



Analysis of the Influencing Factors in the Changes of Southern Song Garden Styles in Wuxing District

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Received 18/04/2025

Revised 28/04/2025

Accepted 20/05/2025

Abstract

Background and Aim: Gardens of the Southern Song Dynasty represent an important facet of classical Chinese garden art, embodying the deeper evolution of social structures and cultural values. As a cultural hub in the Jiangnan region, Wuxing District's garden style uniquely integrates literati aesthetics and religious symbolism, offering distinct research value. However, existing studies have largely focused on cities like Hangzhou and Suzhou, leaving Wuxi gardens systematically underexplored. Framed within Cultural Landscape Theory, this study aims to investigate the mechanisms influencing the stylistic changes of Southern Song gardens in Wuxing, responding to the central research question: *How have political, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms jointly driven the evolution of garden styles throughout history?*

Materials and Methods: Taking Lotus Manor and the Temple of Longevity as representative case studies, this research integrates literature analysis, in-depth interviews (with nine residents and three experts), and field investigations. It systematically analyzes the phased evolution of garden styles across four dimensions: spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery. The study also explores how the dynamic interaction among political, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms shaped garden transformations over time.

Results: The study identifies a three-phase evolution of Southern Song garden styles in Wuxing: “open integration – privatization and simplification – functional reconstruction.” In the Southern Song period, gardens utilized natural topography and integrated poetic imagery with Confucian and Buddhist values. From the Yuan to the Republican periods, political instability and economic shifts led to more enclosed spatial forms and a rise in religious and residential functions. In the modern era, policy-driven cultural revival has led to the regeneration of gardens through the integration of traditional and modern elements. Politically, garden spaces became hierarchized; economically, material construction was shaped; culturally, literati ideals were preserved; and religiously, symbolic meanings were embedded. The interaction of these forces formed a dynamic chain of “structural promotion – symbolic generation – functional transformation.”

Conclusion: This study proposes a “Four-Mechanism Coupling Model,” grouping political and economic mechanisms under the “material–institutional” dimension and cultural and religious mechanisms under the “symbolic–spiritual” dimension, thus validating the applicability of the “material–spiritual–social” triadic structure of Cultural Landscape Theory. The model provides a theoretical framework for the renewal and contemporary expression of traditional garden styles and suggests activating the cultural vitality of historic gardens through community engagement and digital technology.

Keywords: Southern Song Gardens; Wuxing District; Cultural Landscape Theory; Style Evolution; Influencing Mechanisms

Introduction

As an essential vehicle of Eastern cultural artistry, classical Chinese gardens not only embody a profound integration of natural aesthetics and humanistic spirit but also reflect the evolving social structures and cultural values of various historical periods (Liu, 2020). Among them, gardens of the Southern Song Dynasty are particularly distinguished by their literati temperament, poetic imagery, and spiritual symbolism. These gardens served as spatial manifestations of the intellectual and moral ideals of the scholar-official class and exerted a lasting influence on later garden aesthetics and design concepts (Zhou, 1991).

Wuxing District, located in Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, was a major political, economic, and cultural center in the Jiangnan region during the Southern Song period. Situated along the Tiao River and adjacent to the then-capital Lin'an (present-day Hangzhou), Wuxing benefited from exceptional natural resources and rich cultural heritage (Wu & Ke, 2015). The area not only gave rise to typical literati gardens such as





Lotus Manor, but also preserved religious garden spaces like the *Temple of Longevity*, together forming a cultural landscape that fuses Confucian and Buddhist traditions as well as natural and constructed elements (Shen & Ji, 2013). These gardens are well documented in local gazetteers, garden treatises, and poetic inscriptions (Zhou, 1991).

Compared to cities such as Hangzhou and Suzhou, where garden scholarship is well-established, academic studies of Wuxi's gardens remain relatively underdeveloped, particularly in the area of systematic modeling of historical phases and stylistic mechanisms (Tong, 1984). This gap has limited understanding of regional variations in Southern Song gardens and left a theoretical void in the discourse of garden conservation and landscape regeneration. Although recent studies have begun to address stylistic transitions in Wuxing gardens (Zhang, 2021; Zhao & Shen, 2023), there remains a lack of theoretical depth regarding the synergistic interactions between political, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms.

This study introduces **Cultural Landscape Theory** at the outset as its analytical framework, emphasizing that gardens are not only physical constructs but spatial sedimentations of institutional logic, cultural cognition, and symbolic systems (Sauer, 1925). According to Tang and Jin (1998), the theory helps uncover the interaction between spatial form, social structure, and symbolic meaning. Shen and Wang (2009) further affirm its value in guiding garden style restoration and heritage governance. This study builds on the material–spiritual–social triadic structure of cultural landscapes to construct a style–mechanism interaction model and analyzes how Wuxing gardens evolved through multi-mechanism coupling.

A notable feature of Southern Song gardens in Wuxing is their dual expression of **literati aesthetics** and **religious symbolism**. For instance, *Lotus Manor* exemplifies literati garden imagery with its tripartite spatial structure of “studio–water court–objects for contemplation,” enriched by poetic inscriptions and secluded spatial organization, reflecting Confucian ideals of self-cultivation, nature observation, and poetic reflection (Liu, 2020; Zhang, 2021). In contrast, **religious symbolism** manifests through ceremonial axes, meditative spaces, and incense paths. The *Temple of Longevity* features a classic Buddhist axial layout of “Mountain Gate–Main Hall–Dharma Hall,” along with elements such as liberation ponds, incense paths, and stupas that together construct a Chan Buddhist aesthetic of “emptiness—stillness—purity” (Cao, 2005; Shen & Wang, 2009). This dual spatial logic of “aesthetic and faith” differentiates Wuxing gardens from the scenic public gardens of West Lake in Hangzhou and the domestic literati gardens of Suzhou (Tong, 1984).

In recent years, national strategies such as Cultural Revival and Rural Revitalization have provided new contexts and challenges for the protection and revitalization of Wuxing gardens (The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, & The State Council, 2021; Zhejiang Provincial Cultural Relics Bureau, 2022). The spatial tension between tradition and modernity, the restructuring of cultural identity, and the transformation of functional roles have turned these gardens from “static heritage” into “living cultural landscapes,” requiring an in-depth historical inquiry to guide contemporary responses.

Accordingly, this study is driven by the research question: **How have political, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms jointly influenced the evolution of Southern Song Garden styles in Wuxing across history?** To address this, the study selects *Lotus Manor* and the *Temple of Longevity* as representative cases (see Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Using literature analysis, field surveys, and in-depth interviews, the study analyzes their stylistic transformation from four dimensions—**spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery**—and constructs a **multi-mechanism coupling model**. It aims to provide a new theoretical and practical perspective for the understanding, preservation, and contemporary reinterpretation of traditional gardens.



**Figure 1** Lotus Manor

Source: Photo taken by the authors

**Figure 2** Temple of Longevity

Source: Photo taken by the authors

Objectives

This study aims to analyze the influencing factors on changes in Southern Song Garden styles in the Wuxing District.

Literature review

1. Existing Research on Southern Song Garden Styles

Academic research on classical Chinese gardens has developed for nearly a century, with growing scholarly attention to the stylistic characteristics and cultural significance of Southern Song gardens. Zhou (1991), in *History of Chinese Classical Gardens*, identifies the Song Dynasty as a key period in the formation of the "spirit of literati gardens," wherein gardens became important spatial carriers of scholar-official culture and self-cultivation ideals. Zhang (2021) further emphasizes that Southern Song gardens exhibit spatial features such as "seclusion, winding paths, depth, and distance," reflecting the literati's



pursuit of reclusive and tranquil lifestyles. (Liu, 2020) notes the refined design and emotional depth of these gardens, characterizing them as an aesthetic mode that prioritizes "spiritual resonance over formal structure."

Although existing studies have explored the spatial organization, construction techniques, and symbolic features of Southern Song gardens from multiple dimensions, most have focused on mature research areas like Hangzhou and Suzhou (Peng, 1986), while relatively neglecting Wuxi, a critical cultural node adjacent to the Southern Song capital. Wuxing's distinctive spatial forms and symbolic systems have not yet been systematically analyzed (Shen & Ji, 2013). More importantly, current research tends to approach garden styles from formal or aesthetic perspectives, with limited integration of social structures or cultural mechanisms (Cao, 2005; Du, 1990).

2. Studies on the Driving Mechanisms of Garden Style Evolution

In recent years, "style transformation" has become a central theme in garden and cultural landscape research. Scholars now tend to situate garden styles within the broader context of historical and social change, rather than treating them as static visual forms. Cao (2005) argues that garden style evolution is closely tied to national ideologies and shifts in the role of the literati, underscoring the political structures behind aesthetic choices. Zhang (2012) advances a "multi-factor interaction model," in which political systems, economic bases, cultural ideologies, and religious beliefs interact as internal forces that shape garden evolution. He advocates understanding garden style through a "mechanism coupling" framework, which explains how spatial forms are shaped by social structures and generate symbolic meaning through cultural reproduction.

However, these theoretical contributions have yet to be applied in the context of Wuxing. Although local sources such as the *Gazetteer of Huzhou Prefecture* and the *Record of Wuxing Gardens* contain scattered references to stylistic changes (Shen & Ji, 2013), these materials have not been systematically synthesized into a usable theoretical framework. In particular, effective modeling of the linkages between mechanisms and spatial form is lacking, leaving the social basis of garden evolution largely "undeconstructed."

Moreover, existing studies on the cultural imagery of literati gardens tend to remain at an abstract level, with limited discussion of how these ideals are represented in literary works (Zhao & Shen, 2023; Zhang, 2021). Poems, garden records, and stele inscriptions from the Song period reveal deep connections between garden space, literati values, and social order. These texts not only record aesthetic experience but also express ideological structures. Incorporating literary sources into the study of garden style evolution helps to illuminate how "cultural imagery" and "symbolic structures" were historically constructed and sustained (Liu, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

3. Application of Cultural Landscape Theory and Theoretical Framework

Cultural Landscape Theory, first proposed by geographer Sauer (1925), defines landscapes as the spatial sedimentation of human culture on the natural surface, embodying both material form and symbolic meaning. Under this framework, landscapes are not passive backdrops but complex results of historical processes, social structures, and belief systems. Tang & Jin (1998) introduced this theory into Chinese garden and settlement studies, proposing that it can reveal the triadic structure of space: social, cultural, and symbolic. Shen & Wang (2009) emphasized the theory's guiding value for garden restoration and cultural heritage policies.

In landscape studies, the importance of Cultural Landscape Theory lies in its ability to bridge the divide between "form-based" and "mechanism-based" analysis, making it possible to explain why a garden looks the way it does through the interactive structure of "material–spiritual–social." For example, Tang & Jin (1998) used the theory to analyze traditional settlements, integrating terrain, water systems, spatial zoning, and religious belief into a holistic model. Shen & Wang (2009) applied it to classical garden restoration by interpreting the relationship between inscriptions, ancestral shrines, religious elements, and spatial layout through a symbolic lens.

Although the theory has been applied in the context of Suzhou gardens and Huizhou settlements (Tang & Jin, 1998), it remains largely unutilized in research on the stylistic evolution of Southern Song gardens in Wuxing (Zhou, 1991). In particular, no studies have yet constructed an integrated "mechanism–style–symbolism" model based on the Wuxing context. Furthermore, there has been limited comparison with other theoretical approaches, such as memory studies or narrative landscape theory. As noted by Shen & Wang (2009) and Qi (2019), Cultural Landscape Theory holds unique advantages for explaining both temporal transformation and structural continuity in landscape research.

4. Research Gap in Wuxing and the Positioning of This Study





Although Wuxing is geographically close to Lin'an, its historical significance during the Southern Song Dynasty goes far beyond proximity. It was a fiefdom for imperial descendants, enjoying special political status. Economically, it was prosperous and stable, serving as a favored residence for scholar-official families. Culturally, its remote mountains and accessible waterways made it an ideal setting for scholarly pursuits, garden construction, and poetic engagement (Shen & Ji, 2013; Wu & Ke, 2015). During this time, garden culture reached a peak in Wuxing, featuring a distinctive Song-style characterized by refined site selection, intricate rock and water arrangements, and a poetic aesthetic grounded in reclusion and Chan Buddhist spirituality (Cao, 2005; Zhang, 2012). These stylistic traits not only influenced later developments in Wuxing gardens but also constituted a distinct regional style within the broader artistic system of Southern Song Garden culture.

Based on this foundation, this study selects Lotus Manor and the Temple of Longevity as representative cases. By integrating Cultural Landscape Theory with a mechanism coupling model, it systematically traces the logic of stylistic evolution in Wuxing's Southern Song gardens. The research aims to fill theoretical, regional, and mechanistic gaps by transitioning from descriptive approaches to dynamic structural modeling in the study of historical Chinese gardens.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in **Cultural Landscape Theory** as its core analytical foundation. It explores how the garden styles of the Southern Song period in Wuxing District have undergone processes of continuation, reconstruction, and reinterpretation through the interactive influence of political, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms across different historical periods. Proposed by geographer Sauer (1925), the theory conceptualizes landscape as a cultural sediment formed through long-term interaction between human society and the natural environment, characterized by a triadic structure of **material, spiritual, and social dimensions** (Sauer, 1925; Tang & Jin, 1998). As a typical form of cultural landscape, gardens not only reflect the evolution of spatial design and landscape techniques but also embody the institutional logic and symbolic values of specific historical contexts (Shen & Wang, 2009).

To reveal the mechanisms underlying the stylistic evolution of gardens in Wuxing, this study constructs a “**Four-Dimensional Style – Fourfold Mechanism**” model (see Fig. 3). The four stylistic dimensions—**spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery**—correspond to the triadic structure of **material form, spatial organization, and symbolic system** in Cultural Landscape Theory. These are matched with four influencing mechanisms—**political, economic, cultural, and religious**—which constitute the deep structural drivers of stylistic transformation.

The model highlights the **dynamic coupling** between mechanisms and stylistic dimensions: the **political mechanism** reshapes spatial hierarchy and institutional planning; the **economic mechanism** provides the material basis for garden construction and use; the **cultural mechanism** governs the generation of symbolic meaning; and the **religious mechanism** contributes Buddhist elements that ritualize the spatial structure. Particularly within the **cultural imagery** dimension, elements such as poetry, inscriptions, and paintings do more than decorate—they construct a “poetic space” reflecting the owner’s moral aspirations and the cultural ethos of the time (Liu, 2020; Zhou, 1991).

To enhance cultural adaptability, the model incorporates traditional Chinese landscape philosophy—including **fengshui**, the Confucian ideal of “self-cultivation, family regulation, governance, and world peace,” and the Daoist principle of **unity between humanity and nature**—framing the garden as both a space of moral cultivation and a vessel for identity expression and cultural education (Tang & Jin, 1998).

Throughout history, these mechanisms have formed **phased interaction paths**: during the Southern Song to Yuan and Ming periods, political and cultural mechanisms jointly shaped educational gardens and residence-garden compounds; in the Qing dynasty, economic and cultural mechanisms encouraged the pictorial and display-oriented development of gardens; in the modern period, under the dual impetus of **cultural revival and policy support**, Southern Song style has been retranslated as a symbolic resource for local identity and tourism, entering a phase of **cultural reproduction** (Fang et al., 2020).



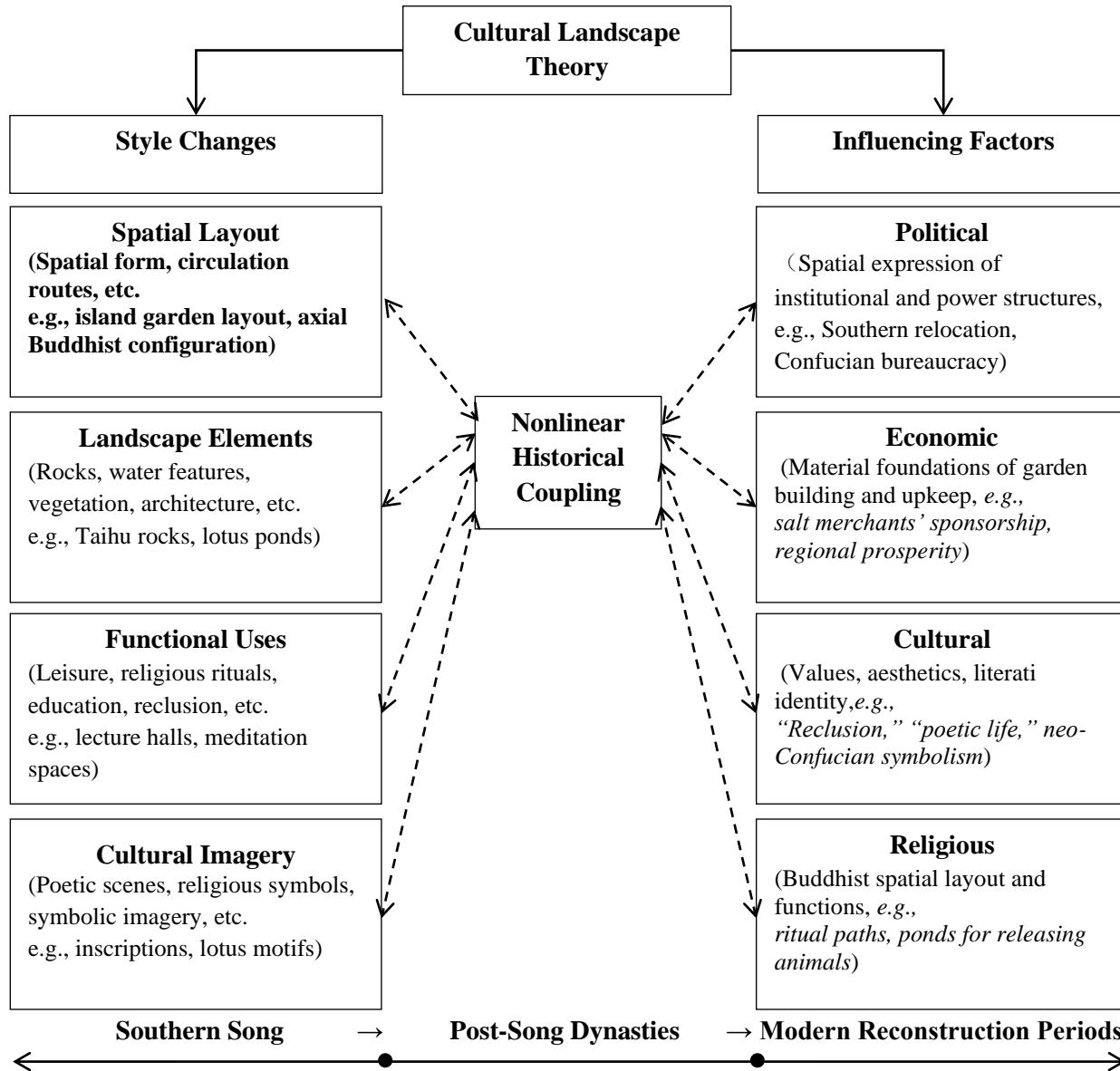


Figure 3 Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This study is based on Cultural Landscape Theory and adopts a qualitative research approach, combining document analysis, in-depth interviews, and case study research to systematically explore the evolution characteristics of Southern Song Garden styles in Wuxing District and the multi-dimensional driving mechanisms behind these changes. The research follows a structured three-stage process (theoretical grounding – empirical investigation – analytical induction) to construct a conceptual model of style-mechanism interaction and propose practical suggestions for cultural inheritance and contemporary reinterpretation.

1. Research Area and Sample Selection

The research is conducted in Wuxing District, Huzhou, Zhejiang Province, which was an important political, cultural, and economic center during the Southern Song period. The region preserves key examples of Southern Song Garden heritage, including **Lotus Manor** and **Temple of Longevity**, which



represent both literati and temple garden styles, making it an ideal empirical condition for cultural landscape research.

The sample selection combines purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods to form a three-tiered sample system:

(1) Wuxing Residents (9 participants): Nine representative residents were selected through community recommendations and the "Wuxing Garden Enthusiasts WeChat Group." All have lived in the district for over ten years and have long been involved in or interested in traditional garden culture. The sample covers different age groups, and the interviews focus on their perceptions, emotional attitudes, and cultural identity regarding garden style changes.

(2) Garden Experts (3 participants): Three experts were selected based on recommendations from local universities and cultural research institutions. These scholars have substantial academic experience and practice in Southern Song Garden styles and Wuxing garden culture. The interviews focus on the mechanisms behind garden style evolution and the applicability of cultural landscape theory in the Wuxing context.

(3) Representative Garden Cases (2 core sites): **Lotus Manor** (a private literati garden) and **Temple of Longevity** (a temple garden) were selected as core case studies. Both were cross-recommended by interviewees, and they represent the typical Southern Song Garden style, supported by comprehensive historical documentation. Additional gardens, such as **Yu Family Garden** and **Ye's Rockery**, were used as auxiliary cases for comparison.

2. Data Collection Methods

To ensure a systematic and diversified dataset, three primary data collection methods were employed:

(1) Document Analysis: A range of historical and contemporary sources were reviewed, including local gazetteers (Huzhou Prefecture Gazetteer, Lotus Manor Records), classical texts, garden poetry, paintings, ancient maps, architectural drawings, and academic publications. These sources helped establish the historical context of style evolution and revealed the symbolic meanings embedded in the cultural landscape.

(2) In-depth Interviews: A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents and experts. Guiding questions included:

- What are the most representative Southern Song gardens in Wuxi District?
- How have these gardens' styles evolved over different historical periods?
- What factors have influenced these changes?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on cultural perceptions, aesthetic preferences, and literary references to gardens.

(3) Case Study Analysis: Field visits to **Lotus Manor** and **Temple of Longevity** documented spatial layout, landscape elements, and cultural imagery. Photographs, sketches, and spatial measurements were collected. These data were triangulated with literature and interview content to analyze how styles have changed over time and how social forces have shaped their evolution.

3. Data Analysis Methods

Three qualitative analysis methods were applied:

(1) Thematic Analysis: Open coding and axial coding were applied to interview transcripts to identify core themes and underlying mechanisms. These were categorized and compared to extract recurring factors influencing garden styles, which were then synthesized into a conceptual model.

(2) Comparative Analysis: Garden styles in Wuxing District were analyzed across six historical periods (Southern Song, Yuan, Ming, Qing, Republican, and modern). Cross-regional comparisons with representative gardens in Suzhou and Hangzhou were also conducted to identify both general patterns and local distinctions.

(3) Contextual Analysis: By comparing the perspectives of residents and experts, this method examined how social structures, cultural transitions, and value systems influence perceptions of garden styles. It revealed how cultural cognition and symbolic interpretation varied across social groups.



4. Research Procedure

The research was conducted in three stages:

Stage One: Literature review, construction of the theoretical framework, and refinement of research questions.

Stage Two: Fieldwork, including interviews, site surveys, and data collection (images, drawings, narratives).

Stage Three: Data coding and interpretation, analysis writing, and proposal of strategies for cultural preservation and landscape revitalization.

5. Methodological Limitations

As a qualitative study, this research involves a degree of subjectivity in data interpretation. Participant selection was recommendation-based, which may introduce sampling bias. The findings are primarily derived from case-based generalization and would benefit from future quantitative validation. Furthermore, the interpretation of cultural imagery, particularly in poetic and symbolic texts, remains inherently open to multiple readings.

Results

Although this study is guided by a single overarching objective—to analyze the influencing factors behind the changes in Southern Song Garden styles in Wuxing District—the results are organized into two sub-objectives to ensure logical clarity and structural hierarchy. The first focuses on identifying and summarizing the characteristics of stylistic evolution, and the second on analyzing and modeling the driving mechanisms of change.

Research objective (Part 1): Identification and Summarization of Garden Style Evolution Characteristics

The garden styles of Wuxing District have experienced distinct, phased transformations from the Southern Song period to the present day. These transformations, spanning four core dimensions—spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery—not only reflect shifts in sociopolitical, economic, and cultural structures, but also embody a sustained response to the “material–spiritual–social” triadic structure central to Cultural Landscape Theory.

(1) Southern Song Period

Garden styles during this period integrated natural topography with the spiritual ideals of both the literati and Chan Buddhism. Literati gardens, such as Lotus Manor, typically featured a tripartite spatial configuration of “studio–water courtyard–object appreciation,” reflecting the harmony between landscape and scholarship. In contrast, temple gardens like the Temple of Longevity adopted symmetrical axial layouts to emphasize ritual spaces for Buddhist practice. Common landscape elements included Taihu rocks, lotus ponds, bamboo groves, pine trees, and moon gates—symbolizing the fusion of literati aesthetics and Chan religious ideals. These gardens fulfilled multiple functions, including scholarly lectures, reclusive cultivation, Buddhist chanting, and poetic gatherings. Their cultural imagery centered on a composite system of “self-cultivation, poetic life, and Confucian morality.”

(2) Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties

Against a backdrop of political instability and shifting social orders, garden spatiality transitioned from open and literati-driven configurations toward more enclosed, private, and ritual-centered forms. Garden use increasingly focused on domestic life and religious ceremony, while symbolic ornamentation and poetic inscriptions were gradually simplified or removed. Design strategies favored practicality over symbolism, with landscape elements often becoming more uniform and function-oriented.

(3) Republican Period

During this era, garden spaces became fragmented in structure and more diversified in function. Traditional literati symbolism declined, while new uses—such as civic infrastructure, educational spaces, and private housing—emerged. Spatial coherence and symbolic expression were weakened, reflecting the broader sociopolitical disruption of the time.

(4) Modern Period



Under the influence of contemporary policies promoting cultural revival and heritage protection, many historical gardens in Wuxi have been restored and revitalized. These restorations integrate traditional spatial forms and symbolic motifs with new societal roles, such as spaces for cultural exhibition, education, tourism, and community engagement. The result is a hybrid garden form that reinterprets Southern Song aesthetics within a modern narrative framework, emphasizing both historical continuity and functional reinvention.

These transformations are analyzed below by historical stage. The specific characteristics of Wuxing garden styles across different periods are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Evolution of Garden Style in Wuxing District (Lotus Manor & Temple of Longevity)

Historical Period	Spatial Layout	Landscape Elements	Functional Uses	Cultural Imagery
Southern Song (1127–1279)	Open and terrain-responsive layout; integrated “courtyard–water–study” composition; axial alignment combining literati and Buddhist spatial logic	Taihu rocks, lotus ponds, pine and bamboo groves, moon gates, poetic inscriptions, and Chan aphorisms	Poetry gatherings, Confucian lectures, Buddhist rituals, and literati retreat	Composite imagery of “reclusion–scholarship–morality”; fusion of Confucian and Chan Buddhist symbolism
Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)	Contracted spatial organization, simplified hierarchy, monastic axial core emphasized	Zen halls, pagodas, ritual altars, spirit tablets; enhanced religious symbolism	Primarily Buddhist rituals, diminished scholarly functions, and partial civic use retained.	Dominant Chan religious imagery; spiritual restoration under Mongol governance
Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)	Elevated axes, complex courtyard structure, integration of temple and residence	Refined features like water pools, pavilions, artificial rockeries, and bamboo; garden names reflect Confucian and imperial ideology	Co-functionality of religious rites and education; increased residential and social use	Literati aesthetics reaffirmed; local elite and cultural identity reflected in toponyms and inscriptions.
Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)	Inward-facing, enclosed layout; modular and compact design	Decorative pavilions and stylized rockeries; minimized ecological planting	Emphasis on leisure and domestic ritual; declining educational/religious use	Shift from moral-laden symbolism to visual spectacle and scenographic storytelling
Republican Era (1912–1949)	Fragmented and adaptive layout; overlapping civic and religious functions	Retained traditional elements (e.g., steles, towers) mixed with local civil infrastructure	Continued popular Buddhist activities; partial conversion to housing or public use	Folk culture and ethnic symbols emerge; literati aesthetics weakened
Modern (1949–present)	Reopened and functionally zoned layout for tourism, exhibition, and education	Combination of restored historical features and modern materials (e.g., lighting, signage, concrete)	Cultural exhibitions, patriotic education, community festivals, and public recreation	Reinterpretation of “Southern Song Style” for cultural branding; a hybrid of tradition and modern symbolic expression

In summary, this analysis demonstrates that the garden styles of Wuxing District have undergone significant transformations across historical periods. From the open, literati-centered gardens of the Southern Song to today's multifunctional cultural landscapes, each phase of evolution has been shaped by the intertwined influences of political, economic, cultural, and religious forces. These transitions reflect not



only material and symbolic changes but also highlight the enduring cultural continuity of Wuxing gardens in response to the material, spiritual, and social dimensions of landscape identity.

Research objective (Part 2): Analysis of the Core Mechanisms Driving Style Changes

The mechanisms influencing the evolution of garden styles in Wuxing District span four dimensions: political, economic, cultural, and religious. These mechanisms do not operate in isolation but interact dynamically, and their influence has shifted across different historical periods.

1. Political Mechanism:

The relocation of the Southern Song capital to Lin'an catalyzed the migration of the literati, transforming gardens into spaces for cultural expression and academic exchange. Gardens such as Lotus Manor illustrate the intertwining of public and private functions, with uses ranging from lectures to poetic gatherings. In the following periods, political centralization and social instability led to the contraction of garden space, which became increasingly privatized. Shifts in urban governance and zoning redefined ritual spaces, making many gardens more symbolic than functional.

2. Economic Mechanism:

The commercial prosperity of the Southern Song provided strong material support for garden construction. Literati and merchant patronage enabled the use of high-quality materials and artistic techniques. However, economic decline in later periods limited garden maintenance and expansion, leading to the disrepair or repurposing of many gardens. In the late Qing period, the revival of merchant influence temporarily restored garden construction, though with a greater focus on decoration rather than symbolic depth.

3. Cultural Mechanism:

Confucian values and literati aesthetics dominated Southern Song Garden design, promoting ideals of "self-cultivation, poetic life, and scholarly retreat." Garden layouts such as the "studio–rockery–pond" configuration embodied the fusion of internal reflection and external scenery. Although the influence of literati gradually fragmented in later periods, Qing scholars revived some of these elements through re-inscriptions and imitations. In modern times, cultural revitalization efforts have reactivated these themes in exhibition, education, and identity-building landscapes.

4. Religious Mechanism:

Chan Buddhism influenced garden spatiality through ritual layouts such as the "gate–hall–pagoda" axis and symbolic elements like liberation ponds and incense paths. These features supported a meditative experience aligned with the Chan aesthetic of "emptiness, stillness, and purity." Although religious structures weakened in later periods, they have been reintroduced in modern garden restorations in symbolic forms, such as lotus motifs or ritual zones adapted for cultural displays.

Integrated Impact:

Over time, the dynamic interplay of these mechanisms resulted in a phased transformation of garden styles: from the open literati and religious spaces of the Southern Song period, to the privatized, function-driven gardens of later periods, to the hybridized cultural-tourism landscapes of the modern era. The trajectory is summarized in Table 2, demonstrating how each mechanism shaped the four key dimensions: spatial layout, functional uses, landscape elements, and cultural imagery.

Table 2 Summary of Key Influencing Mechanisms on Garden Style Evolution

Historical Period	Dominant Mechanism	Spatial Layout	Functional Uses	Landscape Elements	Cultural Imagery
Southern Song (1127–1279)	Political + Cultural	Coexistence of literati and temple spaces; "courtyard–pond–study" layout	Lectures, chanting, worship, and	Taihu rocks, lotus ponds, pine and bamboo, moon gates,	"Cultivation–Poetry–Chan" composite cultural imagery

Historical Period	Dominant Mechanism	Spatial Layout	Functional Uses	Landscape Elements	Cultural Imagery
Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)	Political + Religious	Shrinking ritual layouts; privatization	spiritual cultivation Mainly Buddhist rituals, reduced scholarly functions, some public use retained.	Zen halls, pagodas, ritual altars, incense paths	Strengthened religious symbols; fading literati imagery
Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)	Religious + Political	Emphasis on axial symmetry, complex courtyard structure	Religious rites and education, increased residential and social use	Pools, pavilions, bamboo groves, rockeries	Continued literati aesthetics; local elite cultural identity in toponyms and inscriptions
Qing Dynasty (1644–1912)	Economic + Cultural	Inward-facing, enclosed layout; modular, compact design	Leisure-focused; weakened cultural functions	Decorative pavilions, stylized rockeries, reduced planting diversity	Visual aesthetics dominate, reducing the symbolic literary identity
Republic of China (1912–1949)	Political + Economic	Fragmented layout; mixed-use functions	Combined religious, educational, and residential functions	Retained traditional elements like steles and towers, mixed with local infrastructure	Emergence of folk culture and ethnic symbols; weakened literati aesthetics
Modern (1949–present)	Cultural + Religious (Re-aestheticized)	Open and functionally zoned layout for tourism, exhibition, and education	Cultural exhibitions, educational programs, tourism, ritual revival	Traditional features integrated with modern materials (e.g., lighting, signage, concrete)	Cultural symbolism revived through immersive narrative spaces; hybridization of traditional and modern symbols

Comprehensive Analysis

In conclusion, the garden styles of Wuxing District have undergone a nuanced transformation from the literati-religious spatial systems of the Southern Song period to contemporary representations of local



identity and cultural memory. These changes in spatial layout, landscape elements, and functional roles were dynamically shaped by the interaction of political, economic, cultural, and religious mechanisms across different historical periods.

Despite such transformations, the core cultural structure of the gardens has remained remarkably consistent, embodying ideals of poetic life, spiritual retreat, and Confucian education. This continuity reflects the “material–spiritual–social” triadic framework of Cultural Landscape Theory, which provides an analytical lens for understanding how traditional gardens adapt over time:

1. Material Dimension: Influenced by political and economic forces, manifested in changes to spatial configurations, construction techniques, and material quality. For example, during the Southern Song period, the prosperity of the capital and the patronage of both literati and merchants allowed gardens to feature premium materials such as Taihu stones and lotus ponds, supporting aesthetic ideals while maintaining functional spaces for intellectual and religious activities. Over time, economic shifts led to the simplification of materials and the privatization of garden spaces, as gardens became more confined and focused on private rather than public use.

2. Spiritual Dimension: Driven by cultural and religious mechanisms, reflected in Chan aesthetics, literati ideals, and symbolic inscriptions embedded in the gardens. For instance, the spiritual dimension of gardens like Lotus Manor and the Temple of Longevity was influenced by Confucian values and Chan Buddhist aesthetics, with garden designs incorporating spaces for reflection, scholarly study, and Buddhist rituals. In modern times, efforts to preserve these spiritual aspects have continued, emphasizing their role in the cultural revitalization of gardens and their symbolic importance in the contemporary landscape.

3. Social Dimension: Gardens served as spaces for scholarly gatherings, public rituals, and expressions of social hierarchy, adapting to shifting community roles and functions. During the Southern Song period, gardens were spaces of both intellectual and spiritual engagement, where the literati could retreat from public life. As political centralization and social instability led to garden privatization, gardens became more isolated, with their social roles diminished but still significant in terms of cultural identity and status. In the modern era, gardens have taken on new roles in public and educational contexts, with a strong focus on cultural tourism and local identity building.

This conceptual framework helps explain the resilience and adaptability of garden traditions and offers guidance for current landscape management. Future strategies for garden conservation should go beyond physical preservation, emphasizing the revitalization of cultural meaning and social relevance to ensure that these historical landscapes continue to evolve meaningfully in the modern context.

Discussion

1. Reinterpretation of the Evolutionary Path of Garden Styles

The research results show that the Southern Song Garden style in Wuxing District has undergone a typical stage-by-stage evolution across four core dimensions: spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery. From the Southern Song ideal of "mountains and waters as the bones, culture and education as the soul" of the literati, to the increasing balance of religious and private features during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, followed by the transformation towards a fragmented structure and mixed functions in the Republican era, and finally, to the new expression guided by "cultural revival—functional reconstruction" in the modern era. This process highlights the strong resilience of traditional gardens amidst political changes and social transformations.

Although the material forms of the gardens have changed, their role in preserving cultural memory and values has remained consistent. Whether through historical documents like the *Gazetteer of Huzhou Prefecture* and *Records of Wuxing Gardens*, or field data collected through interviews, the gardens in Wuxing have continuously embodied multiple cultural functions—first as scholarly venues, then as religious spaces, and now as platforms for cultural display and tourism (Wu & Ke, 2015; Zhao & Shen, 2023).

2. Driving Mechanisms and Theoretical Mapping





This study further finds that the evolution of garden styles is not driven by a single variable, but by the dynamic interplay of four key mechanisms: political, economic, cultural, and religious. Through a thorough review of these mechanisms, this study proposes a three-stage path of "structural promotion—symbolic generation—functional transformation," which aligns with the "material—spiritual—social" triadic structure in Cultural Landscape Theory:

(1) Material Dimension: Political and economic mechanisms shape the spatial layout and physical form of gardens through institutional changes and resource allocation. For instance, the bureaucratic system of literati during the Southern Song period led to the emergence of "educational gardens," while the commercial prosperity in the late Qing period saw gardens with a focus on decoration and scenography (Cao, 2005).

(2) Spiritual Dimension: Cultural and religious mechanisms dominate the aesthetic ideals and symbolic structure of gardens, embodied in literati inscriptions, Chan Buddhist compositions, and poetic naming systems. For example, in Zhao Mengfu's *Rhapsody on Wuxing*, the concept of "observing things to attain profound understanding" translates spatially, reflecting the fusion of literature and garden design (Liu, 2020; Zhou, 1991).

(3) Social Dimension: The functions of gardens have shifted from spaces for lectures and rituals to residential and tourism uses, reflecting changes in the social roles and audiences. In interviews, many residents expressed that "gardens are not only landscapes but also the crystallization of cultural and local identity."

This triadic interaction illustrates the strong explanatory power of Cultural Landscape Theory in interpreting historical garden evolution and highlights the structural continuity of gardens as "cross-temporal cultural landscapes."

3. Regional Comparisons and Specific Impact of Chan Buddhism

Compared to the West Lake gardens in Hangzhou, gardens in Wuxing exhibit stronger "cultural and educational functionality," and compared to the private gardens of Suzhou, they show a stronger "cultural heritage orientation." For instance, Lotus Manor integrates multiple functions, such as lectures, retreat, and poetic engagement, while the Temple of Longevity Garden exemplifies the Chan aesthetic of "emptiness, stillness, and purity" through its axial layout and Buddhist symbolism. These features not only differentiate Wuxing gardens but also provide new perspectives on evaluating the value of local gardens.

(1) Limitations and Future Directions Despite using diverse data sources and methodologies, this study has several limitations:

(2) Sampling Bias: The selection of residents and experts was mainly based on recommendations, which may introduce perspective bias.

(3) Fragmented Historical Records: Some historical sources are incomplete, requiring cross-validation to ensure accuracy.

(4) Subjective Interpretation: Especially in the analysis of cultural imagery and poetic texts, the researcher's interpretation remains somewhat subjective.

Future research is recommended to expand the sample size, incorporate GIS technologies, and use spatial modeling methods to further visualize the evolution of garden styles and improve the identification of mechanisms, advancing the integration of "space—culture—policy" in traditional garden studies.

Conclusion

This study, grounded in Cultural Landscape Theory, selects Lotus Manor and the Temple of Longevity in Wuxi District as representative case studies. It systematically analyzes the stage-by-stage evolution of Southern Song Garden styles across four dimensions: spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery. It further examines the sustained impact of four key mechanisms—political, economic, cultural, and religious—on the stylistic transformation of these gardens.

Findings indicate that the evolution of Southern Song Garden styles in Wuxing demonstrates a dual trajectory of "**phased change and structural continuity.**" From openness to enclosure, from literati education to residential use, and eventually to modern functions such as exhibition and tourism, these





gardens have consistently upheld core cultural values of **"poetic living," "spiritual reclusion," and "Confucian moral cultivation"** despite their material transformations.

This study proposes a **"Four-Dimension–Four-Mechanism Interaction Model,"** emphasizing that garden styles are not statically inherited but dynamically reconstructed through the coupling of **"space–symbol–institution"** during periods of social transformation. The four mechanisms map onto the triadic structure of Cultural Landscape Theory as follows: **political and economic mechanisms correspond to the material and institutional aspects; cultural and religious mechanisms reflect the symbolic and spiritual layers** of landscape identity. This model not only validates the applicability of Cultural Landscape Theory but also provides a structured analytical framework for regional garden studies.

In addition, **historical poetry and inscriptions** related to Wuxing gardens—such as Zhao Mengfu's *Rhapsody on Wuxing*—reflect and reinforce the evolving cultural imagery embedded in garden forms, demonstrating how literary representations helped shape both the symbolic resonance and aesthetic direction of garden design over centuries.

Practically, the findings offer a theoretical and methodological basis for the protection, adaptive reuse, and contemporary reinterpretation of historical gardens. It is recommended that future protection efforts **emphasize the activation of cultural content and social function**, using digital tools and participatory methods to transform **"static heritage"** into **"living landscapes."** For instance, **digital reconstruction of Lotus Manor's original spatial layout, combined with community storytelling**, could help reinterpret literati symbolism for contemporary audiences.

Future research may expand the sample size and incorporate **GIS-based spatial analysis and digital modeling** to enhance the visualization and spatiotemporal mapping of garden style evolution. This would further support the **inheritance and renewal** of garden cultural heritage within the context of contemporary society.

Recommendation

To further promote the protection, inheritance, and contemporary interpretation of Southern Song Garden styles in Wuxing District, this study puts forward the following three specific recommendations based on its key findings:

1. Recommendations for Garden Protection and Governance Mechanisms

This study reveals that the Southern Song gardens in Wuxing exhibit significant stage-by-stage evolution in aspects such as spatial layout, landscape elements, functional uses, and cultural imagery. It is recommended that, during the protection and restoration process, priority should be given to identifying and preserving representative traditional layouts and landscaping elements from the Southern Song period, particularly those that reflect the cultural symbols of literati aesthetics and Chan Buddhist spirit. In practice, historical documents such as the *Huzhou Prefecture Gazetteer* and *Records of Wuxing Gardens* can be referenced to develop a list of key elements to be identified and prioritized for protection, thereby enhancing the historical accuracy of the restoration.

It is further recommended to establish a dynamic heritage assessment mechanism centered on cultural orientation, promoting **"de-formalized"** governance to prevent stylistic distortion and functional redundancy. Public education and community co-creation mechanisms should be implemented, including cultural activities such as **"Song Garden Lecture"** workshops and **"Poetry & Garden"** guided tours, helping citizens engage with and appreciate the historical and cultural essence of traditional gardens.

2. Policy Recommendations for Addressing Style Evolution Mechanisms

The study identifies that the evolution of garden styles is deeply shaped by the interaction of multiple mechanisms—political, economic, cultural, and religious. Accordingly, it is recommended to incorporate a **"multi-mechanism synergy"** perspective in garden-related policy formulation. This means systematically considering the compounded influences of various societal forces in policy design, thereby achieving coordinated planning across spatial organization, functional guidance, and symbolic structure through institutional design, resource allocation, and cultural intent.





At the operational level, a tripartite collaboration model involving government, academia, and local communities is encouraged, drawing on participatory design principles to integrate local knowledge and historical narratives with expert perspectives. In terms of technology, digital exhibitions and immersive experiences may be cautiously introduced, but should serve as supportive tools rather than dominating features, ensuring the poetic ambiance of the gardens remains perceptible.

3. Recommendations for the Transmission and Contemporary Expression of Core Cultural Values

Despite the stylistic changes that have occurred over time, the core cultural values of "poetic living," "spiritual retreat," and "Confucian education" have consistently underpinned traditional gardens, forming their most resilient symbolic structure. In the course of garden reuse and creative transformation, these spiritual dimensions should be emphasized and reconfigured into multifunctional spaces for "cultural education, spiritual experience, and local identity."

Against the backdrop of cultural revival and ecological revitalization, modern media technologies should be fully utilized to reinterpret these core values into a landscape language that resonates with contemporary society, thereby activating the cultural vitality of traditional gardens in a modern context. Furthermore, it is advised to incorporate imagery systems and landscape design philosophies from Song dynasty literature—such as *Linquan Gaozhi* (Refined Ambitions of Forests and Springs) and *Guanwu Tongxuan* (Observing Things and Accessing the Profound)—embedding garden renewal within the tangible tradition of classical literature and creating a platform for the aesthetic and cultural transmission of classical values into the present day.

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