

CONTEMPORARY TRANSFORMATION OF YANGZHOU GARDENS CULTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CULTURAL SYMBOLS

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ABSTRACT

Yangzhou gardens, as a vital component of classical Chinese gardens, embody profound historical and cultural significance alongside distinctive regional aesthetic characteristics. However, in contemporary cultural dissemination, their cultural value remains under-explored and under-utilized. This study aims to identify the core cultural symbols of Yangzhou gardens and explore pathways for their transformation into the contemporary cultural and creative industries. Employing a mixed-methods research approach, the study combines literature analysis, field research, focus groups, and questionnaire surveys. Findings reveal that Yangzhou gardens form a distinctive cultural identity distinct from other classical garden systems through their fusion of “southern delicacy and northern grandeur” and masterful spatial design. Systematically extracting and innovatively applying these cultural symbols not only enhances public recognition and cultural identification with Yangzhou gardens but also provides theoretical support and practical references for regional creative economic development.

Keywords: Yangzhou Gardens, Cultural Symbols, Classical Gardens, Cultural Heritage

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INTRODUCTION

Yangzhou gardens, as treasures of classical Chinese landscaping, boast a long history and profound artistic achievements. Once celebrated as “the most splendid gardens under heaven” due to their pivotal role along the Grand Canal and the flourishing salt merchant culture, they have been inscribed on China's Intangible Cultural Heritage List (Zhao, 2021). However, their current social recognition lags behind that of Suzhou gardens, and they face challenges in insufficient cultural and creative product development and difficulty in conveying their cultural value to younger audiences (Zhao et al., 2019). Cultural heritage is not merely a physical entity but a symbolic system conveying profound meanings(UNESCO, 2005). Its enduring vitality depends on its creative transformation within contemporary life (Hall, 1997). Current research on Yangzhou gardens predominantly focuses on historical documentation, lacking systematic studies grounded in cultural symbolism. Therefore, this research aims to analyze and extract the core cultural symbols of Yangzhou gardens, explore pathways for their transformation within the cultural and creative industries, and thereby advance the sustainable preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- 1) To examine the historical evolution, cultural symbolism, architectural features, landscapes, and cultural significance of Yangzhou Gardens.
- 2) To analyze and compare the distinctive cultural symbols of Yangzhou Gardens with other traditional Chinese gardens, and to investigate the potential of integrating these symbols into the design of creative cultural products that represent the identity of Yangzhou Gardens.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Cultural symbols not only cover the form, structure and function of the creation, but also its core value lies in its "meaning". Cultural objects have both practical and symbolic values, and the correspondence between their form and meanings constitutes the rules of the symbol system. A search for the keyword "cultural symbol" on Web of Science yielded 7,655 results. As can be seen from the statistical chart of the number of articles published in a year, the research on cultural symbols has been increasing year by year.

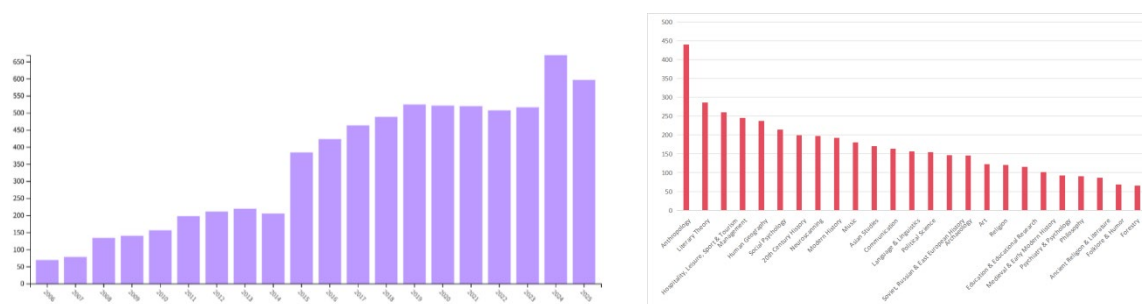


Figure 1 Annual Publication Volume Statistics for Papers on Cultural Symbols in Web of Science

There are many theoretical analyses and practical summaries of researchers who combine cultural symbols with social psychology, national history and values, sustainable consumption concepts, urban landmarks and other fields on the basis of symbol theory. Taken together, the study of cultural symbols is mainly carried out in the following aspects:

Connotation and Symbol System Research

Sopa's study of Indonesian houses reveals how architectural structures and motif symbols carry religious and social values (Sopa, 2018); Wicaksono analyzes the diplomatic role of language as a symbol system in the process of religious localization(Wicaksono, 2019). In addition,

Alefrenko points out from the perspective of philosophy of language that symbols are a bridge between internal imagery and external form, which profoundly influences human creative thinking (Alefrenko, 2015).

Research on Conservation and Sustainable Development

Ismail explores the sustainability of traditional food as a symbol in the transmission of memory and community identity (Ismail, 2025), while Honda and Azmi emphasize that the revitalization of historical buildings and the heritageization of religious spaces should not be limited to the physical and technical level, but should be explored in depth as a symbol of socio-cultural integration in order to promote the transformation of cultural heritage into a tourism resource (Azmi, 2015; Honda, 2014). Instead, their role as symbols of social and cultural integration should be explored in depth, so as to promote the benign transformation of cultural heritage into tourism resources.

Cross-cultural communication and application research

Studies by Zhang, Smith-Jackson and Stachon have consistently shown that there are significant differences in the interpretation of colors, graphics and symbols in different cultural backgrounds (Smith-Jackson, 2003; Stachon, 2018; Zhang, 2019). Chinese consumers tend to focus on textual information and high-contrast symbols. Therefore, in the application of symbols, the cultural appropriateness of visual elements must be prioritized to ensure the accuracy of information dissemination.

Research on digitalization and modern design transformation

Xu developed an AI painting system that proved that the combination of cultural symbols and artificial intelligence can improve the creative experience (Xu, 2023); Yang proposed the strategy of "archetypal image and cognitive transformation" for the Chaoshan Ancestor Worship Symbol, emphasizing the systematic reconstruction from the four elements of context, image, concept, and behavior, instead of simple visual appropriation (Yang, 2024); Zhou proposes to balance the originality and innovation of symbols in commercial illustration to enhance cultural recognition (Zhou, 2019).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs Mixed Methods Research, combining the qualitative insights of in-depth interviews with the quantitative breadth of questionnaire surveys to deliver more interpretive findings. (Creswell, 2018)

Qualitative Research

1) Interviews: The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with three experts representing professional expertise (Patton, 2015). Interviews followed a semi-structured outline covering three dimensions: regional cultural characteristics, garden cultural elements, and cultural and creative expectations.

2) Focus Group: To explore the feasibility of cultural and creative transformation, the researcher organized an 11-member focus group comprising university professors, designers, and potential users. Discussions centered on four core themes: symbol application, product practicality, market adaptability, and innovation.

3) Field Research: Employing field observation, researchers visited representative gardens and venues in Yangzhou including Slender West Lake, Ge Garden, He Garden, and the Yangzhou Grand Canal Museum to collect field data through photography, videography, and written documentation. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) identified highly recognizable visual symbols of Yangzhou gardens.

Quantitative Research

1) Research Instruments: A questionnaire was designed based on qualitative findings, employing content validity indicators (IOC) evaluated by an expert panel. SPSS software calculated Cronbach's Alpha, which demonstrated high reliability, confirming the internal consistency of the survey tool.

2) Population and Sampling: The questionnaire was randomly distributed via online platforms to participants across northern and southern China. A total of 400 valid responses were collected, ensuring the survey's broad representativeness and objectivity.

3) Data Analysis: Collected data underwent analysis using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP). By constructing decision matrices across objective, criterion, and indicator layers, qualitative thinking was mathematically quantified. This enabled precise calculation of consumer preference weights for each design metric of Yangzhou garden-themed cultural and creative products.

RESEARCH RESULTS








Historical Development of Yangzhou Gardens

Through literature review and field research, this study reveals that Yangzhou gardens constitute a vital component of classical Chinese gardens. Their rise, decline, and evolution are intrinsically linked to the transformation of the Grand Canal, the salt industry economy, and regional culture, having undergone a complete journey from inception to peak prominence and eventual transition.

The Tang Dynasty marked the foundational period of Yangzhou's gardens, where the wealth accumulated through its pivotal role as a canal hub attracted numerous distinguished scholars. During the Song Dynasty, garden construction shifted toward the literati class, evolving toward more refined aesthetic sensibilities. The mid-to-late Ming Dynasty witnessed the first peak, as salt merchants rapidly rose to prominence and competed to build gardens as symbols of status. Technologically, this era saw the formation of urban mountain-forest landscapes, with rockery artistry reaching new heights under masters like Ji Cheng. Representative gardens like Xiu Garden and Ying Garden exemplified the deep convergence of salt merchants' wealth and literati aesthetics. During the Kangxi-Qianlong era of the Qing Dynasty, Yangzhou gardens reached their zenith. To host imperial southern tours, salt merchants constructed large-scale garden clusters along Slender West Lake, creating the magnificent vista of "a continuous line of pavilions stretching all the way to the mountains." Stylistically, Yangzhou gardens achieved a unique blend of southern delicacy and northern grandeur, incorporating the monumental scale of imperial architecture while preserving the refinement of Jiangnan gardens.

Yangzhou still retains dozens of classical gardens, mainly the gardens on the lake around the Slender West Lake and some private gardens. The table provides information about several famous gardens in Yangzhou.

Table 1 Famous Gardens in Yangzhou Information

Name of garden	Owner and identity	Year	Area (m ²)	Features	Photo
He's Garden	He Zhiren, Official	Qing Dynasty, 1883	14,000	The combination of Chinese and Western architectural forms and the characteristic with double corridors.	
Xu's Garden	Xu Baoshan, soldier	Republic of China, 1915	6000	Though small in scale, it is well structured and has a well-organized interior.	
Geyuan Garden	Huang Zhi Yun, salt merchant	Qing Dynasty, 1818	24000	The Conception and Construction of the "Four Seasons Stones".	
Yipu Garden	Li Hesheng, salt merchant	Qing Dynasty, 1910	2000	Well-preserved, compact architecture, reasonable layout, simple and natural	
Xiaopan Valley	Zhou Fu, official	Qing Dynasty, 1904	5700	Nine Lion Figure Hill	
Nine Lion figure Hill	Jia Yuan, salt merchant	Qing Dynasty, Daoguan g Period	1031	Highlighting the theme of the moon, with a variety of colorful moon bridges, moon gates and moon windows.	
Ping Shan Hall	-	Song Dynasty, 1048	-	Inside the Daming Temple, it is quiet and tranquil.	

Distinctive Cultural Characteristic of Yangzhou Gardens

Chinese classical gardens have a long history and have formed various artistic schools with their own characteristics. Among them, Suzhou Garden, exemplified by the Humble Administrator's Garden and the Liuyuan Garden, is an outstanding representative of the private gardens in Jiangnan. The core of the garden is that it is small in size and expresses the feelings of the literati and ink masters of seclusion and elegant aesthetics through the exquisite layout of architecture, water, rocks and flowers. At the same time, the northern royal gardens, headed by the Summer Palace, absorbed the elegant style of the Jiangnan gardens on the basis of the grand scale and majesty of the royal architecture, constituting the artistic wonders of the combination of rigidity and flexibility. In this system, Yangzhou garden is located in Jiangnan, but because of the special historical background, in the private garden on the color evolution of a unique, fusion of north and south of the regional style.

Table 2 Comparison of Yangzhou Gardens and Other Gardens

Gardens	Characteristics	Representative Gardens
Northern Imperial Gardens	Grand and imposing, emphasizing symmetry, rich and bold colors	Summer Palace, Chengde Mountain Resort,
Southern Jiangnan Gardens	Long history, numerous in number, exquisite artistry, delicate and elegant colors	Suzhou Gardens: Humble Administrator's Garden, Master of the Nets Garden
Yangzhou Gardens	Blending characteristics of Northern imperial and Southern private gardens, they feature both resplendent grandeur and the delicate charm of Jiangnan gardens. With over 2,000 years of history, they excel in rock arrangement, boasting numerous renowned rock formations.	He Garden, Ge Garden, Slender West Lake

1) Yangzhou gardens and the symbiotic relationship between the salt economy

Yangzhou gardens flourished with the rise of the Qing dynasty salt merchants class has a deep blood connection. Ming and Qing dynasties, Yangzhou by virtue of the geographical advantage of the Grand Canal hub, became the center of the national salt trade. During this period, the salt merchants in the two Huai provinces accumulated huge wealth through monopolization, and this wealth eventually became the most solid material support for the construction of gardens in Yangzhou. For them, the construction of gardens was not only to satisfy the needs of housing and aesthetics, but also a means to demonstrate their status and to obtain social capital through cultural investment. For example, the owner of the garden of Huang Zhi Yun as the two Huai salt merchants, the family's strong capital, so that it can be costless to search for strange stones, transplanted trees, will be the garden into the pinnacle of the art of stacking stones.

**Figure 2** He's Garden

The southern tour of two emperors is Yangzhou garden development of the external core driving force. In the Qing Dynasty, receiving the emperor was not only a political task, but also an opportunity for salt merchants to win the emperor's favor and consolidate their monopoly. According to "Traveling Records of Yangzhou", in the Golden Age of the Qianlong Emperor's southern tour, Yangzhou northern suburbs formed "Buildings and pavilions stretch all the way to the mountains." magnificent scene, promote the rapid expansion of Yangzhou garden scale, established "Yangzhou's gardens are the best in the world" historical position.

2) Both Jiangnan humanistic connotation and northern royal style

Yangzhou gardens are renowned for their fusion of "southern delicacy and northern grandeur." The convergence of Jiangsu's refined craftsmanship and Anhui's solidity, shaped by salt merchant culture, manifested through Yangzhou artisans' practice, achieving extraordinary artistic tension in architecture and decoration. At its core, it remains rooted in literati aesthetics,

transforming painting compositions and poetic couplets into landscape ambience. Influenced by imperial southern tours, Yangzhou gardens adopted the grand scale and opulent colors of imperial gardens. They organically combined expansive suburban waterscapes with the delicate essence of Jiangnan, forming a distinctive artistic framework.



Figure 3 Imperial-style gardens in the Slender West Lake area



Figure 4 Exquisite Doors and Windows in Yangzhou Gardens

3) The Art of Stacking Stones

Yangzhou gardens are renowned for their “mountain-centric design,” with rockery artistry representing the pinnacle of classical construction techniques. Masters like Ji Cheng and Shi Tao emphasized the unity of humanity and nature, while *The Art of Garden Design* laid the theoretical foundation. Landscape architects ingeniously repurposed ballast stones from salt transport vessels. The Four Seasons Rockery in Geyuan Garden exemplifies this, employing stones with such precision that they convey a dynamic sense of time. Conceptually, these gardens integrate principles from landscape painting theory, pursuing the interplay of solid and void. Thus, though crafted by human hands, the rockeries appear as if naturally formed, creating profound artistic depth within limited spaces.



Figure 5 Rock Arrangements in Geyuan Garden

The Potential for Cultural and Creative Transformation in Yangzhou Gardens

Through analyzing existing literature and conducting expert interviews and questionnaire surveys, three major research gaps were identified in the process of transforming Yangzhou garden culture into modern design.

1) Current research on Yangzhou gardens primarily focuses on the landscaping techniques, spatial layouts, and historical evolution of individual gardens, He Garden, or Slender West Lake. Such studies often confine themselves to the restoration and display of the gardens themselves, neglecting to delve into the deeper regional cultural roots underlying these landscapes. Few scholars have conducted systematic cross-disciplinary research linking garden forms to Yangzhou's distinctive salt merchant culture, canal culture, and literati gathering traditions. Consequently, the uniqueness of Yangzhou gardens is often generalized as a branch of Jiangnan gardens, failing to fully highlight their differentiated value and hindering the deep development of their cultural IP.

2) Analysis of academic platforms such as CNKI reveals that among over 500 papers retrieved using the keywords “gardens” and “cultural creativity,” research on Suzhou gardens predominates. As quintessential examples of Jiangnan literati gardens, these emphasize refined artistic conception. In contrast, Yangzhou gardens, though belonging to the same Jiangnan tradition, possess unique characteristics. They blend the delicate beauty of the south with the majestic grandeur of the north, combining the grandeur of imperial gardens with the opulent elements of salt merchant culture. Characterized by imposing rockeries, expansive water features, and ornate architecture, they embody the fusion of secular and imperial aesthetics. However, research on Yangzhou gardens in the context of cultural and creative industries remains marginalized, resulting in a mismatch between their modern market reputation and historical significance. Therefore, specialized research is urgently needed to extract cultural value, uncover the distinctive merits of their northern-southern synthesis, and fill the gap in regional cultural and creative development.

3) Current design practices in applying traditional architectural symbols largely remain at the level of superficial ornamentation. This includes the direct appropriation and stylized decoration of concrete elements like dougong brackets and carved motifs, resulting in a tendency toward superficial application that prioritizes form over substance. Current research lacks a deep integration of semiotics, cultural anthropology, and modern design concepts, failing to address the implicit symbols underlying garden design such as spatial logic, philosophical thought, and humanistic spirit. This disconnection from cultural context makes it difficult for cultural and creative products to evoke emotional resonance among users. This study attempts to transcend the limitations of morphological analysis, exploring the emotional connections and innovative application potential of traditional symbols within contemporary contexts.

4) Through AHP analysis, the criteria layer weights were determined in descending order: cultural heritage, market adaptability, design innovation, and functional utility. Therefore, building upon the research and preservation of Yangzhou gardens, the focus will be shifted toward cultural innovation and market adaptability. The top five cultural symbols by weighting will be applied to contemporary contexts, such as home goods, cultural tourism souvenirs, digital artworks, and urban furniture. This approach aims to achieve the contemporary transformation and market dissemination of cultural value, providing actionable solutions for the living inheritance and commercial development of Yangzhou garden culture in the modern era.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Research indicates that Yangzhou gardens, as a significant branch within China's classical garden system, derive their unique value not only from exquisite landscaping techniques and

spatial aesthetics but are also deeply rooted in a complex cultural context interwoven with salt merchant economics, canal culture, and literati spirit. Existing literature, however, offers limited research on cultural and creative design in Yangzhou gardens, with insufficient exploration of their deeper symbolic layers. This mixed-methods study reveals that translating the architectural forms, spatial logic, and aesthetic concepts of gardens into cultural and creative design language helps transcend the limitations of superficial symbol application. This approach enables cultural connotations to be perceived and understood by the public particularly younger demographics in a more contemporary manner.

However, this study also has certain limitations. Moving forward, based on this research, commercial strategies for transforming Yangzhou garden culture will be proposed. The focus will be on developing a series of cultural and creative products centered around the inheritance of Yangzhou garden culture. Recommendations will be made for Yangzhou's cultural tourism departments and cultural and creative enterprises to strengthen industry-academia-research collaboration, establish a cultural symbol database, and promote cultural intellectual property licensing mechanisms to enhance the depth of cultural development and market dissemination. Future efforts should optimize these strategies and validate their effectiveness through practical application and impact evaluation.

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