# CULTIVATING BEAUTY: THE ARTISTIC AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF YANGZHOU GARDENS

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the garden culture and art of Yangzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, aiming to explore its unique spatial aesthetics and profound cultural connotations. Against the backdrop of urban modernization and cultural heritage preservation, the question of how traditional gardens acquire new interpretative pathways within visual culture has become a critical research topic. Adopting a mixed-methods research framework that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches, this study systematically examines the historical evolution, cultural artistry, and garden-making elements of Yangzhou gardens through literature review, field investigation, case studies, and questionnaire surveys. The primary objective is to analyze the developmental characteristics and design language of Yangzhou gardens from historical and artistic perspectives, and to further employ image turn theory to investigate the role of garden visual imagery in cultural meaning construction and contemporary expression. To achieve the research objectives, the study constructs an analytical framework centered on image representation, visual systems, and cultural symbolism, approaching the cultural functions of garden art from the perspective of image-space interaction. The findings reveal that Yangzhou gardens, through spatial organization, decorative elements, and symbolic imagery, constitute a highly visualized cultural narrative system. This system not only embodies the spirit of Eastern aesthetics but also conveys cultural memory and identity. The study provides a theoretical foundation and analytical pathway for the reinterpretation of traditional garden art in contemporary contexts.

**Keywords:** Yangzhou Gardens, Cultural and Artistic Expression, Elements of Garden-Making, Image Turn Theory

# INTRODUCTION

Yangzhou is located in the central region of Jiangsu Province, China, at the intersection of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal. Historically, it served as a major hub for salt merchants. As one of China's most renowned historical and cultural cities, Yangzhou holds a pivotal role in the development of garden art. Distinct from the grand, solemn, and axially symmetrical style of imperial gardens, Yangzhou gardens emphasize the natural charm and spatial fluidity characteristic of private gardens, presenting an artistic style that is more dynamic, refined, and subtly expressive.

These gardens not only embody the ancient wisdom in architectural and spatial construction but also demonstrate the ability to extract artistic language from nature. Elements such as architecture, decoration, rock formations, water features, and plant arrangements are imbued with rich cultural symbolism.

However, with the accelerating process of urbanization and the transformation of lifestyles, garden culture is facing pressing challenges, including functional decline, symbolic alienation, and the fragmentation of visual communication. In this context, reexamining the cultural agency of garden imagery through the lens of "image turn theory" and exploring the possibilities for contemporary expression and visual reconstruction of traditional garden culture has become a significant issue in current studies of garden aesthetics.

**Research Objectives**

The research objectives include the following two points:

1) This research aims to analyze the historical development, artistic features, and compositional elements of Yangzhou gardens, in order to reveal their aesthetic value and cultural significance.

2) This research aims to apply the theory of pictorial turn to explore the role of garden imagery in cultural construction and its relevance in contemporary visual expression.

# LITERATURE REVIEWS

**Analysis of the Cultural Characteristics of Yangzhou Gardens**

*Historical and Regional Characteristics of Yangzhou Gardens*

The origins of Yangzhou gardens can be traced back to the Western Han dynasty, with a revival during the Ming dynasty and a peak in the Qing dynasty. In the mid to late Ming period, the prosperity of the salt industry and the smooth operation of the Grand Canal fostered economic growth, enabling salt merchants to play a central role in garden construction, painting, and decorative arts, which contributed to the maturation of Yangzhou's garden tradition (Chu & Liu, 2015). Today, well-preserved examples such as Slender West Lake, Ge Garden, and He Garden are mainly located in Guangling District within a 5-kilometer radius, forming a concentrated cultural landscape.

Situated at the confluence of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal, Yangzhou enjoys a strategic geographical position in central Jiangsu. As a member of the Yangtze River Delta and the Nanjing metropolitan area, it represents a vital nexus of northern and southern cultures, giving rise to the distinctive garden aesthetic of "northern grandeur and southern elegance". (Figure 1). As Liu Daguan remarked in The Pleasure Boats of Yangzhou: "Hangzhou excels in lakes and mountains, Suzhou in marketplaces, and Yangzhou in gardens and pavilions" (Li, 1984). Yangzhou gardens thus hold a unique place within the system of classical Chinese gardens, serving both as a popular destination and a valuable case for the study of ancient architecture and cultural exchange.

**Figure 1** Location of Yangzhou Gardens

*Cultural Arts of Yangzhou Gardens*

Yangzhou gardens, rooted in the Jiangnan garden tradition, have integrated diverse cultures to form a unique style. During Ming and Qing dynasties, salt merchants competed to build gardens with refined layouts and decorations. The Baroque elements in Jingxiang Garden and the European-style architecture in He Garden reflect the fusion of East and West (Xu, 2014). Canal culture provided abundant water resources, with Slender West Lake and the Twenty-Four Bridges showcasing the dynamic beauty of water blending with rock and landscape.

Literati culture was deeply embedded in garden design. Shi Tao, one of the "Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics", directly participated in the design of Pianshi Shanfang in He Garden, integrating painting and poetry into the spatial layout to create an artistic atmosphere. Religious culture further enriched the gardens' connotations: Daming Temple embodies Zen concepts, while Xiaojin Mountain reflects Daoist philosophy.

Moreover, craftsmanship and folk culture also permeate these gardens. Traditional skills like carving and lacquer art enhance the decorative beauty of the gardens, while activities such as morning tea gatherings and temple fairs provide social and recreational functions. Consequently, Yangzhou gardens symbolize a city where imperial grandeur, literati elegance, and diverse cultural elements coexist.

*The Elements of Garden-Making in Yangzhou Gardens*

The cultural and artistic qualities of Yangzhou gardens are primarily reflected in their refined garden-making elements, including architecture, decoration, rockeries and water management, and plant arrangements. Architectural spaces such as pavilions, terraces, towers, and halls not only fulfill practical needs for resting and viewing but also embody cultural symbolism and aesthetic values. Bridges are often built over water bodies, such as the Five Pavilion Bridge (Figure 2) and the Twenty-Four Bridge in Slender West Lake, which combine elegant forms with poetic and historical connotations, creating the experience of "changing views with every step". (Bao & Wang, 2019)
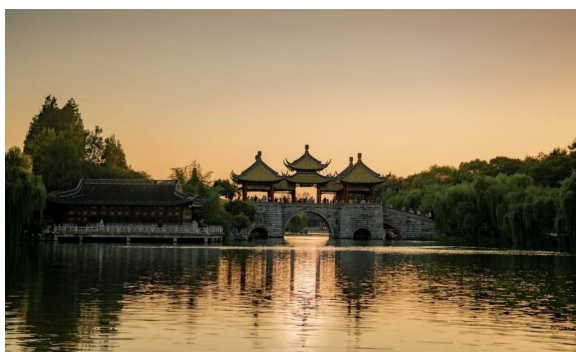


**Figure 2** Five Pavilion Bridge

Decorative arts are concentrated in details such as paving, doors, and railings, which integrate functionality with symbolic expression. Craftsmen skillfully employed materials and patterns to convey auspicious meanings, thereby enriching the cultural connotation of garden spaces. For example, pebble pavements feature motifs such as Bright Future and Successive Promotions, Five Blessings Arrive at the Door (Figure 3), and Butterfly patterns; railings include brick carvings (Figure 4), stone carvings, and wrought iron; gates vary in form, such as the round gate in Ge Garden and the bottle-shaped and begonia-shaped gates in He Garden, which both divide spaces and enhance cultural atmosphere.



**Figure 3** Five Blessings Arrive at the Door



**Figure 4** Brick carvings

In addition, Yangzhou gardens often employ rock stacking and water management to create multilayered landscapes, while planting symbolic flora such as plum blossoms, orchids, bamboo, chrysanthemums, hydrangeas, and magnolias. These arrangements allow gardens to display rich spatial layers and enduring artistic charm throughout the changing seasons.

**Pictorial Turn Theory**

The theory of the pictorial turn was first proposed by image scholar W. J. T. Mitchell. In Picture Theory, Mitchell emphasized that the pictorial turn is not a return to mimetic or resemblance theories but a "postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay among visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality" (Mitchell, 1994). Theory can be regarded as a revival of iconology, shifting the interpretation of images from a static to a dynamic mode, in which audiences generate a unique semantic environment through interaction with the image and interpret it accordingly (Zhan & Xiong, 2023). In his "iconology trilogy" Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (1987), Picture Theory (1994), and What Do Pictures Want? (2006) Mitchell further argued that images are not passive reflections of ideology but active agents in its construction (Mitchell, 1987).

Recent studies have extended the theory across various fields. Shen (2020), in The Pictorial Turn of New Century Tibetan-language Films, analyzes Tibetan-language cinema, revealing a shift from "experiential images" to "intuitive images". Zhang (2022) applies it to team Lab's

new media art, demonstrating its effectiveness in interpreting digital visual practice. Xu et al. (2010), through the bilingual adaptation of Cai Zhizhong's Analects comics, highlight the value of integrating image and text in cross-cultural communication.

Overall, the pictorial turn provides a cross-media explanatory framework for art history and visual culture, offering insights into contemporary visual objects such as political propaganda, tourism souvenirs, and historical painting, and enabling analysis of cultural logic and aesthetic structures across image, space, and visual discourse, while enhancing communicative roles in cross-cultural exchange and cognitive transformation

**Policies and Activities**

UNESCO's Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972) highlights the safeguarding of cultural landscapes with "Outstanding Universal Value" (OUV), such as classical gardens. Similarly, China's 14th Five-Year Plan for Culture and Tourism Development (2021) stresses the protection of historic cultural resources and intangible heritage. Since 2015, Yangzhou, as a key garden culture center, has established a multidimensional framework integrating conservation, inheritance, and dissemination. This includes cultural-creative events and online-offline platforms to expand communication, community and ecological projects for cultural co-construction, and enhanced global influence through UNESCO awards and new media. In this way, Yangzhou garden culture has been transformed from traditional heritage into modern communication carriers (Figure 5)
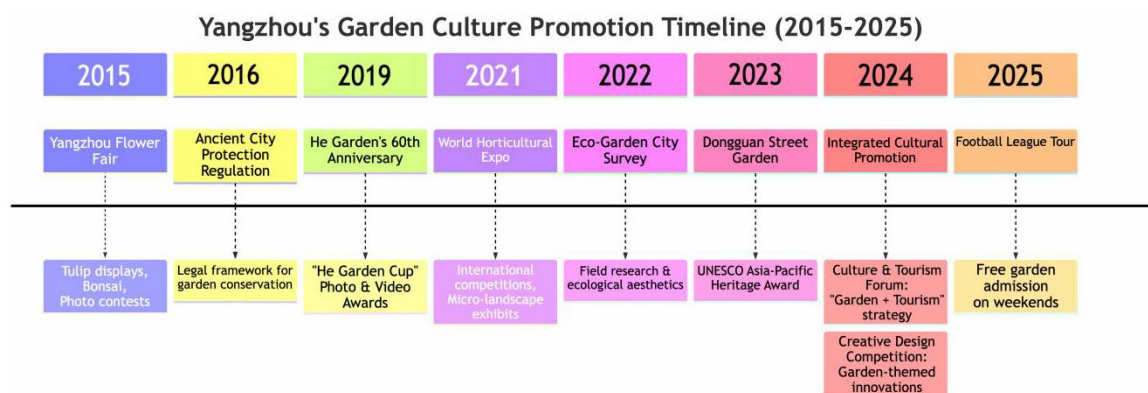


**Figure 5** Yangzhou's Garden Culture Promotion Timeline (2015-2025)

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**Population**

The population of this study consists of two groups: tourists and cultural heritage experts. Tourists were mainly selected from Ge Garden, Slender West Lake, and He Garden, all of which hold significant cultural value and representativeness. Cultural heritage experts were required to have more than ten years of professional experience in garden studies, historic building conservation, or cultural heritage preservation, thereby providing academic perspectives for the study.

**Sample Size**

A total of 388 participants were included in this study. For the quantitative part, 384 tourists were sampled. Based on the report from Jiangsu Net, Ge Garden received over 2,000,000 visitors in 2024, and the sample size was calculated using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) formula. For the qualitative part, 4 cultural heritage experts were selected as participants.

**Research instrument**

This study adopts a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative research. The qualitative part includes literature review, field investigation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The literature review was conducted using academic databases such

as CNKI, Google Scholar, and ThaiLis, supplemented by classical texts and archival materials, to systematically examine the historical development, artistic features, and cultural symbolism of Yangzhou gardens, thereby establishing a theoretical foundation. Fieldwork was carried out at Ge Garden, He Garden, and Slender West Lake, where structured and participant observations were employed to document garden architecture, carvings, patterns, and decorative elements, and images were collected to build a visual database. Through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, representative elements of garden culture were extracted, and the pathways for their transformation and expression were explored.

For the quantitative part, a questionnaire survey was conducted to collect tourists' awareness of Yangzhou garden culture, perception of visual elements, and preferences for cultural. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent validity and reliability testing. Validity was assessed using the Content Validity Index (CVI), with S-CVI/Ave = 0.95, while reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.928. These results indicate that the questionnaire demonstrates strong validity and reliability, ensuring the robustness of the subsequent data analysis.

**Data analysis**

The data analysis in this study combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively support the achievement of the research objectives. For the qualitative part, thematic analysis was applied to systematically summarize and interpret literature, fieldwork records, visual materials, and expert interview content. NVivo software was used to code and categorize textual and visual data, thereby identifying themes related to the historical development, artistic features, and cultural symbolism of Yangzhou gardens. Furthermore, under the framework of the pictorial turn theory, the study explored the role of garden imagery in cultural construction and its relevance in contemporary visual expression.

For the quantitative part, questionnaire data from tourists were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, standard deviation) were first applied to reveal tourists' awareness and perceptions of Yangzhou garden culture. Reliability and validity were then tested through Cronbach's α and the Content Validity Index (CVI) to ensure the scientific rigor of the questionnaire. By integrating qualitative and quantitative methods, this study not only unveils the aesthetic and cultural value of Yangzhou gardens but also provides empirical support for their transformation in contemporary design and cultural communication.

# RESEARCH RESULTS

## Current Status of Research

This study employs a combination of literature review, field investigation, and image collection to conduct an in-depth exploration of the visual imagery elements and their cultural functions in Yangzhou gardens. The results of questionnaires and interviews reveal that, although the visual imagery within these gardens embodies rich cultural connotations, modern visitors show significant differences in understanding. While most respondents can recognize the aesthetic elements, they lack deeper knowledge of the cultural symbolism behind the images. Therefore, it is necessary to systematically interpret the key elements of garden-making in Yangzhou gardens-such as architecture, decoration, rockery, water management, and vegetation-in order to enhance visitors' comprehensive understanding and aesthetic appreciation of garden culture.

## Application of Picture Theory in the Study of Yangzhou Gardens

### *Identification and Classification of Visual Imagery in Yangzhou Gardens*

In this phase, the research systematically identifies and preliminarily classifies spatial and decorative elements with distinct visual characteristics in Yangzhou gardens through field investigations and literature review. Guided by W.J.T. Mitchell's pictorial turn theory, this study examines these elements not as static symbols but as dynamic agents within a visual apparatus that engages viewers' bodies and conveys cultural discourse. As concentrated

embodiments of visual imagery, Yangzhou gardens encode profound cultural significance within their architectural layouts, structural details, and ornamental symbols.

This study focuses on elements that demonstrate strong visual expressiveness and cultural symbolism, primarily including rockeries, doors and windows, paving patterns, threshold ornaments, brick carvings, and wood carvings.

From the perspective of pictorial turn theory, the arrangement of rockeries in a seemingly natural manner (visuality) constructs poetic landscape scenes through compositional techniques, which reflects the cultural discourse of harmony with nature. The physical experience of navigating these miniature landscapes (bodies) is an integral part of this visual apparatus, encouraging visitors to bodily engage with the garden's underlying philosophy of "mountains and forests within arm's reach".

Similarly, doors and windows serve not only as architectural interfaces but also as key visual apparatuses that frame views and guide movement. Their forms (e.g., circular gates symbolizing reunion) are laden with cultural discourse (e.g., wholeness, blessing), while the physical act of passing through them (bodies) completes the transition between spaces and meanings.

Paving patterns act as a "visual language beneath the feet", using motifs like butterflies, ancient coins, wave patterns, and cranes to convey auspicious messages.

Additionally, threshold ornaments such as stone lions, qilin, and drum-shaped stones symbolize status and ritual propriety, establishing visual order and a hierarchical spatial structure. Brick and wood carvings depict images of flowers, birds, historical narratives, and auspicious phrases, revealing the garden owner's cultural literacy and aesthetic taste. (Table 1)

**Table1** Classification Table of Decorative Elements in Yangzhou Gardens

| Type | Common Patterns / Forms | Symbolism & Cultural Meaning | Function |
|---|---|---|---|
| Stones | Zodiac, Seasonal Stones | Harmony with nature | Focal points, seasonal ambiance |
| Gates | Circular, Moon, Lantern, Octagonal | Reunion, blessings, prosperity | Partition spaces, mark entrances |
| Openwork Windows | Plum Blossom, Lotus, Folding Fan | Elegance, good wishes | Frame views, enrich scenery |
| Perforated Windows | Geometric grids, Hexagon | Balance of solid & void, good wishes | Light & ventilation |
| Ground Paving | Butterfly, Copper Coin, Longevity Peach | Longevity, blessings | Beautify floors, convey cultural symbols |
| Eaves & Drip Tiles | Dragon, Phoenix, Bat, Peach, Trigrams | Warding off evil, longevity | Protect eaves, auspicious symbols |
| Doorsteps & Entrances | Lion, Qilin, Crane | Nobility, protection, order | Show status, guard entrances |
| Brick Carvings | Flowers, Birds, Auspicious Texts, Landscapes | Blessings, morals, philosophy | Decorate walls & corridors |
| Wood Carvings | Flowers, Scrolls, Stories, Auspicious Beasts | Craftsmanship, cultural taste | Artistic narrative |
| Couplets | Calligraphy, Garden Names, Classical Poems | Cultural refinement, theme | Highlight motifs, enrich language |

***Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Visual Imagery in Yangzhou Gardens***

This phase aims to explore the application pathways of traditional garden imagery in modern cultural and creative design. By extracting fundamental forms, structural logic, and symbolic

meanings from elements such as rockeries, doors and windows, brick carvings, and wood carvings, the study conducts a systematic analysis and redesign from three perspectives: aesthetic form, semantic pattern, and functional adaptability.

During the deconstruction process, the research employs a three-step method of image translation "form recognition-cultural deconstruction-visual abstraction" to identify and generalize the morphological symbols, cultural contexts, and formal languages of selected elements.

In the reconstruction stage, emphasis is placed on the modern expression of design language, including line simplification, compositional reorganization, color extraction, and material integration. These approaches transform traditional images into graphic symbols with contemporary design aesthetics. This process reflects a shift, as Mitchell describes, from a static to a dynamic mode of image interpretation. The newly created designs empower contemporary audiences to generate unique semantic environments through interaction with the images. This can be achieved, for instance, by applying a simplified rockery pattern to a customizable product, reinterpreting the form of a classic pavilion in a minimalist style, or integrating a traditional door-leaf pattern into the design of souvenirs.

### *Practice and Application of Yangzhou Garden Imagery*

Building upon earlier phases of image identification and reconstruction, the study integrates questionnaire and interview feedback to develop practical applications for garden imagery. A "visual morpheme library" is established to extract and redesign elements such as rock texture, window and door forms, brick and wood carvings, and paving patterns.

Survey results indicate that contemporary consumers prefer visual styles that are bright in color, simple in form, and rich in clear symbolic meaning. Moreover, they value the emotional experience and cultural significance conveyed by image design. In response to these preferences, the study incorporates modern design techniques-such as symbolic extraction, rhythm restructuring, graphic recomposition, and color simplification-while drawing inspiration from flat design, hand-drawing techniques, and Pop Art aesthetics. These integrations breathe new life into traditional images through contemporary visual expression.

At the practical level, the study develops a series of cultural and creative design prototypes based on the core concept of "garden imagery". By integrating imagery with various media, the visual reproduction and multi-scenario communication of garden culture are promoted. This enhances public awareness, recognition, and utilization of traditional culture, transforming it into a tangible cultural resource.

## DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study, based on the historical background, cultural connotations, and garden-making elements of Yangzhou gardens, proposes a design approach that integrates the theory of the pictorial turn. The aim is to more effectively showcase the artistic value of Yangzhou gardens through visualization methods and to enhance their cultural communication power. The study constructs an analytical framework centered on image expression, visual systems, and cultural symbols, and follows three steps: "image identification and classification, deconstruction and reconstruction, and practice and application" to systematically analyze and redesign the visual image elements of Yangzhou gardens. This provides theoretical support and practical pathways for the in-depth study, preservation, and transmission of Yangzhou garden culture.

The research results reveal that Yangzhou gardens constitute a highly visualized cultural system, in which architectural forms, decorations, and rockeries embody rich symbolic and aesthetic meanings. This system functions as a complex visual apparatus, where visuality (the designed way of seeing), discourse (cultural values), and the physical experience of visitors (bodies) are deeply intertwined. Applying the theory of the pictorial turn enables a dynamic interpretation of these elements, transforming traditional imagery into a modern visual

language suitable for cultural and creative design. The "visual morpheme database" established in this study provides designers with concrete tools to translate traditional imagery into new products, media, and experiences, thereby bridging classical culture with contemporary audiences. The design approach of this study aligns closely with the contemporary cultural communication and creative design concept of the "creative transformation and innovative development of traditional culture".

Building on the research results, it can be further explored how traditional imagery may be transformed into diverse forms of expression in cultural and creative design, such as pattern reconstruction, color innovation, and media integration, in order to meet the demands of the times and the aesthetic preferences of younger generations. In particular, the incorporation of Pop Art's high-saturation colors and bold visual symbols enables cross-boundary fusion between traditional garden imagery and modern visual art, offering new approaches for the contemporary expression of Yangzhou garden culture. The strategies proposed in this paper are consistent with the ideas discussed by Tan Shu in her master's thesis The Application of Cultural and Creative Product Design of Yangzhou Slender West Lake, which emphasize enhancing practicality to align with users' daily needs, strengthening innovation to integrate modern design trends, and deepening value to highlight regional cultural connotations. (Tan, 2022) Similarly, the integration of Pop Art and traditional culture proposed in this study aligns with the core direction explored by Cheng Jianwen in his master's thesis Strange Tales of the Past and Present: A Study on the Application of Pop Art Style in the Cultural and Creative Product Design of the "Yangzhou Eight Eccentrics", which stresses the fusion of Pop Art language with traditional artistic elements to innovate cultural and creative design. Both approaches underscore the importance of activating the contemporary expression of traditional culture through modern artistic styles, thereby offering new pathways for cultural and creative product design. (Cheng, 2022)

The contributions of this study are noteworthy. To begin with, it proposes an analytic framework based on the pictorial turn, offering new interpretive approaches for garden culture research. Moreover, it establishes a visual morpheme database that provides actionable tools for cultural and creative product design. Finally, it demonstrates how visualization methods can enable the modern dissemination of traditional culture, thereby enhancing cultural communication.

Nevertheless, several challenges remain. First, balancing historical authenticity with modern reinterpretation is complex: excessive simplification may weaken cultural depth, while overly literal replication may diminish contemporary relevance. Second, incorporating the visual style of Pop Art into cultural and creative design may conflict with the restrained and refined qualities of traditional gardens, requiring careful harmonization. Third, resource limitations such as restricted access to archival materials, specialist knowledge, and rare garden records may constrain comprehensive analysis and application.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the visual, artistic, and cultural dimensions of Yangzhou gardens, demonstrating how traditional imagery can be systematically analyzed, deconstructed, and creatively re-adapted to meet contemporary contexts. By integrating theoretical insights with practical design strategies, the study provides a paradigm for the sustainable communication of cultural heritage, bridging classical garden culture and modern visual expression, promoting long-term appreciation, understanding, and creative utilization, and supporting the development of the local tourism economy. Future research may incorporate specific cultural and creative design cases and communication scenarios to further test and refine this framework, advancing the diversified dissemination and sustainable development of Yangzhou garden culture in global contexts.

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**Data Availability Statement:** The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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