

Why Famous Gardens Endure: Social Capital, Symbolic Power and Hidden Inequalities in the Conservation of Chinese Classical Garden Heritage

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1 **Why Famous Gardens Endure: Social Capital, Symbolic Power and Hidden**

2 **Inequalities in the Conservation of Chinese Classical Garden Heritage**

3 **ABSTRACT:** Previous studies of the making and transmission of Chinese classical
4 garden heritage have privileged aesthetic value and garden-making techniques while
5 neglecting sociological motives. Taking Suzhou private gardens as examples, this
6 article uses Bourdieu's field theory to examine the capital struggles and political
7 purposes embedded in garden construction, inheritance and reconstruction. It reveals the
8 concealed exchange of interests behind poetic-spatial aesthetics and literati gatherings,
9 explaining how garden heritage endured. The article develops a framework of 'initial
10 establishment, capital accumulation and institutionalised continuity' and identifies three
11 evolutionary stages of the garden heritage field: 'individual symbol, collective symbol
12 and intrinsic symbol'. It argues that poetic-spatial aesthetics was interest-driven: gardens
13 selected and sustained privileged groups, acted as sites of ideological and cultural
14 discipline, and enabled concealed exchanges of social, economic, political and cultural
15 capital. Through field monopolies, dominant actors secured high returns and class
16 reproduction. Unequal capital accumulation in the garden field has produced
17 conservation inequities, including monopolies over capital and discourse, resource
18 misallocation and spatial displacement. The article proposes heritage-field network
19 assessment, heritage-field development red lines, social-capital audits and compensation
20 for vulnerable heritage, and the activation of normalised public cultural and political
21 functions.

22 **KEYWORDS:** field theory; social capital; Chinese classical gardens; cultural heritage
23 conservation; heritage equity.

1 Introduction

Gardens are easier to create than to preserve. Historic gardens constitute an important category of heritage within the World Heritage system, linking conceptions of nature, aesthetic practice, social life and urban memory. They are not static works of art, but spatial crystallisations of how different civilisations have understood life, nature, aesthetics, power and belief over long historical periods. Since the twentieth century, international heritage conservation has expanded from monumental sites and individual buildings to the integrated preservation of historic environments, cultural landscapes, urban life and human-nature relations. The Venice Charter characterises historic monuments as living witnesses to the traditions of their age (ICOMOS, 1964). The World Heritage Convention incorporated groups of buildings and natural heritage of outstanding universal value into the framework for safeguarding humanity's common heritage (UNESCO, 1972). UNESCO's Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape identifies historic urban landscapes as among the richest and most diverse expressions of humanity's shared cultural heritage, bearing witness to ideals of life accumulated across generations, time and space (UNESCO, 2011).

Within this heritage framework, historic gardens have particular significance (Emge et al., 2024). Composed of buildings, water, topography, vegetation, paths and social uses, they were spaces of everyday life and social interaction in premodern societies. The ICOMOS-IFLA Florence Charter defines a historic garden as an architectural and horticultural composition of historical or artistic interest to the public and treats it as a living monument requiring maintenance, restoration, interpretation and reuse (ICOMOS-IFLA, 1982). Its value lies not only in surviving physical forms, but also in the deep civilisational

understanding it embodies of the enduring relationships between natural and human-made orders, historical memory and the organisation of life, and aesthetic ideals and social institutions. Historic gardens therefore constitute an important form of heritage for understanding human behaviour, cultural practices, social life and the development of urban civilisation.

Chinese classical gardens constitute a representative tradition in global garden history and an important part of world cultural heritage. *A Preliminary Chronology of Chinese Gardens* records 4753 identifiable gardens from the pre-Qin period to the Republican era (Liu, 2016). Suzhou gardens are regarded as embodying the highest achievements of Chinese mountain-and-water garden art. World Heritage documentation identifies the nine Classical Gardens of Suzhou as outstanding examples of Chinese garden design that recreate expansive landscapes in limited space and convey profound cultural and aesthetic meaning (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1997/2000). They combine architecture and horticulture while condensing Chinese civilisation, culture and social relations. Compared with the royal ritual and geometric order of European classical gardens and the hydraulic technologies and religious ideals of Islamic gardens, Suzhou gardens were more deeply embedded in everyday urban life, literati sociability and networks linking officials and merchants. They reflect premodern lived realities and social interactions, offering micro-scale, everyday cases for urban heritage research.

Research on Suzhou gardens has largely privileged aesthetics and garden-making techniques, attributing survival to exceptional artistic value or fortuitous wartime survival. Yet records identify 389 notable gardens in Suzhou from the Western Han to the Republican

era, of which only 108 survive. Despite their exceptional beauty, many once-celebrated gardens became wastelands after their owners died. Why were the Humble Administrator's Garden and Canglang Pavilion repeatedly rebuilt despite warfare, changing forms and the loss of their former woodland refinement, while Pijiang Garden, once praised as the "foremost garden in Wuzhong", and Sun Garden quickly vanished? Why did Wang Yongning's ostentatious remodelling of the Humble Administrator's Garden, later criticised, paradoxically usher in brief prosperity? If artistic value determined survival, why did so many sites celebrated in poetry and prose disappear? These questions expose a central blind spot in the conventional paradigm: its failure to account for the social mechanisms underlying garden making and transfer.

Contemporary international heritage studies no longer treat heritage as a static relic, but as a process in which value, identity, memory and power are continually negotiated (Vlase and Lähdesmäki, 2023; Wu and Li, 2024). Smith's 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' shows institutions privilege monumental, elite, material, expert-led and state-recognised heritage, excluding local, everyday, community-based and marginalised practices from heritage visibility (Smith, 2006, 2012). Harvey argues that heritage is not a past discovered by modernity, but a social practice reorganising past-present relations over time (Harvey, 2001). Harrison frames it as a political process organised around future risk, identity commitments and material persistence (Harrison, 2013). Garden heritage survives not from artistic quality alone but through power relations, social recognition and institutional selection (Yin, 2026).

Space is purposefully, strategically and politically produced (Lefebvre, 1991; Li et al., 2024). Bourdieu's field theory explains how capital and power accumulate and circulate

through social relations, offering a relational perspective on classical garden making and transfer. A field is a relatively autonomous domain of relational positions. Classical gardens were not only aesthetic and residential spaces but fields concentrating and converting social, cultural, economic and symbolic capital. Habitus comprises largely unconscious dispositions that turn socially shaped experience into standards of perception, appreciation and judgement (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Through cultural habitus, garden appreciation becomes not merely aesthetic experience but a mechanism of class sorting and social distinction. Within the field, class rules are internalised through education, while struggles over capital among authority holders establish shared values and rules (Bourdieu, 1991). Capital is accumulated, transmitted and reproduced across generations and groups, tacitly converting distinctions in garden taste into durable class boundaries (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Studies have attempted to introduce field theory into garden heritage research. In *Elegant Debts and Fruitful Sites*, Craig Clunas reveals capital exchanges in Ming garden activities centred on Wen Zhengming (Clunas, 1996, 2004). Nie Chunhua proposes a "garden-culture-aesthetics" framework for interpreting the "field-capital-habitus" model in garden space (Nie, 2007). Using the Rong family's Plum Garden, Xu Jiarui examines struggles and interpenetration between landscape capital and the political field in Republican China (Xu, 2024). Yet this research remains theoretically underdeveloped and has four limitations. First, "garden field" and "landscape capital" are posited without theoretical grounding or explanation of their historical formation. Second, research concentrates on capital exchange within individual events, neglecting cumulative effects of field evolution. Third, it rarely connects field theory to garden heritage's historical trajectory and survival

112 mechanisms. Fourth, field theory is used merely to explain historical events, without
113 examining how field relations shaped gardens or the latent inequities embedded in garden
114 heritage conservation.

115 Famous gardens do not endure naturally; they are continually reproduced through the
116 mobilisation of social relations. This does not deny their artistic value, but asks how and why
117 that value is recognised, circulated and sustained. Through cross-dynastic source comparison,
118 this article takes the Humble Administrator's Garden, Canglang Pavilion, Lingering Garden
119 and other Suzhou gardens as cases to trace the garden heritage field through "initial
120 formation-capital accumulation-institutionalised survival". It distinguishes individual-symbol,
121 collective-symbol and garden-as-symbol stages, explains the sociological mechanisms
122 through which famous gardens endure, reveals hidden conservation inequities and broadens
123 the theoretical scope of classical garden heritage conservation ([Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#)).

Why Famous Gardens Endure

Capital Accumulation, Symbolic Power, and Hidden Inequity in Classical Garden Heritage Conservation



Research Puzzle

Aesthetic value alone cannot explain why some refined gardens disappear while others are repeatedly rebuilt, remembered, and protected.



Core Argument

Famous gardens are historically produced through capital conversion, symbolic consecration, social-network reproduction, and institutional recognition.



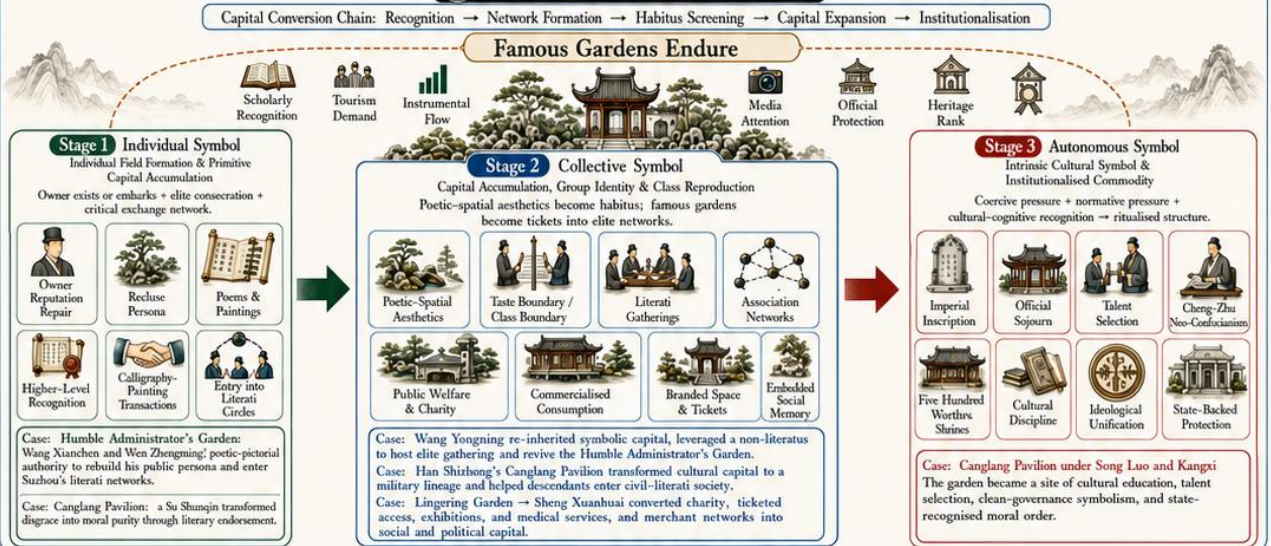
Method

Historical sociology + process tracing + comparative cases: Humble Administrator's Garden, Canglang Pavilion, Lingering Garden.

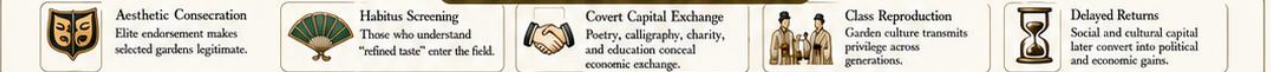
(1) Bourdieu's Capital Field: Garden as Capital Converter



(2) Famous-Gardenization Mechanism



Hidden Mechanisms Behind Garden Aesthetics



(3) Modern Heritage Inequity: Uneven Capital Accumulation



(4) Equity-Oriented Conservation: From Famous-Garden Objects to Heritage-Field Networks

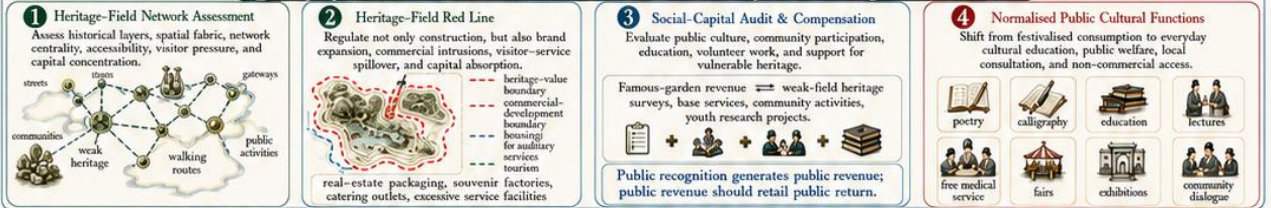


Figure 1. Graphical Abstract

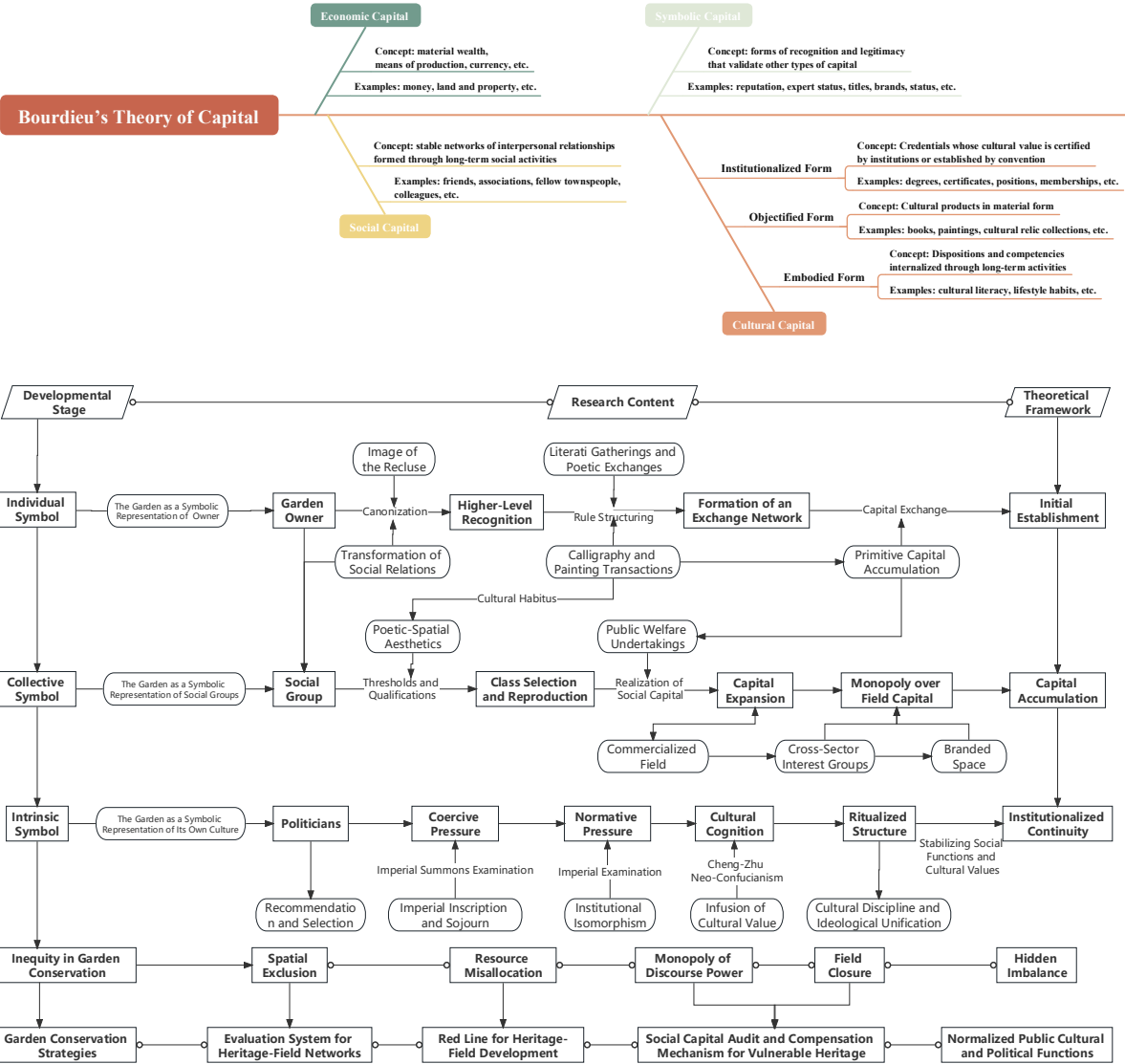


Figure 2. Bourdieu's theory of capital and the evolution of the garden field.

Note: The terms used in this article are explained in detail in the supplementary material, Appendix A. Glossary_of_Key_Terms.

127 **2 Materials and Methods**

128 This study combines process tracing in historical sociology with comparative case
129 analysis (Collier, 2011; Flyvbjerg, 2006) to reconstruct the canonisation and survival of the
130 Humble Administrator's Garden, Canglang Pavilion and Lingering Garden. Comparative
131 cases include renowned gardens that did not survive continuously and residential,

commemorative and adjacent micro-heritage sites assigned lower levels of heritage recognition and protection. Six source categories are examined: garden records, illustrated poetic works, poems, inscriptions and colophons; gazetteers, family documents and writings of prominent figures; modern-period newspapers and periodicals, fair records and family account books; historical maps and satellite imagery; publication counts for Suzhou's 108 gardens; and selected investment, financial and marketing-revenue data. Rather than narrating chronology, process tracing and historical source analysis reconstruct ownership, spatial use, social interaction, restoration and institutional recognition, compare conservation trajectories, and use quantitative evidence as supplementary checks.

3 Results

3.1 The Individual-Symbol Stage: Initial Field Formation and Initial Capital Accumulation

Initial field formation typically depends on high-status, resource-rich actors endorsing emerging practices and coordinating rules, thereby linking dispersed activities into a relatively autonomous relational network (Cattani et al., 2014). A garden field generally involved three conditions: an owner with substantial capital and an elite political or familial background; consecration by authoritative actors in higher-order literary or official fields, supplying cultural symbols that concealed exchange; and stable, enduring networks and rules of capital exchange.

Qian Yong argued that a garden's rise and decline depended on its owner's reputation (Clunas, 1996). Long-remembered gardens belonged to officials or literary celebrities. Wang Xianchen, a Ming jinshi and owner of the Humble Administrator's Garden, came from an eminent family. After offending the Eastern Depot (Dongchang), he was falsely accused and

demoted; after resigning, his damaged reputation made it difficult to enter Jiangnan gentry circles. Without poetic or artistic distinction, he urgently needed to restore his moral standing and enter Suzhou literati circles.

Wen Zhengming, one of the Four Talents of Jiangnan and a leading literatus, failed the civil service examinations ten times between 1496 and 1523. His line, "For twenty years I have languished beneath a scholar's cap; karmic ties still bind me to fame and gain", suggests hardship and an urgent, instrumental pursuit of office. He later sought Lin Jun's patronage, writing inscriptions for Lin's parents and repeatedly gifting him calligraphy and paintings (Kuang and Wang, 2024). Lin recommended him for admission to the Imperial Academy without examination. Scholars interpret much of his work from this period as utilitarian gift exchange and patron cultivation (Clunas, 2004). His Preface to *Seeing Censor Wang Off upon His Demotion to Assistant Magistrate of Shanghang* likewise suggests seeking Wang's favour. During Suzhou's garden boom, Wen's literary prestige gave Wang access to literati circles.

In *Record of the Wang Family's Humble Administrator's Garden*, Wen Zhengming wrote that Wang Xianchen's "aspirations were lofty and refined" and "many of his associates were men of renown". He claimed that Wang had "conducted himself uprightly and devoted himself to principle" before his early dismissal: "How could such a man be petty and self-protective, rising and sinking with the times?" (Wen, 2014). This suggests that Wang used the garden for self-vindication and reputational repair. Inscriptions in the *Album of Thirty-One Views* fashioned him as a lofty recluse: at Ruoshu Hall, "Worthy of this retreat once graced by lofty recluses, books in hand, he instructs the boys in farming"; at Little Flying Rainbow, "I know your talent for statecraft was only briefly tested; the bridge spans

176 the cold stream"; and at Jiashi Pavilion, "The lofty man long cherished his resolve; casting off
177 his cap, he left the arena of fame" (Wen and Fung, 2021) (Figure 3).

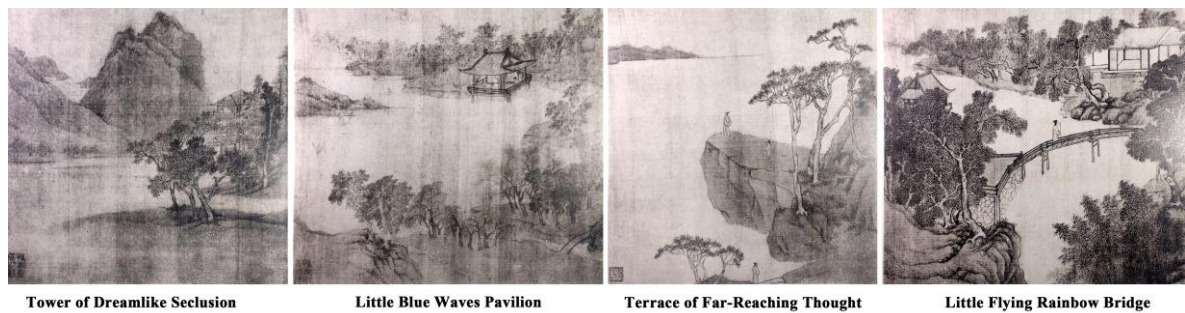


Figure 3. Wen Zhengming's *Thirty-One Views of the Humble Administrator's Garden*.

The names of many scenes suggest the deliberate reshaping of Wang Xianchen's public persona.

178 Yet Wen participated in the garden's design and construction in 1509 amid financial
179 hardship, repeated examination failure and intensive paid and patronage-based artistic
180 exchange. *Yanzhou shanren sibü gao* records that the Record "was written for Censor Wang
181 Xianchen, who paid thirty [units]", suggesting that Wen's poetry and painting may have
182 formed part of a remunerated exchange combining artistic production with strategic
183 ingratiation (Clunas, 2004; Wen and Fung, 2021). Clunas and Liu Runen show that Wen's
184 idealised woodland-retreat imagery diverged sharply from the actual garden, largely
185 comprising fruit trees, vegetable plots and productive plantings (Clunas, 1996; Liu, 2026).
186 Wang Chong's Rhapsody implies that Wang did not practise rural reclusion. Wang Juyuan's
187 research portrays him as pleasure-seeking and rapacious in office, extracting wealth from the
188 populace, and regards his professed reclusion as deceptive (Wang, 2006). Wang's supposed
189 refinement and integrity therefore remain doubtful.

190 Taken together, the garden's construction and representation may have served less as
191 neutral garden making and scenic depiction than as instruments for fashioning a persona

192 acceptable to literati society and repositioning Wang within it. This image of a thwarted lofty
193 recluse resonated with Suzhou literati whose official ambitions had failed. Wen's works
194 consecrated the constructed persona, while the *Thirty-One Views* circulated it through literati
195 networks, converting it into cultural capital and enhancing Wang's renown. Garden making
196 and artistic transactions enabled conversion between Wen's social and cultural capital and
197 Wang's economic and political capital. Through Wen's cultural brokerage, Wang repaired his
198 reputation, entered Suzhou literati circles and consolidated his cultural identity and social
199 standing.

200 Jiangnan literati often formed poetry societies through garden gatherings. Gardens
201 served as banquet spaces sustaining networks and as class credentials, while calligraphy and
202 painting reinforced sociability and mediated exchanges among forms of capital. Examples
203 included the Wumen Zhenshuai Society associated with Tingfeng, Lingering and Humble
204 Administrator's Gardens; Zhu Changwen's Nine Elders Society at Music Garden; the Wenmei
205 Poetry Society at the Master of the Nets Garden; and Canglang Pavilion's Winter-Dispelling
206 Poetry Society. After the Humble Administrator's Garden was completed, Wang Xianchen
207 hosted Suzhou notables, including Wang Chong and Tang Yin, Wen Zhengming's close
208 friends. Tang praised him as an "immortal official in an iron cap", while Wang Chong called
209 him "open, lofty and pure, with the bearing of an ancient upright minister". As invited guests,
210 their encomia were inevitably flattering; nevertheless, they validated Wang's cultural identity
211 and standing among Suzhou literati. Sustained associations and poetic and artistic exchanges
212 established rules for converting cultural capital into social, economic and political capital.
213 Mutual praise reinforced status, formed stratified circles and enabled the field to take shape.

214 Classical gardens were not merely retreats, but instruments for fashioning idealised
215 personae, entering local networks and demarcating class positions. Garden making and
216 gatherings constituted authoritative literati circles and codified legitimate taste. Literati
217 authorities orchestrated rules through which capital exchange and conversion occurred under
218 refined sociability, allowing participants to remain embedded in urban life while enjoying
219 reclusive prestige and material advantages. Beyond core participants, garden and artistic
220 transactions were recast as refined anecdotes. Admirers praised unseen gardens to signal their
221 aspirations and entered poetry-society networks, further elevating garden and owner. The
222 owner's persona and reputation gave the garden social meaning beyond material space and
223 drove its contemporary renown. Through the owner's social and cultural capital, the garden
224 field underwent primitive capital accumulation, symbolic construction and hierarchical
225 differentiation.

226 Most surviving famous gardens display similar patterns. After being falsely accused
227 and disgraced, Su Shunqin became acutely concerned with his reputation and, fearing
228 rumours, "closed his door or went out secretly, not daring to meet relatives and friends, as
229 though avoiding soldiers and bandits". On Fan Zhongyan's recommendation, he left for
230 Suzhou and built Canglang Pavilion, apparently as part of an effort to vindicate himself. The
231 allusion to the "waters of Canglang" fashioned a persona of moral purity unsullied by the
232 vulgar world, while "my traces remain far from jackals and wolves ... I have no leisure for
233 schemes" implied that treacherous officialdom had caused his disgrace (Su, 2011).

234 Su also sought recognition from authoritative figures in the higher-order literary field.
235 He wrote to Ouyang Xiu and Mei Yaochen in self-defence and enclosed his *Record of*

Canglang Pavilion to seek poetic endorsement (Su, 2011). Their poems suggest that neither had visited the garden, yet they praised its scenery and "clear breeze and bright moon" (Suzhou Garden and Landscaping Administration, 2016). Private gardens were elite spaces of sociability, difficult for non-affiliated literati and commoners to access. Canglang Pavilion's rapid fame therefore derived not only from scenery, but from Ouyang's and Mei's literary authority, which consecrated both its aesthetic value and its owner's moral persona. Their friendship with Su and admiration for his talent encouraged later readers to idealise the pavilion. Su thereby gained acceptance within Suzhou's literati circles: "They knew I upheld the Way and loved learning; all gladly came to associate with me and did not treat me as a criminal."

Yet Su's post-demotion poetry repeatedly expresses disdain for idle retirement and a desire to return to public service. In *Reflections during a Summer Daytime Sleep*, he urges readers to "seize honour while the time permits" and "sweep all grievances clean"; *Dispelling Frustration* asks when the "heavy gloom" will break to reveal the sun; and *Shuidiao getou* declares that an ambitious man "is ashamed of idle seclusion" (Su, 2011). Canglang Pavilion may therefore be understood less as carefree withdrawal than as an attempt to redress injustice and restore Su's moral reputation.

The *jinshi* Xu Taishi hired the painter Zhou Bingzhong to build the Lingering Garden and later frequently entertained Shen Shixing, Jiang Yingke and other notables there; *Record of Houle Hall* and *Brief Account of the Garden Pavilions* spread its fame. Fan Zhongyan built Tianping Mountain Villa, while Gu Wenbin established Yiyuan Garden. Of Suzhou's 95

surviving private gardens, 83 were founded by high officials, *jinsi* degree-holders or literary leaders (Liu, 2016). Social and cultural capital accumulated through such gatherings formed an initial base for continued remembrance and transmission. By contrast, Zhu Mian seized commoners' land and wealth to build Tongle Garden. Though briefly magnificent, it was denounced and demolished by local people after its notorious owner's death, then vanished from memory. Material refinement alone could not secure survival: without favourable social reputation and elite recognition, a garden was far less likely to be remembered, protected or transmitted across generations.

3.2 Collective-Symbol Stage: Accelerated Capital Accumulation and Collective Identification

Bourdieu argues that social capital gives members prestige-bearing credentials and material or symbolic returns (Bourdieu, 1986). Authoritative consecration converts cultural and social capital into exchangeable symbolic capital, expanding capital and consolidating groups (Bourdieu, 1985, 1986). To preserve entry thresholds and hierarchy, exchange rules favouring early entrants are internalised as habitus; later entrants accept them as self-evident standards of taste. Through family practice, this habitus reproduces status and capital advantages across generations (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977).

Garden value is not naturally generated by aesthetics alone, but continually produced through sustained social recognition, legitimation and capital conversion. An incipient field could make a garden a status symbol preserved as a worthy figure's residence. Yet 256 of Suzhou's 281 lost gardens disappeared after their owners died, showing individual reputation and temporary acclaim could not secure continuity. Capital reproduction required famous

gardens to attract more actors and capital forms, moving the field from the individual-symbol to the collective-symbol stage. Preserving early entrants' advantages required concealed class screening: garden aesthetics.

3.2.1 The Formation of Yijing Aesthetics and the Intergenerational Transmission of Capital

Private gardens were closed to most people but selectively open to elites; this openness rested on concealed class screening. Because literati designed many classical gardens, the garden field was oriented towards the cultural field. Drawing on their habitus, literati converted experience in poetry, calligraphy and painting into garden-making rules centred on *yijing*, or poetic-spatial aesthetics. At gatherings, participants judged motifs, circulated those judgements through verse and used cultural authority to distinguish the refined from the vulgar. Internalised as aesthetic standards and cultural habitus, these rules operated as instruments of cultural disciplining.

Su Shunqin's Canglang Pavilion became a cultural allusion, later echoed in Little Canglang, Zhuoying Waterside Pavilion and Sulin Xiaozhu. Evoking Canglang through waterside pavilions became an aesthetic norm, while understanding and reproducing its meanings became part of cultural habitus. Mastery of the allusion became both a threshold and a rule of entry into the field, helping constitute Chinese garden *yijing*.

As these standards formed, class positions were tacitly demarcated and entrants screened. Civil service examinations made culturally similar literati more likely to gain power. Owners of gardens or art collections could draw on shared habitus to apprehend *yijing*,

301 distinguish themselves from ordinary people and enter literati groups as desirable associates.

302 The field could expand while class screening protected dominant interests.

303 Famous gardens transferred more than property: their cultural, social and symbolic

304 capital was selectively transmitted as social relations changed. Those born into powerful

305 families and disciplined through garden culture developed dispositions closer to dominant

306 literati, easing entry into the field's core and accumulating relationships for their lineages.

307 Despite ten examination failures, Wen Zhengming attained literary prominence through

308 family capital and eminent teachers. The Wen family's gardens supported aesthetic practice,

309 social selection, habitus formation and field inheritance. By Wen Zhenheng's *Changwu zhi* ,

310 garden-dwelling experience had been codified into aesthetic rules. Prominent lineages

311 therefore competed to acquire and inherit famous gardens rather than commission new ones.

312 This preference served explicit social purposes: they sought embedded social and symbolic

313 capital, credentials of class membership and valuable assets transmissible to descendants. The

314 inheritance of famous gardens therefore often had explicit social purposes. If the garden itself

315 had been the only concern, local gentry lineages could simply have paid famous literati and

316 craftsmen to build residences, as Wang Xianchen did with Wen Zhengming, or the Wang

317 lineage with Ge Yuliang. Bidding for and contesting famous gardens was, in essence, a

318 struggle over their symbolic and social capital. By acquiring them, owners gained

319 qualifications to enter literati circles, the capacity to organise gatherings, and a high-value

320 social asset transferable to later generations.

321 Wang Yongning's inheritance of the Humble Administrator's Garden is exemplary.

322 Born poor and outside the literati, he entered an elite household as a uxorial son-in-law and

323 moved into luxury. Modern scholarship criticises his extensive construction, embellishment,
324 wholesale alteration and extravagant banquets, yet he was crucial to the garden's continuity.
325 Previously confiscated and converted into the regional military intendant's lodge, the garden
326 had lain derelict. Even after becoming an imperial son-in-law, Wang's origins hindered entry
327 into elite literati circles. Capitalising on the garden's inherited renown, he courted Jiangnan
328 notables through lavish banquets and calligraphy-and-painting transactions presented as
329 refined gatherings. He maintained an opera troupe and built Nanmu Hall, attracting Li Yu,
330 You Tong and other frequent visitors. Through the garden's symbolic capital, Wang's identity,
331 art transactions, hospitality and patron cultivation were recast as refined literati sociability. He
332 became an organiser of Jiangnan cultural life, formed close friendships with Wang Shimin
333 and Wang Jian, and assembled authentic calligraphy and paintings (Zhang and Bai, 2010).
334 These activities enriched the garden's capital across official and merchant networks , restored
335 it as a centre of Suzhou gatherings and strengthened intergenerational transmission([Figure 4](#)).



Figure 4. Wang Jian's Landscape Screens after Ancient Masters, panels 1, 2, 7 and 9, Shanghai Museum.

The colophons record painting-viewing activities by Wang Jian and other eminent figures at the Humble Administrator's Garden.

336 Why did the Southern Song general Han Shizhong, born poor and seasoned by
 337 lifelong campaigns, risk impeachment by seizing Canglang Pavilion with troops despite
 338 lacking literary achievement or interest in gardens (Xia, 2016)? The Song privileged civil
 339 officials and distrusted commanders. In retirement, Han "spoke no more of war and refused to
 340 meet his former military retainers or commanders" (Xia, 2016). Canglang Pavilion adjoined
 341 the Suzhou Prefectural School and Confucian Temple, while literati writing had endowed it
 342 with cultural capital and educational resources. Han renamed Gui Pavilion Qingxiang Hall,
 343 invoking Li Shangyin, and Bamboo Pavilion Cuilinglong, evoking Su Shunqin. His forcible
 344 acquisition and reconstruction can be interpreted as an effort to educate his descendants. The

345 Spirit-path Stele records that his three sons and nine grandsons became civil officials; his
346 eldest son, Han Yanzhi, entered Suzhou literati circles, passed the jinshi examination and
347 attained the highest official rank. Inheriting the garden shifted the family from military
348 retainers to literati networks, transferred social and cultural capital, and bypassed prolonged
349 accumulation of cultural credentials through calligraphy, painting and literati exchange. This
350 accelerated its transformation into the civil-literati elite.

351 Famous gardens were more than material property. Their cultural, social and symbolic
352 capital could pass partly to new owners and families. Even inheritors without literary or
353 artistic achievement could derive ascriptive advantages from inherited prestige, networks and
354 aesthetic habitus. Nor were gardens passive containers of capital. Successive owners
355 reinforced a garden's reputation, while the garden endowed them with symbolic authority to
356 organise sociability, shape cultural discourse and participate in local social life. This
357 reciprocal reinforcement formed stable circles, secured recognition of garden value and
358 moved the field into accelerated capital accumulation and reproduction.

359 *3.2.2 Capital Accumulation and Group Consolidation*

360 During capital accumulation, the garden field shifted from symbolising its owner's
361 reputation to organising social groups and concentrating capital. The "Zhongnan shortcut" and
362 Tiger Hill gatherings illustrate this shift. Generations of eminent figures' reclusion and poetry
363 endowed Mount Zhongnan with social and cultural capital, making it a collective symbol for
364 literati recluses. Visitors drew on this symbolic capital when seeking office or recruiting
365 worthy men, not merely viewing scenery. Poems celebrating Tiger Hill more readily gained
366 Jiangnan recognition, spreading participants' reputations while reducing the cost of

367 establishing cultural standing. Participation thus generated returns. The field expanded its
368 network and accumulated capital, while beneficiary groups maintained famous gardens at its
369 centre to protect their interests.

370 The late-Qing Lingering Garden illustrates this mechanism. Sheng Xuanhuai, later
371 described as the "father of modern Chinese industry", suffered repeated setbacks in early
372 ventures. Li Hongzhang rebuked him over the Wuxue coal mine, which had "produced no
373 results and instead incurred losses to official funds", condemned him as "fond of grandiose
374 claims", and barred him from bureau affairs. Relief work in Hejian marked a turning point.
375 Drawing on Li Jinyong's charitable reputation and networks, Sheng mobilised Jiangnan
376 gentry-merchants, raised hundreds of thousands of taels and aided disaster victims (Zhu,
377 2008). Success secured his promotion and appears to have shown him that public-welfare
378 initiatives could convert social reputation into economic capital and political authority, while
379 Jiangnan gentry wealth and influence constituted latent capital. Zhou Qiuguang notes that
380 charitable achievements brought Sheng honours as his industrial ventures expanded alongside
381 famine relief.

382 Against this background, the Sheng family established a yizhuang (charitable estate) at
383 the Lingering Garden. Sheng completed the remodelling in 1876, when Li's relief work was
384 renowned at court. The garden opened to the public for an admission fee in 1877; by early
385 1878, both men were directing relief work in Hejian. After the yizhuang was completed in
386 1891, Jiashan Hall provided free consultations and medicine to up to one hundred Suzhou
387 residents daily (Lu, 2011). The garden also hosted opera, charitable fundraising and
388 commercial gatherings. At the Suzhou Prefectural Products Fair, "officials, gentry and

outer-suburban Liuyuan Road, later one of Suzhou's commercial centres.

394 By funding road and telephone construction, organising charitable fundraising and
395 coordinating industry and commerce, the Sheng family built public esteem and extensive
396 networks. Operated by an organised group, the Lingerin Garden became a semi-public,
397 semi-commercial charitable venue, Suzhou's leading centre of trade and sociability, and the
398 base of a transregional interest bloc centred on the Sheng family. Economic and social
399 resources and political ties across Jiangnan converged there, expanding Sheng Xuanhuai's
400 influence and giving the garden a near-monopolistic position within Suzhou's garden field.
401 Sheng later formed ties with Jing Yuanshan and Zheng Guanying. His nationwide railway,
402 telephone and iron enterprises relied heavily on Jiangnan gentry-merchants, while regional
403 heads were "all former associates from Taohuawu" (Zhu, 2008). Garden and family became
404 mutually reinforcing reputational symbols, producing enterprises and social undertakings that
405 came close to dominating major spheres of Suzhou life. Although other famous gardens
406 charged admission, only the Lingerin Garden flourished; Yu Yue called it the "crown among
407 the famous gardens of Wu" (Wang, 2022).

408 The Lingerin Garden thus became a collective symbol of the Sheng-led group. Its
409 inherited cultural and social capital gave the family's public and industrial activities a capital
410 base and discursive power, while Sheng management made the garden synonymous with the
411 group in Suzhou. The field shifted from a private courtyard dominated by cultural capital to a
412 site of interest-group organisation where social, economic, cultural and political capital
413 intersected and converted. Comparable mechanisms appeared when Canglang Pavilion
414 became a temple for rituals seeking blessings and favourable ties, and the Humble

Administrator's Garden became the Fengzhi Guild Hall of the Eight Banners, with a theatre, railway activities and public welfare. As "a place for maintaining native-place ties" and "a gathering place for sojourning officials" (Xu, 2013), it assembled official, commercial, literary and artistic networks. Such organised groups signalled accelerated capital accumulation and reproduction.

Gardens at this stage were no longer merely credentials of literati class membership. Cultural habitus and authoritative consecration codified legitimate taste, design standards and evaluative rules; the distinction between the "refined" and the "vulgar" operated as concealed social screening. Through intergenerational transfer, part of a garden's cultural, social and symbolic capital passed to inheritors and families, granting privileged positions and recognised legitimacy within class discourse. Accumulated reputation attracted wider actors and forms of capital, forming stable groups and interest networks. Through charitable, cultural or political activities, gardens accumulated reputation and relations convertible into economic, social and political returns. Private aesthetic spaces thereby became composite fields in which multiple forms of capital intertwined, converted and reproduced.

3.3 The Intrinsic-Symbol Stage: Externalised Spiritual Meaning and Institutionalised Continuity

Bourdieu treats institutionalised cultural capital as competence certified through recognised qualifications (Bourdieu, 1986). Institutional theory explains how rules and capital relations stabilise through regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive mechanisms (Scott, 2014), reinforced by coercive and normative pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Field rules are elevated and hardened into moral expectations, legal standards and institutional order.

Institutional actors recast and legitimise this order as public value, cultural orthodoxy and moral instruction. Symbolic power subjects actors to socially recognised constraints, rendering capital exchange and power legitimate as common sense and morality (Bourdieu, 1991).

Gardens at the collective-symbol stage remained dependent on specific groups. After wartime devastation and "the minister's departure from Suzhou", the Eight Banners Guild Hall "declined day by day" (Xu, 2013). The Fan clan yizhuang (charitable estate) recovered when dispersed members returned to its overgrown site. After the Taiping War scattered the lineage permanently, two state-sponsored restorations failed and the institution ceased operation. Such gardens remained group brands: their value and renown could not prevent decline when social change dissolved their supporting groups. Durable continuity required a garden to transcend an owner or community and acquire independent value and enduring social functions recognised by state and society. Canglang Pavilion was among the earliest Suzhou gardens to make this transition. Existing histories, drawing on Song Luo's Record of the Restoration of Canglang Pavilion, interpret the restoration as a refined literati act of venerating antiquity and worthy men. Read in the context of early-Qing governance, however, it can be understood as serving explicit political and cultural purposes.

Early-Qing Jiangnan was rich in taxation, grain, industry and talent, yet a major centre of anti-Qing sentiment and gentry resistance. Fearing Ming loyalism and anti-Qing thought would destabilise its rule, the Qing court launched extensive literary inquisitions (Yu, 2014). Social instability amid prosperity contributed to pervasive luxury. The emperor appointed the Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucian Tang Bin governor of Jiangsu to implement moral instruction.

Directives prioritised "honouring culture and education", returning people from luxury to simplicity, recruiting neglected worthies and selecting outstanding gentry and commoners (Xu, 2013; Yu, 2014). Regulation through filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, trustworthiness, propriety, righteousness, integrity and shame achieved little. Promoting education, winning hearts and minds, recruiting talent and cultivating identification with Manchu Qing rule therefore became important tasks of conciliatory governance.

Song Luo had used literary gatherings, poetry societies and restored shrines to worthy figures to win local support and cultivate cultural identification while governing Jiangxi. In Jiangsu, he extended this strategy through Canglang Pavilion. Politician-centred gatherings turned selected literati into semi-official, semi-private advisers: they gained prospects of recommendation for office and transmitted political views locally. Jiangnan gentry sought ties with this senior official but distrusted Qing rule, so Song needed cultural identification with local literati. Su Shunqin and Tang Yin, admired Jiangnan talents frustrated in office, resonated with literati constrained under the Qing.

Song installed Wen Zhengming's clerical-script inscription "Canglang Pavilion", rebuilt the pavilion on the hilltop to evoke the Book of Odes line "The high mountain is looked up to; the great way is followed", and named a studio after Su's Record of Canglang Pavilion. "Dull as I am, how dare I hope to match even one-hundredth of the master? Yet I privately admire him", he wrote (Song, 2010). Commemorating Tang Yin and building the Talented Literatus Pavilion extended this strategy. These practices inserted Song's political identity into Suzhou's cultural genealogy, fashioned a governor who "honoured Wu traditions and respected worthies", and reduced the cultural and political distance between Qing

officials and Jiangnan literati. Frequent gatherings followed, notably the Shousu Gathering of 1700, the Xiao Canglang drinking gathering of 1702, and the 1703 performance of The Peach Blossom Fan and inscription of the "Fifteen Literati of Jiangzuo".

Song's Minor Gazetteer of Canglang translated Cheng-Zhu ethics through poetry and prose into a local cultural narrative. Its verses promoted loyalty, ritual, fraternal duty and righteous friendship (Song, 2010). The Shousu Gathering and The Peach Blossom Fan disseminated respect for virtue and worthy men and aspirations to serve the state. The "Fifteen Literati" inscriptions, the Kangxi Emperor's five visits and public recruitment of talent secured official recognition, incorporated the pavilion into state systems of talent selection and cultural-educational governance, and gave it an overt political character. Donglin Academy and Suzhou Prefectural School later embedded Cheng-Zhu learning in the surrounding educational landscape. Officials including Hu Jitang and Liang Zhangju treated restoration as a duty, sustaining normative construction and institutional continuity. The Five Hundred Worthies Shrine selected figures according to the eight virtues, converting Neo-Confucianism into the garden's commemorative theme and public value. Continued management by literati and officials transformed Canglang Pavilion from a literati memorial site into a public cultural-educational node and an institutionalised site for moral education and cultural identification (Figure 6).

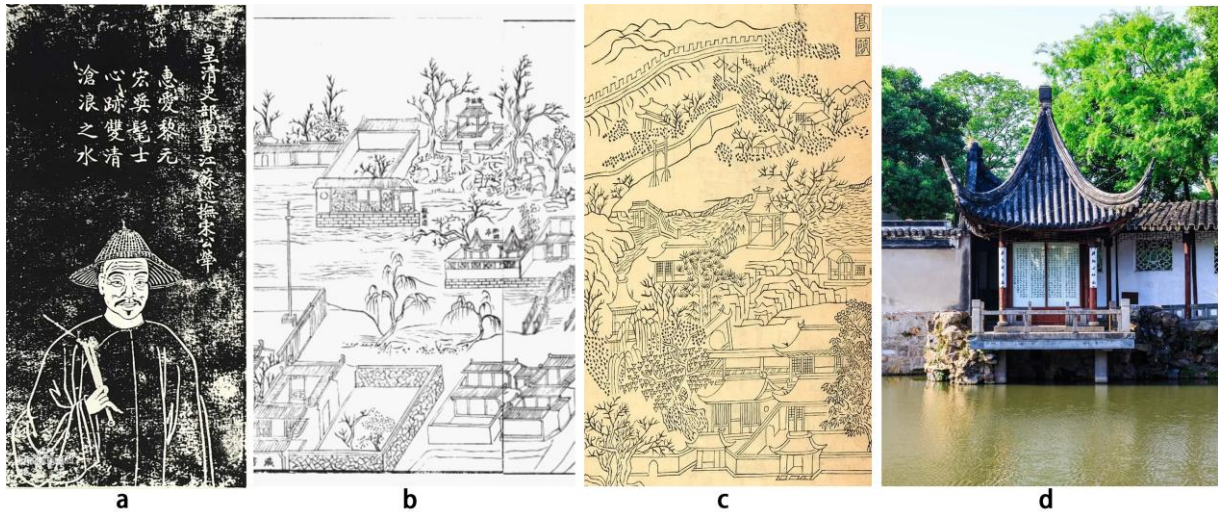


Figure 6. The cultural functions of the Canglang Pavilion.

a. Song Luo's stone inscription.

b-c. Canglang Pavilion in the Illustrated Record of Scenic Sites from the Imperial Southern Tours, Suzhou Local Chronicles Museum collection, recording an imperial sojourn site.

d. Song Luo's Minor Gazetteer of Canglang, carved inside Canglang Pavilion.

499 Gardens thus became spatial instruments through which the state imposed cultural
500 discipline, pursued cultural-educational governance, regulated public sentiment and
501 identification, and reshaped local customs and thought. They also became spiritual sites for
502 literati political aspirations. Canglang Pavilion's Neo-Confucian and clean-governance ideals,
503 Tianping Mountain's loyalty and righteousness, the Mountain Villa with Embracing Beauty's
504 scholarly ethos, and Jichang Garden's traditions of filial piety and fraternal harmony show that
505 famous gardens survived not through landscape value alone, but by carrying ethical, political
506 and cultural meanings required by higher-order fields. State recognition institutionalised these
507 functions and subtly enlisted gardens in ideological alignment and cultural construction.
508 Despite repeated destruction and changing spatial form and social order, Canglang Pavilion's
509 independent cultural symbolism and political functions repeatedly justified reconstruction and

sustained continuity. It remains a public platform for promoting Suzhou's culture of integrity and clean governance.

4. Discussion

4.1 Imbalanced Capital Accumulation and Inequities in Garden Heritage

Conservation

Economic monopoly is widely recognised, but monopolies of social, cultural and symbolic capital have broader effects, are harder to perceive or quantify, and generate deeper inequities. Established reputation, academic attention, protection rank, World Heritage status and tourism revenue certify a few famous gardens as exemplars and benchmarks of the "Chinese garden". Generalising this conservation logic obscures the diverse values of other garden heritage and historic spaces. Suzhou's nine World Heritage gardens represent the highest achievement of classical garden art, yet their dominance of city branding, tourism, research and fiscal investment marginalises other heritage. Authorised heritage discourse rarely declares vulnerable heritage worthless. By steering recognition, scholarship, discourse and resources, it makes funding, research agendas and tourist itineraries bypass such sites in ways that appear natural. Their decline is then misattributed to insufficient intrinsic value, although inadequate recognition and resource allocation jointly produce it.

Bourdieu shows how privileged classes cloak power in morality, taste and standards, legitimising domination and its reproduction while obscuring capital struggles (Bourdieu, 1991). Concentrated symbolic capital attracts policy and investment, while strong fields' resource monopolies erode diversity in weaker fields (Meskell, 2013). Embedded in institutional procedures, symbolic capital may generate coercive, mimetic and normative

isomorphism. Institutional routines then lag behind social conditions and conservation needs, favouring conservative, certifiable practices over open conservation innovation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Qualifications, taste and professional conventions restrict access to field resources, reproducing exclusionary power and privilege internally (Bourdieu, 1984). Five potential inequities follow: concealed imbalances in capital accumulation, spatial exclusion and displacement, monopoly over discursive authority, resource misallocation and field closure.

4.1.1 Concealed Imbalances in Capital Accumulation

Imbalanced capital accumulation in the garden field is difficult to detect because it rarely appears as overt appropriation or exclusion; instead, it is continually recoded into acceptable narratives of aesthetic, moral and cultural value. At the individual-symbol stage, poetic writings, gatherings and reclusion narratives repaired owners' reputations, recasting economic transactions, social relations and political ingratiation as refined moral character. At the collective-symbol stage, gatherings, poetic and artistic exchange, and garden inheritance converted class-specific competence into recognised "taste" and "credentials" that restricted entry and kept capital circulating within privileged groups. At the garden-as-symbol stage, charitable and cultural-educational functions secured institutional recognition, recoding political alliances, family operations and capital expansion as local culture and public interest.

Capital monopolies were legitimised through sustained "misrecognition": reputational repair as literati integrity; class screening as refined-vulgar distinction; bureaucratic and commercial capital reproduction as cultural transmission; and political-economic returns beneath the languages of charity, moral instruction and conservation. Famous gardens

accumulated social trust, symbolic prestige and institutional priority, while vulnerable gardens lacking comparable narrative framing, elite networks and institutional endorsement were gradually rendered invisible in conservation governance. This inequity was not accidental resource-allocation bias, but the continuation of historical capital monopolies in modern heritage governance.

4.1.2 Spatial Displacement: The Pressure of Strong Fields on Weak Fields

Conservation inequity is also spatial. In modern conservation and cultural-tourism development, dominant heritage fields often expand outward, converting surrounding historic spaces into infrastructure for transport, visitor services, commercial consumption and cultural display. Although justified as supporting heritage presentation and visitor experience, these facilities subordinate vulnerable, less readily certified heritage, reducing it to ancillary space for famous gardens and producing displacement in the name of conservation.

As Canglang Pavilion's cultural-educational functions expanded, its surroundings were progressively reorganised. Westward, Qian Yuanliao's Nan Garden became a Confucian temple, prefectural school and commercial streets, while the millennium-old Daoshan Pavilion and Zixia Pond gradually disappeared. Southward, Xiannong Altar and Nanchan Temple, surviving for over two centuries into the modern era, were replaced by a cultural palace and commercial offices. Eastward, Jiecao'an became a hospital; northward, half of the yamen garden Jinshanlin became parking and service space. Tourism commercialisation created an intensive consumption centre between the Humble Administrator's Garden and Taohuawu. Songyin'an, Baogong Temple, Yingchunfang, Sangyuan, Shilin Temple, Beichan

575 Temple, Baoguang Temple and Xiaotianzhu were replaced by commercial streets or luxury
 576 villas. Even documented and measured sites remained commercially occupied.

577 The key mechanism is not demolition alone, but reordered heritage priorities.
 578 Cultural-tourism development allocates resources by garden rank, overstates famous gardens'
 579 cultural status and commercial value, builds commercial and social-capital networks around
 580 them, and drives redevelopment. Their discursive dominance conceals spatial exploitation and
 581 displacement: other historic spaces are absorbed under "necessary supporting facilities" and
 582 "environmental improvement", commercialised and eventually erased. Yingyuan (Ying
 583 Garden), Suzhou's only private classical garden built in the 1970s, contains inscriptions,
 584 carvings, poetry, calligraphy and paintings by notable figures. Regarded as filling a gap in
 585 modern garden-making history and possessing considerable heritage value, it was threatened
 586 with demolition for commercial-district redevelopment. The dispute shows that even valuable
 587 heritage may be sacrificed to famous-garden-led displacement, while the loss of cultural
 588 diversity is rationalised as priority conservation and visitor-service necessity (Figure 7).

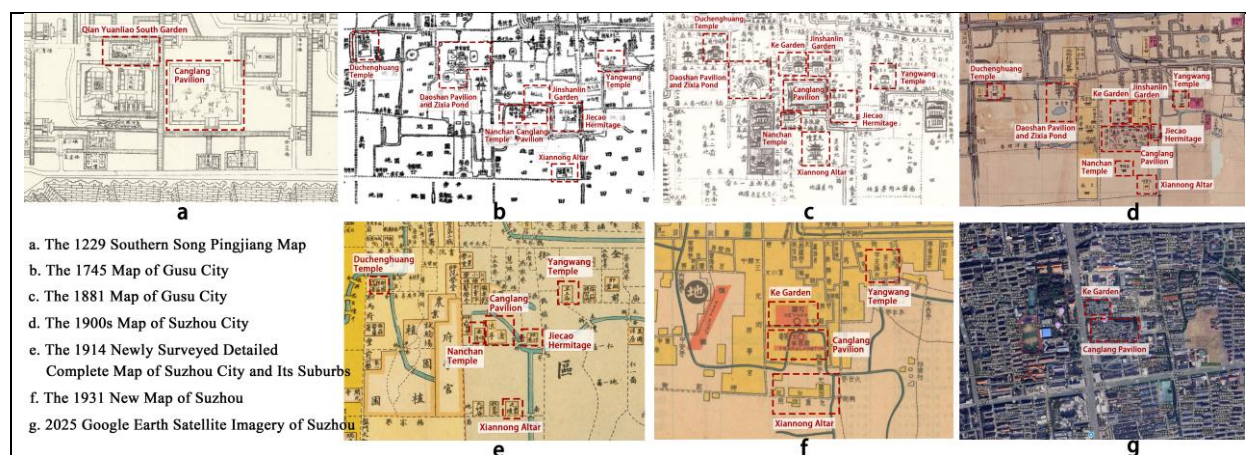


Figure 7. Spatial displacement in Suzhou garden heritage.

Note: Historical maps were examined to trace how centuries-old scenic and historic sites around
 Canglang Pavilion were redeveloped in the modern period into commercial streets and tourism

service spaces.

4.1.3 *Monopoly over Discourse: Conservation Standards That Weak-Field Sites Are
'Forced' to Imitate*

Famous gardens are embedded in dense social and political relations and generate substantial commercial returns. Their managing institutions often occupy higher administrative positions and command greater interpretive and discursive authority than other conservation bodies. They may also influence local conservation policy. Even without becoming law, authoritative endorsement turns individual projects into implicit benchmarks and exemplars with demonstrative power over weaker-field gardens. Political, commercial and academic actors linked by shared interests tacitly endorse and publicise these models regardless of merit. A single famous-garden model can thus set wider trends, pressuring lower-ranked heritage bodies to imitate it despite different cultural identities and capital conditions.

Imitation shapes aesthetic judgement and conservation practice. Once a garden becomes an urban symbol, visitor flows, media circulation and fiscal returns validate its publicity, remodelling and events as replicable models. Historical shifts from simplicity to luxury, late-Qing aesthetic excess, the plum-viewing boom inspired by Xiangxuehai at Tiger Hill, and widespread cherry-blossom attractions following Yuantouzhu's success show that garden aesthetics is constructed not by artistic standards alone, but through authority, social demand and commercial returns. American-style open woodland and lawns and European pastoral imagery have likewise become urban-renewal templates, intensifying homogenisation

while displacing classical Chinese aesthetics of changing views with every step and refined naturalness.

More troublingly, demonstration effects turn particular commercial and remodelling models into implicit norms. Gardens imitating tourism-oriented commercialisation while disregarding their identity, capital base and reputation may pursue demolition, reconstruction or wholesale remodelling, only to incur losses, erode authenticity and become derelict. Such practices raise serious questions about integrity, authenticity and minimum intervention in international heritage conservation and China's cultural-relic protection system. Commercial expansion, service-facility spillover and excessive entertainment around famous gardens also constitute governance risks. "Forced" imitation is therefore not stylistic copying, but the institutional extension of unequal discursive authority into conservation standards, resource allocation and spatial practice.

4.1.4 Resource Misallocation: Hierarchies of Capital Investment

Disparities in symbolic capital within the garden field produce class differentiation and unequal capacities to attract capital, generating a Matthew effect. The stronger a garden's position, the more readily it attracts scholarly attention, commercial investment, cultural-tourism promotion, and policy and market support. Scarce public resources likewise favour famous gardens according to protection rank. Overlapping investment produces asset surpluses, frequent intervention, unnecessary expenditure and losses of authenticity. Weaker-field gardens receive less funding, lose historical records, deteriorate into wasteland, and may ultimately be cleared and redeveloped.

Famous gardens such as the Humble Administrator's Garden receive sustained expert attention to historical change, spatial authenticity and restoration. By contrast, finely designed residential gardens, including those of Shen Shixing and Ren Daorong, are reduced to memorial sites for famous individuals; their layouts remain poorly studied, producing a bias in which "the garden is lost while the residence remains". CNKI and Web of Science searches identified 6,776 papers on Suzhou's nine World Heritage gardens, whose funding and garden-level data are comparatively visible. Only slightly more than 1,400 papers concerned the other 99 gardens, for which annual investment, visitor numbers and restoration projects are rarely disclosed (Supplementary Material B). Gardens within the same heritage list are thus stratified in knowledge, finance, management and resources.

Publicly disclosed financial documents from the Suzhou Garden Administration show that conservation is embedded not only in public finance, but also in visitor economies, scenic-area services and operating revenue. World Heritage status, protection rank and tourism branding enable dominant gardens to secure more investment and restoration projects, while ticket sales and cultural-creative products convert symbolic into economic capital. Many lesser-known listed gardens lack independent budgets and stable income. Despite recognised aesthetic value, Jingsi Garden and the Qing-era Xiu Garden were forced into judicial auction because of operating difficulties. The nine World Heritage gardens have become models of the "orthodox" Chinese garden and symbols of Suzhou, while nearly one hundred other refined gardens remain little visited or unknown. Monopolies over publicity, investment and social resources are concealed by the appearance of tourists' "free choice" and supposedly "socially recognised value". Resource misallocation concerns not only investment

amounts, but institutional visibility: which gardens are named, counted, reported and continuously researched (Figure 8).

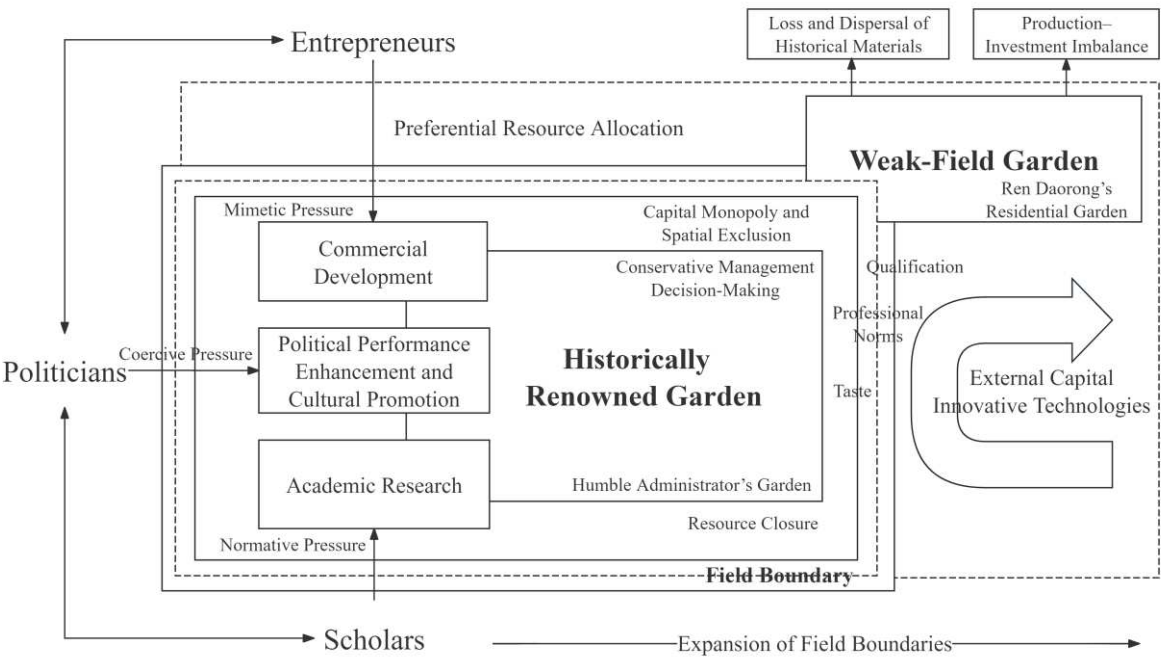


Figure 8. Resource misallocation and field closure

4.1.5 Field Closure: The Exclusion of External Capital

Once a garden field's capital structure stabilises, resources tend to circulate among institutions, expert networks and incumbent operators. To keep resources internal, incumbents legitimate existing rules and elevate them into collective norms. Qualifications, taste, professional conventions and tradition reproduce privilege and hinder external actors, capital and technologies from entering core decisions. Competition between external and incumbent capital is recast as confrontation with the field as a whole, provoking collective resistance and exclusion. Habitus that lags behind changing conditions, together with professional closure, encourages conservative decisions, frames new proposals as risks, suppresses theoretical and technological innovation, and weakens adaptive resilience.

4.2 Implications for Contemporary Garden-Heritage Conservation

4.2.1 Establishing a Heritage-Field Network Assessment Framework

Current conservation focuses on individual heritage properties, scenic-area boundaries and World Heritage components, while assessment privileges revenue, restoration expenditure and visitor numbers. It overlooks both the capital sustaining gardens and the unequal relationships between famous gardens and vulnerable surrounding heritage. If famous-garden value was historically produced through social networks, cultural and educational spaces, gentry-merchant organisations and street-and-lane memories, conservation cannot stop at buildings and horticulture within walls. The Historic Urban Landscape Recommendation and Xi'an Declaration support a relational understanding of heritage through material space, visual connections, social practices, traditional knowledge, uses and communities (UNESCO, 2011; ICOMOS, 2005). Protecting nodes while neglecting networks risks severing material preservation from sociohistorical continuity.

Assessment should map four networks shaping relations between dominant famous gardens and heritage in weaker fields: spatial fabric, social relations, economic ties and management structures. It should test whether conservation, renewal and tourism erode spatial continuity and non-commercial public use or further concentrate funds, visitors and interpretive authority. This shifts conservation towards integrated governance and supports compensation for vulnerable gardens, development control and resource redistribution.

4.2.2 Establishing Heritage-Field Red Lines

The Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas and the World Heritage impact-assessment toolkit require attention to heritage

686 settings, buffer zones and development impacts across heritage boundaries (ICOMOS, [2005](#);
687 UNESCO et al., [2022](#)). Garden conservation should define "heritage-field red lines":
688 regulatory boundaries controlling famous-garden branding, commerce, visitor-service
689 spillover, capital concentration, social-network reach and nearby vulnerable heritage. Within
690 them, network assessment should set the permissible scale and location of commerce, services
691 and consumption projects. Beyond them, a negative list should prohibit famous-garden
692 branding for real estate, restaurant clusters, cultural-creative districts and large visitor
693 facilities, preventing dominant fields from appropriating and subordinating historic spaces.

694 Unlike conventional protection boundaries, these red lines integrate heritage value,
695 commercial limits, brand use, public access and social use. They should curb one-way
696 absorption of capital, space and discursive authority, giving vulnerable gardens conservation
697 resources, public representation and participation rather than forcing them to serve dominant
698 gardens, cede space or disappear. Building on existing Suzhou controls, the framework should
699 combine brand regulation, commercial restrictions, facility limits and compensation. Local
700 red lines should foster open competition in capital, technology and services; across the wider
701 network, they should guide capital, technology and public resources towards balanced
702 distribution ([Figure 9](#)).

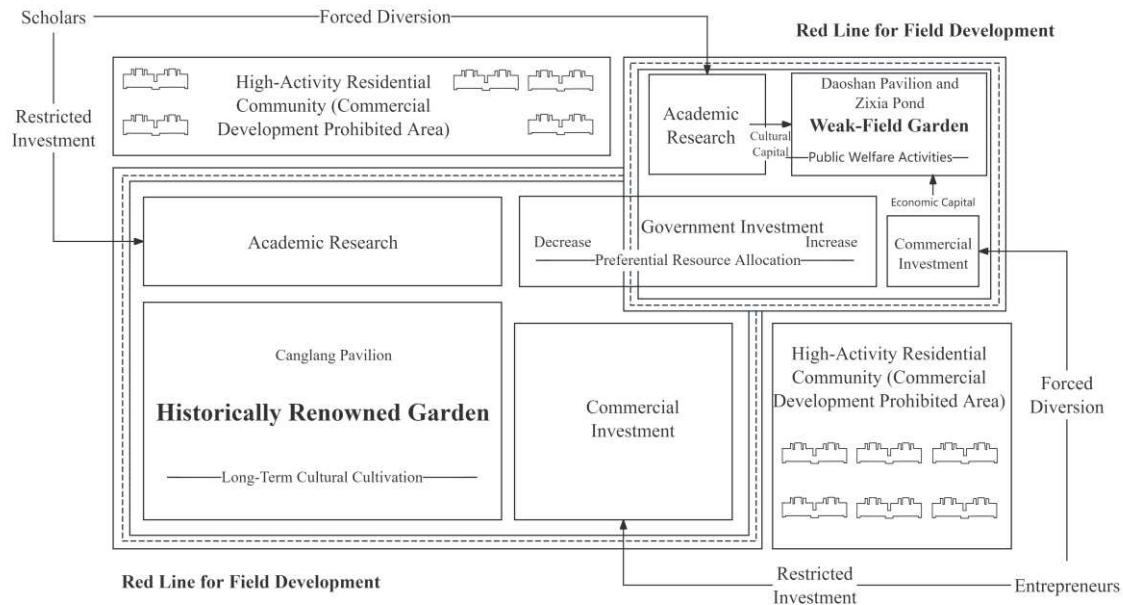


Figure 9. Field-development red line and resource regulation.

4.2.3 Social-Capital Audits and Compensation Mechanisms for Vulnerable Heritage

Social-capital audits should be incorporated into garden-conservation performance assessment. Beyond visitor numbers, revenue, restoration expenditure and heritage designation level, they should assess contributions to public culture, community participation, education and local memory. Because famous gardens derive visibility and public returns from accumulated historical capital, they should assume public responsibilities. A "famous-garden revenue, vulnerable-garden compensation" mechanism could allocate ticket, cultural-creative and rental income, or dedicated funds, according to spatial relations and influence within heritage-field red lines, to surveys, basic repairs, community welfare and youth research on vulnerable heritage. This would recognise, rather than punish, famous gardens: their capital and returns were produced through historical social relations and sustained public recognition. Part of those returns should be reinvested across the heritage network to redress inequalities in capital investment and cultural access.

4.2.4 Restoring Gardens' Normalised Public Cultural and Political Functions

Garden conservation cannot rely solely on festivals, cultural-creative sales and short-video dissemination. Although profitable, these may reduce cultural-educational spaces to consumption stages. The Faro Convention understands heritage significance as emerging from meanings, uses and values attributed by people (Council of Europe, 2005). Garden value should therefore reflect not only expert judgement, visitor numbers and market returns, but also community perspectives, everyday use and cultural memory. Historically, gardens accumulated capital by serving cultural functions for state and local society. Governance should shift from commercialised "festival performance" towards sustained everyday engagement through education, public welfare, participation and local transmission, offering another pathway for gardens in weaker field positions with limited commercial potential.

4.3 Limitations

This theory-building study is constrained by limited public data, preventing systematic comparison of funding, visitors, consumption, research output and restoration frequency. Its indicator framework and planning strategies remain exploratory and require empirical validation.

Declarations

Data availability

All data analysed during this study are included in this article and its Supplementary Information files.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage

During preparation of this manuscript, ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used only to assist with English language translation and copy-editing. The authors reviewed and edited the content and take full responsibility for the content of the submitted manuscript.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors. The study did not involve interviews, questionnaires, experiments, participant-level personal data or identifiable information.

Informed Consent Statements

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors. The study did not involve interviews, questionnaires, experiments, participant-level personal data or identifiable information.

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880 Sources of Figures and Tables

881 Figures 1, 7 and 8: Drawn by the author.

882 Figure 2: Wen Zhengming's Thirty-One Scenes of the Humble Administrator's Garden. Source: Wang,
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885 Figure 3: Wang Jian's Landscape Screens after Ancient Masters, nos. 1, 2, 7 and 9. Source: Shanghai
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888 Figure 4: Sources are indicated in the figure. Materials were obtained from the Suzhou Local
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892 Figure 5: Panels a, b and c are from the Suzhou Local Chronicles Museum. Panel d was published in
893 Suzhou Gardens, no. 2, 2020, by Song Jia.

894 Figure 6: The base maps are from the Suzhou Historical Culture Website. The contents were redrawn
895 by the author according to the arguments of this paper. The website's digital materials are supported by
896 the BenQ AUO Foundation Jiangnan Culture Research Fund.
897 <https://www.jnwhcn.net/ArticleList.aspx?CategoryId=0133c656-fc78-4f46-bae7-70d8c5235441&Type=Image>
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- [AppendixB.GardenConservationVisibilityandFundingDataset.pdf](#)