces, and everyday social life intersected in increasingly patterned ways.

Graburn's earlier work on Indigenous and ethnic tourism in the Arctic, New Zealand, and Japan (Graburn 1975, 1978; Graburn and Ishimori 1979; Bunten and Graburn 2018) generated analytical tools that travelled into the Chinese context, but they encountered a distinctive intellectual and political genealogy shaped by British social anthropology, the legacies of Soviet nationality theory, and Fei Xiaotong's indigenisation of the *minzu* framework. In China's minority regions, the politics of representation cannot be separated from state categories, rural development mandates, and the broader governance of cultural difference (Harrell 1995; 2001). Tourism thus became not just an economic activity but a dense field of classification, aspiration, regulation, and negotiation.

Within this landscape, collaborative research between Chinese scholars and Western anthropologists—such as Graburn, Margaret Swain, and Jenny Chio—helped consolidate ethnic tourism as a substantive analytical field rather than a peripheral topic. Their work showed that tourism imaginaries—scenes of singing and dancing, images of 'authentic villages', narratives of harmonious ethnic relations—are not merely representational devices but instruments through which minorities are incorporated into national development agendas.

Building on this, Graburn (2016a) identified three pathways through which ethnic identity is commodified in village tourism, illuminating how local actors navigate state classifications, market logics, and community expectations. In their co-authored

interview, Graburn and Lu Jin (2014) argued that tourism research in China must grapple with a dual imperative: safeguarding minority heritage while recognising that tourism is embedded in developmental mandates that carry their own moral and economic pressures.

Graburn's work also contributed to the development of the concept of tourism imaginaries, highlighting how cultural expectations shape tourist experiences and representations (Salazar and Graburn 2014). Subsequent research in regions such as Sichuan, Ningxia, Yunnan, and Guizhou demonstrates how tourism reshapes social relations, redistributes risks and opportunities, and produces new forms of subjectivity among rural minorities (Graburn and Peng 2006; Zhu 2018; Sun and Luo 2022). At the same time, Graburn observed the growing presence of Chinese scholars researching their own communities, particularly within tourism anthropology, where increasing numbers of ethnic minority researchers analyse the transformations of their own regions (Graburn and Jin 2011; Graburn and Jin 2014). Studies from Yunnan, for instance, show how romanticised tourist imaginaries can obscure the choreographed labour that structures encounters and reproduces hierarchical gazes between visitors and local communities (Zhu 2018).

Long-term fieldwork by Graburn and collaborators in Han villages and minority communities of the Miao, Yao, Yi, Zhuang, and Hui peoples shows how aspirations, memories, and notions of progress circulate across gendered and generational lines. These dynamics intersect with changing land regimes, cultural industries, ritual transformations, and shifting class relations, revealing how rural life is continually reconfigured by state planning and market participation.

What emerges from this body of work is not a single theoretical model but a reorientation of how anthropologists conceptualise minority governance, rural transformation, and the political life of cultural performance. Co-created scholarship positioned ethnic tourism as a methodological lens capable of tracking how state projects, market economies, and local actors negotiate value, identity, and visibility. Rather than a descriptive subfield, ethnic tourism becomes an analytical vantage point through which Chinese and international scholars have generated concepts and critiques that now circulate beyond the Chinese context, informing broader debates on development, inequality, and the politics of cultural representation.

Food Anthropology

Food anthropology in China has expanded rapidly over the past two decades, and co-created research has played a formative—though not exclusive—role in shaping its intellectual directions. Rather than importing Western paradigms such as terroir or the anthropology of taste, collaborations between Chinese scholars and Western anthropologists have developed a body of work attentive to how food practices emerge from situated relations among humans, landscapes, cosmological orders, and non-human forces (Cheung and Wu 2002; Cheng 2023). These studies show that food in China operates not only as a commodity circulating through global markets

but also as a medium through which moral values, social relations, ecological knowledge, and cultural memories are continually negotiated (Newman 2004).

While global food studies often emphasise the European genealogy of terroir, China's deep traditions of linking cultivation with cosmological order offer alternative analytics (Aijmer 2010). The classical formulation of *tian ren he yi* (uniting heaven and humanity), for instance, situates food production within a relational ontology in which soils, waters, plants, and labouring bodies are mutually constitutive (Min and He 2014; Yao 2014). Co-created research demonstrates how such philosophies persist—explicitly or implicitly—in the everyday practices of tea growers, vintners, farmers, and rural households. These insights complicate dominant Western narratives of industrialisation and modernisation by foregrounding relational and ecologically embedded understandings of sustenance.

A representative example is the long-term collaboration between Graburn and Zheng Xiangchun. Their research on wine consumption in contemporary China challenges sensory or aesthetic explanations, arguing instead that wine operates as a form of 'imaginative consumption', where globalised ideals of refinement intersect with national aspirations toward cosmopolitan modernity (Zheng and Graburn 2019; Zheng 2019). Wine becomes a symbolic artefact, an index of class, aspiration, and China's participation in global cultural flows. At the same time, their work highlights how globalisation can homogenise taste and marginalise local foodways, echoing Graburn's critique of industrialised food production in his 2021 Asia Food Forum keynote (Graburn 2021b).

Co-created food anthropology in China, however, is not confined to analyses of globalisation or elite consumption. Ritual cooking, communal feasts, foraging traditions, and rural fermentation techniques embody ecological knowledge and cosmological reasoning that persist amid rapid economic change (Fraser 2024). These examples resonate with wider anthropological debates on nature–culture entanglements, non-human agency, and the reproduction of heritage in everyday practice.

These trajectories also intersect with rural development. In recent years, Graburn has extended his work on wine to examine how food and beverage industries participate in rural revitalisation strategies. His post-pandemic fieldwork in Kunming, Chengdu, Wulong, Guizhou, Wuhan, and Ningbo explores how wine tourism and hospitality initiatives might generate new livelihoods while integrating local food traditions into development agendas. Rather than romanticising industrialisation or collapsing modernity into Westernisation, this research traces how rural communities negotiate global trends, integrating them selectively while sustaining or reworking local knowledge.

Taken together, co-created food studies in China have advanced an anthropology that foregrounds ecological embeddedness, relational ontologies, and cosmological frameworks without treating them as exceptional or static. These collaborations demonstrate how food can serve as a theoretical bridge linking heritage and rural transformation. The resulting contributions do not constitute a regional variant of global food studies but offer analytical problematics with relevance well beyond

China, illustrating how co-created scholarship can widen the conceptual vocabulary of food anthropology.

Anthropology of Art

The anthropology of art has been one of the most enduring threads in Nelson Graburn's scholarly trajectory, beginning with his work on Inuit artistic production and extending into his later collaborations in China. What distinguished his approach—and made it resonate within Chinese scholarship—was his insistence that art be understood not as an isolated aesthetic object nor solely as a commodity shaped by tourism, but as a relational medium. In his analyses, artistic practice emerges from interactions among makers, materials, landscapes, ritual forms, and viewing publics, each contributing to the ongoing negotiation of meaning and value.

This perspective gained particular traction in China in the early 2000s, when his essay *Art and the Process of Acculturation* was translated into Chinese (Graburn 2002). Rather than framing 'acculturation' as a unilinear movement towards Westernisation, Graburn conceptualised it as a dynamic interplay in which Indigenous artists mediate multiple cultural worlds—colonial, local, spiritual, and commercial. Chinese scholars drew on this formulation to revisit their own art historical and ethnographic traditions, where craftsmanship, materiality, and performative skill have long been linked to cosmology, moral cultivation, and embodied learning. Co-creation thus created openings for comparative reflection: Inuit carving and Chinese craft philosophy became parallel cases for theorising how art circulates across, and helps configure, different cultural worlds.

These conversations expanded into a broader interdisciplinary inquiry linking anthropology with art history, archaeology, mythology, and literary studies (Zhao 2007; Zhang X. 2003; Graburn 2015; Graburn 2016b). In their study of craftsmanship, Z. Peng, Graburn, and C. Li (2012) argued that heritage should be understood not as discrete cultural products but as relational practices embedded within China's specific heritage context, shaped by state institutions, philosophical commitments, and everyday creative labour. This emphasis on practice and relationality contributed to a shift away from object-centred preservation towards analyses of process, reproduction, and embodied knowledge.

Research in minority regions further deepened this perspective. Here, oral histories, mythological motifs, and ritual forms continue to structure aesthetic expression, making Indigenous art a key medium for transmitting intergenerational knowledge (Smith 1999; Graburn and Jin 2014; Graburn 2016a). Artistic practice in these settings is not merely symbolic but embodied; not simply representational but relational (Harrison 2013). Such insights connect Chinese art anthropology to global debates on non-human agency, drawing attention to how materials, techniques, spirits, and landscapes participate in the making of art.

The rise of intangible cultural heritage frameworks has complicated these dynamics. While ICH policy foregrounds the human 'representative inheritor', co-

created research has documented how bureaucratisation and standardisation can narrow creative possibilities or detach craft from its cosmological foundations (Zhu and Ma 2025). Collaborative work on museums and craftsmanship also shows how industrialisation and digitalisation introduce new frictions—compressing temporal cycles, altering materials, and reshaping relations between artisans, tools, and environments (Graburn et al. 2016). These tensions are not uniquely Chinese; they reflect global transformations in artistic labour under conditions of market expansion and technological change.

Taken together, co-created research on art in China demonstrates how creativity, materiality, and embodied practice can be theorised outside Euro-American aesthetic genealogies without positioning Chinese traditions as exceptional or homogeneous. By treating art as a relational medium situated within cosmology, ritual, labour, and heritage regimes, this scholarship offers alternative problematics for thinking about authenticity, authorship, and aesthetic value. It positions Chinese and Indigenous artistic traditions as analytically generative space where co-creation produces questions, critiques, and conceptual tools that expand the scope of global art anthropology.

Co-Creation, Relational Knowledge, and the Future of Global Anthropology

The trajectory traced in this article is not simply an account of anthropology's development in China, nor a narrative of Western theories travelling outward. Rather, it addresses a longstanding anthropological concern: how knowledge is produced, and how relationships mediate its emergence, circulation, and reinterpretation. Co-creation, exemplified in Nelson Graburn's collaborations over three decades, offers a mode of intellectual practice grounded in reciprocity, sustained presence, and attentiveness to the asymmetries that shape scholarly exchange. It suggests that the gradual decentring of Western theoretical authority occurs not through critique alone but through the relational labour of building partnerships in which scholars think with, rather than about, one another across linguistic, cultural, and institutional divides.

These collaborations show that joint knowledge-making is not simply an ethical orientation but a methodological form (Stalpaert, van Baarle, and Karreman 2021; Stewart et al. 2024). Through shared fieldwork, co-authorship, and iterative dialogue, knowledge becomes collaboratively generated rather than extracted or transferred. Crucially, this process has generated new analytical questions rather than merely producing additional data. Concepts emerging from research on tourism, heritage, rural transformation, foodways, and art illustrate how China-based scholars draw on local epistemologies, philosophical lineages, and everyday practices to intervene in wider debates. In practical terms, these collaborations have contributed to several developments: the consolidation of tourism anthropology in China, the expansion of heritage and museum studies grounded in local historical experience, the growing presence of minority scholars researching their own communities, and the emergence of relational approaches to knowledge production that challenge extractive models of

fieldwork. While Graburn's work provides a particularly rich example, many Chinese and international scholars have jointly contributed to this relational reorientation of the field. In this sense, Chinese—and broader Asian—anthropologies are increasingly visible sites of theoretical intervention, offering conceptual problematics that broaden how global anthropology understands its analytic foundations.

Graburn's legacy could therefore be understood not simply in terms of mentorship or cross-cultural engagement but as contributing to the gradual reconfiguration of what a 'global anthropology' might entail. As articulated by the IUAES and the World Anthropological Union, the 'global' is not a geography of disciplinary centres but a commitment to forms of relating that make analytical plurality possible. Its value lies less in harmonising differences than in sustaining the conditions under which divergent perspectives can confront, challenge, and recalibrate one another.

This vision carries particular relevance in the present moment. Geopolitical tensions, digital fragmentation, and institutional precarity have weakened many of the infrastructures that previously supported transnational scholarly exchange. Early-career and minority scholars—those whose insights are often most critical for diversifying knowledge production—face structural constraints that limit participation in global conversations. Co-creation does not erase these inequalities; rather, it offers a workable relational practice through which they can be navigated and, at times, modestly reconfigured. These collaborations remind us that intellectual life depends less on mobility alone than on the long-term cultivation of networks, mutual recognition, and shared labour.

By fostering co-creation, supporting emerging scholars, and enabling China-based researchers to articulate theoretical insights grounded in their own contexts, Graburn helped create the conditions for a more plural and contextually attuned anthropology. His legacy endures not only in the individuals with whom he collaborated but also in the methodological possibilities his practice continues to suggest. At a time when academic borders are tightening, his example underscores a critical lesson: anthropology's future will depend on the relationships we maintain and the forms of knowledge we choose to cultivate together.

Note

- [1] Here, 'Western' refers not to geography but to a historically specific epistemic formation that emerged from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment and was institutionalised through empires, universities, museums, and legal systems (Bennett 1995; Mignolo 2002).

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