

PG1 - FULL RESEARCH PROPOSAL

This form is to be completed by both the student and supervisory team within **THREE** months for full-time students and **SIX** months for part time students, after the commencement of the research degree or Part Two. Return the completed form to the **Academic Office** pgresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk.

Student Details

Student Family / Surname:		Yan			
Student Given / First name:		Ruojin			
Student Number		2408616			
UWTSD Institute		WISA			
UWTSD Partner Institute (if appropriate)					
Start Date	10.2025	End Date	05.2027		
Mode of Study		Part time ☐		Full time ☒	
PhD by Research	PhD Practice Based	PhD by Published Works	Professional Doctorate (including DBA, DProf, Ed D)	MPhil by Research	MPhil Practice Based
☐	☐	☐	☒	☐	☐
MA by Research	MSc by Research	MRes			
☐	☐	☐			

Proposed Research

Current Proposed Title (20 / 30 words):
Enhancing Intergenerational Interaction in Dong Community Outdoor Public Spaces through Product – Service Design: A Practice-Led Ethnographic Study
Background & Context (approx. 500 words)
In the context of rapid global population ageing, Chinese society is undergoing a profound demographic transition. It is projected that by 2040, the population aged 60 and above in China will reach 402 million, accounting for 28% of the total population—a pace of ageing significantly

faster than the global average. This phenomenon is particularly acute in rural ethnic minority areas, where out-migration of working-age adults has led to hollowed-out communities and a widespread prevalence of left-behind elderly individuals, drastically weakening intergenerational support networks (World Health Organization, 2021; Luo & Waite, 2014). Taking the Dong community as an example, traditional public spaces such as drum towers and wind-and-rain bridges have historically served as central venues for communal gatherings, musical performances, and ceremonial practices—playing a vital role in maintaining cultural identity and intergenerational solidarity (Yang, 2008). However, rapid modernisation and rural-to-urban migration are eroding these social structures. Collective traditional activities are gradually being replaced by individualised daily encounters, causing intergenerational relationships to become superficial and even fractured. This not only exacerbates social isolation among the elderly but also places intangible cultural heritage—such as polyphonic choir traditions, architectural techniques, and agricultural practices—at risk of being lost (Singh, 2025; Wen, 2025).

The weakening of intergenerational ties poses a dual challenge to community cohesion and cultural continuity. Research indicates that prolonged loneliness significantly increases older adults' risks of developing dementia, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes (Luo & Waite, 2014). From a cultural perspective, the lack of meaningful engagement and deep interaction between younger generations and elders hinders the transmission of local knowledge systems—including the Dong grand song, carpentry skills, and farming practices—leading to a erosion of ethnic identity and collective memory (Wen, 2025). The World Health Organization's 2023 report explicitly states that a lack of meaningful intergenerational contact will further reinforce ageism, deepen social isolation, and create a vicious cycle of cultural disconnection and generational dissociation. Therefore, facilitating intergenerational interaction is not only crucial for the health and wellbeing of older people, but also key to safeguarding cultural diversity and community resilience (WHO, 2023; Butts, 2023).

Although intergenerational issues have gained increasing attention in recent years within design studies, sociology, and gerontology, existing intervention strategies remain limited in several respects. Current research predominantly focuses on urban contexts and technology-driven solutions, such as intergenerational co-housing models (Labit & Dubost, 2016) or digital gamification platforms (Pérez-Rodríguez et al., 2022). These approaches often presume individualistic values and modern infrastructure, making them difficult to adapt to ethnic minority communities that emphasise collectivist traditions and local cultural practices. More importantly, a recent systematic review found that the benefits of existing intergenerational programmes on older adults' wellbeing are inconsistent, with limited evidence of reduced loneliness in many cases (Whear et al., 2023), indicating shortcomings in the cultural sensitivity and social embeddedness of current design methodologies.

To address these research gaps, this study adopts a practice-led ethnographic approach, using the Dong community as its fieldwork site. Through participatory design combined with in-depth ethnographic interviews, the project engages elders, youth, and other community stakeholders in co-creating strategies to enhance intergenerational interaction within public spaces. Theoretically, the research draws on Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances, which emphasises the behavioural possibilities offered by physical environments, and incorporates gamification mechanisms as proposed by Deterding et al. (2011). Crucially, however, it seeks to thoughtfully integrate these with Dong cultural symbols, traditional rituals, and collective narratives, thereby avoiding the direct imposition of technocentric or foreign models. The ultimate aim is not only to increase the frequency and quality of intergenerational engagement through product-service systems but, more profoundly, to revitalise mechanisms of cultural transmission, enhance subjective wellbeing among elders, and rebuild the social foundations of cross-generational solidarity. Situated at the intersection of design, anthropology, and gerontology, this study

proposes a culturally sensitive, systematically sustainable, and human-centred intervention pathway for ageing ethnic minority communities.

Aims and Objectives (approx.. 250 – 500 words)

● Aims

This study aims to design an interactive seating and Public-space product – service system that fosters intergenerational interaction and reduces loneliness among older adults, while improving spatial accessibility and strengthening cultural identity in Dong communities. Through a participatory design process and iterative design based on user-research feedback, the project will develop a detailed digital model of the interactive seating design and its supporting service system. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute a practice-grounded theoretical framework for intergenerational public-space design and to deliver a deployable prototype concept package—comprising specifications, a service blueprint and implementation guidance—to inform future community interventions.

● Objective

1. Stakeholder engagement and needs elicitation

To organise targeted, community-based participatory co-design activities (e.g., focus groups and facilitated ideation) with older adults (55+) and young people (18 – 35) to identify needs, barriers and cultural priorities, and translate these into spatial accessibility requirements and culturally resonant interaction scripts.

2. Digital prototyping and service synthesis

To produce parametric 3D digital models of the seating modules and, in parallel, develop service blueprints, touchpoint maps and interactive storyboards that specify the product–service system without any physical build.

3. Evaluation with digital model

To evaluate the concepts through context-informed methods—scenario-based walkthroughs, role-play, and clickable service prototypes in workshop settings—and to collect mixed-methods data (brief scales on perceived social connection, cultural resonance and accessibility, plus qualitative feedback) to estimate likely impact.

4. Theoretical contribution and implementation guidance

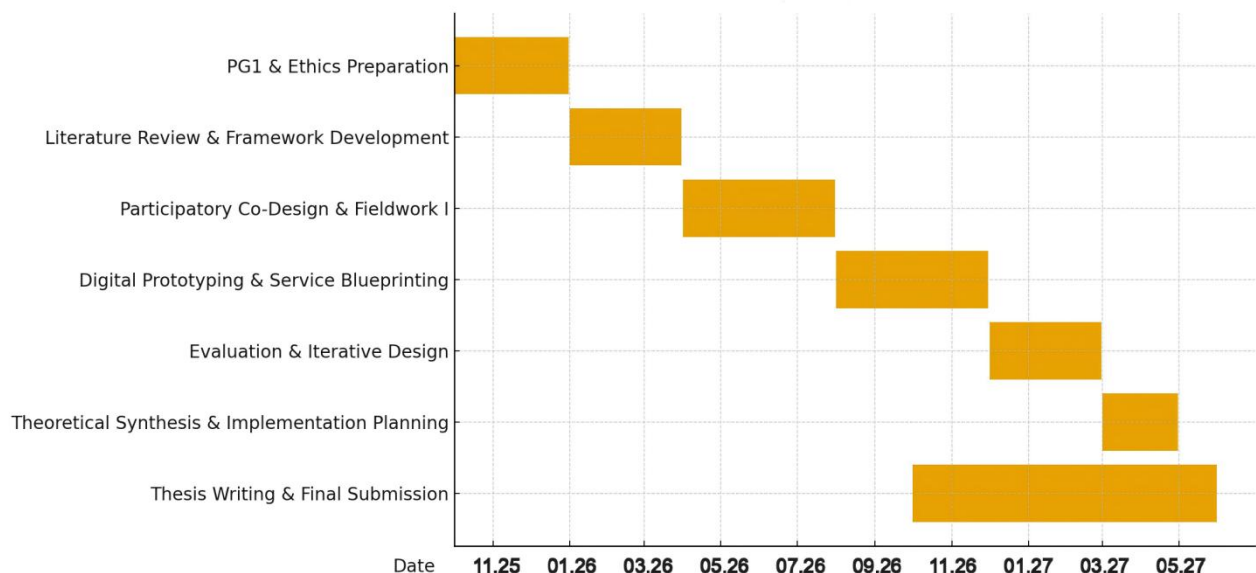
To synthesise findings into a practice-based intergenerational design framework tailored to minority rural communities, and to compile an implementation roadmap (policy alignment, partnership model, maintenance and evaluation guidelines) for future pilot deployment beyond.

Proposed plan of work including timetable

Below is a proposed plan of work in the form of a timetable with an start date of October 2025 and completion by May 2027.

Stage	Time Frame	Achievement
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PG1 & Ethics Preparation	October 2025 – December 2025	Submit full project proposal and ethics application forms, detailing participatory methods and data handling with vulnerable groups.
Literature Review & Framework Development	January 2026 – March 2026	Conduct in-depth review on intergenerational design, product-service systems, cultural identity in Dong communities, and spatial accessibility. Develop initial theoretical framework.
Participatory Co-Design & Fieldwork I	April 2026 – July 2026	Organise and facilitate co-design workshops (focus groups, ideation sessions) with elders and youth in Dong communities. Identify needs and translate into design principles and interaction scenarios.
Digital Prototyping & Service Blueprinting	August 2026 – November 2026	Develop parametric 3D models of seating modules and produce service blueprints, touchpoint maps, and interactive storyboards for the product-service system.
Evaluation & Iterative Design	December 2026 – February 2027	Conduct concept evaluation through scenario walkthroughs, role-play, and clickable prototypes in workshop settings. Collect mixed-method feedback and refine design accordingly.
Theoretical Synthesis & Implementation Planning	March 2027 – April 2027	Synthesise findings into an intergenerational design framework. Develop implementation roadmap including policy alignment, partnership models, and maintenance guidelines.
Thesis Writing & Final Submission	October 2026 – May 2027	Write-up thesis chapters concurrently throughout research process. Complete full draft, revise, and submit by end of May 2027.



Proposed methodology (approx. 500 words):

This section delineates the disciplinary foundations and the specific methodological approach that

will be employed to conduct the research, ensuring it is robust, culturally sensitive, and capable of addressing the complex, interdisciplinary nature of the research questions.

● **Disciplinary Orientation and Approach**

This research is fundamentally interdisciplinary in its orientation, situated at the confluence of Design Studies, Social Anthropology, and Ecological Psychology. The core epistemological stance is pragmatist, prioritising practical outcomes and actionable knowledge that can directly inform design interventions aimed at enhancing social well-being and cultural sustainability. The approach is practice-led and ethnographic, meaning that theoretical insights will be generated through, and are inextricably linked to, immersive engagement within the Dong community and the iterative practice of design. This aligns with the principle that effective design solutions for specific cultural contexts must be deeply rooted in an emic (insider's) understanding of local practices, values, and social structures.

The theoretical framework, integrating Cultural Affordance and Culturally-Sensitive Gamification, necessitates this blended approach. Anthropology provides the tools for deep cultural interpretation and understanding implicit social norms. Design Studies contributes the methods for creative problem-solving, prototyping, and synthesising user needs into tangible proposals. Ecological Psychology (through affordance theory) offers a lens to understand the relationship between the environment (physical and cultural) and behaviour. This triangulation of disciplines ensures the research moves beyond technological determinism or cultural reductionism, instead seeking a nuanced integration of culture, space, and behaviour.

● **Research Methods**

A mixed-methods research design (MMRD) will be adopted, privileging qualitative methods led by ethnography, while incorporating quantitative methods in a supplementary role to enhance the breadth and generalisability of findings. This approach is chosen to capture both the rich, subjective experiences and cultural logics of the community (qualitative) and to measure specific patterns of behaviour and attitudes across a larger sample (quantitative).

The specific methods to be deployed are:

1. Library-Based and Online Desk Research:

A comprehensive and ongoing review of academic literature across the disciplines of design, anthropology, gerontology, and game studies will be conducted. This will solidify the theoretical foundation, inform the development of research instruments, and ensure the research contributes to existing academic discourse.

2. Ethnographic Fieldwork:

Participant Observation: Extended periods of immersion in key Dong public spaces (e.g., drum towers, wind-and-rain bridges, marketplaces) will be conducted. Spatial behavioural mapping will be utilised to systematically record and visually represent patterns of intergenerational interaction, space usage, and the confluence of physical layouts and cultural activities.

Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs): In-depth interviews will be held with key stakeholder groups: elders (≥ 60 years, prioritising culture bearers), local youth (18-35 years, including returnees), and community managers (e.g., village leaders, ICH inheritors). Interviews will explore perceptions of public spaces, cultural identity, intergenerational dynamics, and reactions to proposed design concepts.

Co-Design Workshops: These are central to the practice-led aspect. A series of participatory workshops will be facilitated with mixed groups of elders and youth. Activities will include facilitated ideation, feedback sessions on design prototypes (e.g., using sketches, storyboards, digital models), and role-playing scenarios to elicit needs, preferences, and culturally appropriate design ideas.

3. Analysis of Visual and Material Culture:

This involves the systematic collection and semiotic analysis of cultural symbols found in Dong architecture (e.g., patterns on drum towers), ritual objects, and textiles. Photographs and drawings will be created to build a visual database. This analysis will directly inform the design language, ensuring it resonates with cultural meanings rather than appropriating symbols superficially.

4. Quantitative Surveys:

A structured questionnaire employing Likert scales will be administered to a broader sample to quantify metrics such as frequency of intergenerational interactions, spatial satisfaction, and acceptance of proposed gamification mechanisms. This data will provide complementary evidence to the qualitative findings and help identify generational differences or consensus.

Sampling Strategy: A combination of stratified sampling (by age and role), snowball sampling (to access hard-to-reach groups like isolated elders), and site-based sampling (across different public spaces and times of day) will be used to ensure a comprehensive and representative sample.

Introductory bibliography:

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Facilities and resources available for the investigation: please indicate if you expect to need any special resources

1. Required Facilities and Access

- **Fieldwork Sites:** Primary access is required to Dong communities in the Guangxi region (e.g., Sanjiang, Liping counties). Specific sites include public spaces such as drum towers, wind-and-rain bridges, and village squares.
- **Libraries and Archives:** Access to digital collections and databases (e.g., CNKI, Web of Science) is essential. Physical access to libraries at Guangxi University for Nationalities or Hunan University would be beneficial but not mandatory, as inter-library loan services will be utilised.
- **Specialist IT Facilities:** he project requires use of personal computing equipment with adequate specifications to run parametric design software (e.g., Rhino with Grasshopper). Cloud-based storage services will be used for data backup, adhering to all data security and confidentiality protocols.
- **Prototyping Workshop:** Access to a university model-making workshop (e.g., with 3D printers, laser cutters) will be needed in the later stages to create tangible prototypes for co-design

2. Permissions and Protocols

- **Field Site Access:** Initial permissions have been informally secured through prior contacts with community leaders and local cultural bureaus. Formal written permissions will be obtained prior to

fieldwork commencement, following the university's ethical clearance and based on a detailed research plan provided to the communities.

- **Library/Archive Access:** Access to digital resources is covered under the institutional affiliation with my university. Any necessary inter-library loans or physical archive visits will be funded personally.

- **IT and Workshop Facilities:** Access to the university's IT infrastructure and workshops is standard for research students and has been confirmed as available upon request.

3. Travel and Financing

- **Travel Requirements:** Extended fieldwork in Guangxi Dong communities is essential. The plan entails two intensive field trips totaling approximately 4-5 months (e.g., 2-3 months in Year 1 for initial ethnography and co-design, 2 months in Year 2 for prototype testing and evaluation). This duration is optimised to ensure research depth while managing personal financial constraints.

- **Financing:** All travel, accommodation, subsistence, and incidental fieldwork costs will be covered by personal funds. A detailed and conservative budget has been prepared to ensure the financial sustainability of the research throughout the candidature.

4. Fieldwork, Ethics, and Clearance

- **Fieldwork and Interviews:** The research involves significant ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and co-design workshops with human participants (elders, youth, community leaders).

- **Protocols and Ethical Clearance:** The full ethical clearance application will be submitted to the University's Research Ethics Committee. The application will detail protocols for informed consent, anonymity, data confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. All fieldwork will strictly adhere to the approved protocols, regardless of funding source. Prior informed consent will be obtained from all participants, with procedures adapted for non-literate individuals (e.g., verbal consent in the Dong language witnessed by a community member).

Intellectual Property IP

It is anticipated that Intellectual Property (IP) will be produced as a result of this research.

Tick ✓

	YES	NO
Is the IP already subject to a separate agreement with a third party (e.g. employer, sponsor or external funder)? If so please provide details below	☐	☒
Is the research dependent upon background IP owned by: If so, please provide details below	UWTSD ☒	A third party ☐
<i>Text box will expand</i>		

Tick ✓

I understand that:

	YES	NO
If any party other than the student is likely to be involved in the development of IP a separate IP agreement will be needed and it may be necessary for the student to assign the IP rights to the University.	☒	☐
If there are no third parties involved in the creation of the IP the student is deemed to own the IP, however should the student wish to commercially exploit their IP and require the assistance of the University to do so, they will be required to assign their IP to the University. https://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/iiced/protecting-innovation-and-creativity---intellectual-property/	☒	☐

Student Signature

Signature or Print Name:		Date:
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Supervisory Team

Has the student proposed a viable research project that is appropriate for this programme that should be supported by the Institute?

Supported: ☒

Not Supported: ☐

Authorisation

Director of Studies	Signature or Print Name:	Date:
Institute Manager of Research Degrees	Signature or Print Name:	Date: