Historic Urban Landscape research in China: the Slender West Lake in Yangzhou

Han Feng
Abstract

The paper presents the recent pilot research project of cultural landscape on Slender West Lake in China’s historic city Yangzhou with 2500-year history. A systematic theoretical framework was designed to examine this cultural landscape and to explore layering of the meanings of this historic landscape from city’s social, political, economic, cultural and natural context. The project is now under preparation as a six-book outcome covering six focuses: cultural landscape inventory of the lake, research on landscape elements and characteristics, research on history of the lake, landscape character research from poems and painting of the lake, historical interpretation of the lake, authenticity and integrity of the lake and recommendations of management. Two books have been published and the others are underway. This paper explains the project that not only aims to research Slender West Lake, but also implements the Historic Urban Landscape principles (UNESCO 2011) and contributes to the clarity of the identity of the city by shaping the direction and structure of urban development.

Introduction: From heritage listing to understanding

As the historical origin of the Grand Canal and located at the crossroad of the Grand Canal and Yangtze River, the historic city of Yangzhou was the geographic and military throat between the North and the South in China. Over 2500 years of history and tightly connected with the Grand Canal, Yangzhou has been an influential historic city, full of chaos, devastating wars and splendid glories.

Yangzhou has been the front line, both of defense and offense for the South against the North. This strategic importance, together with rich salt, copper and grain resources close to the circle of the highly developed Chinese Southern culture, gave the city its leading position in culture, politics and economy in the past. However, its glorious history declined during the downfall of the Grand Canal in the mid-18th century, following the rise of marine shipping, the shift of the Yellow River’s route, the management crisis of the Grand Canal and the devastating wars.

In the World Heritage Grand Canal nomination process, Yangzhou was the leading city in the nomination group composed by the 35 cities through which the Grand Canal flows. History once again motivated Yangzhou’s ambitions to come back to today’s stage. However, today’s Yangzhou has neither the thoroughfares nor is the economic and cultural centre. How to revive Yangzhou’s historical position and how to establish Yangzhou’s future became the deep underlying causes for the municipal government to be involved in this nomination. The project clearly aimed to recognise the historic character of the city, to re-establish the identity of the city and to recover the confidence to move to the future, through reviewing and understanding the historic values of the city.
But to recollect the past history is not easy. Although Yangzhou has a 2500-year history, and it is a city of ‘general history’ because of its well protected underground archaeological evidence of city construction, historical memories have blurred and become distant from today’s daily life. The great ancient city walls were ruined and there is so little visible historic evidence compared with the massive new developments. History is under the threat of rapid urbanisation, disappearing and being forgotten. How to arouse historical identity? What is the strength of historical importance today? How to sustain historical values and apply historical wisdom to today’s developments? These questions are exactly ones that UNESCO’s Historic Urban Landscape approach could direct.

**Background: the opportunity of implementation of the Historic Urban Landscape approach in Yangzhou**

On 10 November 2011 UNESCO’s General Assembly adopted a new international instrument: the Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL), defining HUL as the urban area understood as the result of a historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes (UNESCO 2011). Based on the recognition and identification of a layering and interconnection of natural and cultural, tangible and intangible, international and local values present in any city, HUL is an integrated and comprehensive approach to identify and understand the urban values, which are at the heart of the identity and character of the city. The HUL approach also provides a useful tool to connect the old and the new in the city through detecting the historic context in dynamic social and economic changes.

Although it was not until 2012 that the China roadmap for implementation of Historic Urban Landscape was developed by Tongji University and the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia and the Pacific Region (WHITRAP) in Shanghai, Yangzhou had the opportunity to apply the HUL approach early in 2010 as I was the expert member representing China in this UNESCO initiative. I was also leading the research project of ‘Cultural Landscape Research of the Slender West Lake in Yangzhou’ from 2010 to assist the nomination of the Grand Canal.

Among all those heritage manifestations in Yangzhou, the Slender West Lake is the most visible one and has been continuously used throughout history. As the essence of this city, it is a well-known Scenic and Historic Interest Area which is characterised by 2.5 kilometre-long linear waterways and exquisite beauty of landscape. There is abundant literature eulogising this beauty and comparing it with famous classical Chinese gardens in Suzhou and the ‘Heaven on the Earth’ – the West Lake in Hangzhou. But the Slender West Lake faces the same difficulty as the city: what is the unique identity and character of this lake and how does it differ from other landscapes which are strongly rooted in its history? The visionary scenery is similar to other Chinese classical landscapes and the blurred memories of the lake make the understanding, interpretation and conservation very challenging. The historic power of its landscape as a cultural, social and political space and as an icon of the city has been forgotten in enjoyable views. Therefore, as the miniature of the city, Slender West Lake was the perfect entry to understand the city through the HUL approach.

**Methodology: Historic Urban Landscape research on the Slender West Lake in Yangzhou**

**Research purposes**

As the only visible, evolving and living heritage landscape, the Slender West Lake is witness to the history of the city. This pilot research project aims to decode the recorded memories of historic significance and symbolic meanings of the lake, to understand the interweaving relationship between the lake and the city and to interpret the layering of values through re-examining the history of the Slender West Lake. It aims to identify the landscape character and identity of Yangzhou, and the power and wisdom from history to shape the new directions for the City in today’s context of rapid urban development in China. Most importantly, the historic
and context-based understandings of cultural landscape heritage would be a significant engine in urban development and a powerful tool to shape the city’s identity.

Research theoretical basis

The Historic Urban Landscape approach is implemented in this pilot research. The Slender West Lake is recognized as a culturally and socially constructed cultural landscape sustained over long periods of time in the dynamic context of the living city of Yangzhou, the result of human interaction or interference with its physical elements and natural cycles. An urban landscape as a cumulative record of the succession of economic booms, slumps and innovation adoptions within a particular place thereby acquires its own genius loci or spirit of place. The spirit of a society is objectively represented in the historical-geographic character of the urban landscape which enables individuals and groups to take root in an area. They acquire a sense of the historical dimension of human existence, which stimulates comparison and encourages a less time-bound and more integrated approach to contemporary problems (Whitehand 1993). Landscapes with a high degree of expressions of past societies exert a particularly strong educative and regenerative influence, which should become the starting point in the search for a theoretical basis for the management of urban landscapes in the future (van Oers 2006).

Research methods

Based on the holistic, dynamic and integrated scope of the cultural landscape discipline, a multidisciplinary research academic group was organised. The group covered knowledge of archaeology, history, cultural landscape, landscape architecture, iconology, text analysis, culture study, sociology, politics, GIS, heritage landscape conservation and urban planning from two leading universities in Shanghai, Tongji University and Fudan University. The exploration of the significance of heritage landscape values and their integrity and authenticity involving multidisciplinary sources was designed as a principal line running through the research process.

Research also took this opportunity as a great chance to link academics and local managers, history and present, university teaching and social practice. Research encouraged the participation of local experts, local municipal government, citizens of Yangzhou, and students of Tongji University. The huge work of compiling an on-site heritage resource inventory, a questionnaire survey and GIS data collection was undertaken by 20 undergraduate and master students from Tongji University. More than 10 inspiring focus groups were facilitated with the deep involvement of local and university experts, local municipal governments and management authorities. Description and active interpretation via content analysis methods have been adopted for interpretation. The skill of critical thinking has been important in this research, especially for re-examining and re-interpreting values of the Slender West Lake in the evolving urban context. Triangulation, as a basic analysis method, has been applied to justify the validity of the research. Research tried triangulating the various forms of cross-disciplinary data to see the reality of values.

Research diagram

The research was undertaken as set out in the basic framework of the Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland (The Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage) into an historical dimension, locating all layers of landscape research into the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental historical context of Yangzhou, to read and to decode the reality, meanings

Figure 1: Research Diagram of Landscape Character Assessment (Based on LCA and Research Report 1: The Dynastic History Research of the Slender West Lake)
and values behind visible landscape phenomena, to further understand the historical integrity and authenticity of the landscape values and to detect their situation today (Figure 1).

**Research focuses and findings**

Based on the above theoretical framework, the research focused on the following six issues covering key issues of landscape conservation regarding inventory, investigation, interpretation, understanding and management. These six reports of findings are being developed into six books.

**The dynastic history research of the Slender West Lake: a moat landscape**

The research believes that the Slender West Lake is a cultural landscape that is evolving over time. Tracing its origin would help to examine the reality of the landscape and to value the landscape in its broad urban context. Therefore the historical investigation of this water body became a most important way to shake off conventional thinking which was tightly focused on its classical garden origins and ignored its predecessor. The research also believes that the authenticity and integrity of landscape values are embedded in its evolving history. The research traced all the historical literature and the most recent archaeological findings to detect the nature of the lake. The research successfully completed the first dynastic historical research of the Slender West Lake, which is a significant breakthrough and filled the gap of conventional research on the lake.

The research found that the origin of the Slender West Lake were pieces of the city moat developed from different dynasties that had functioned as military defense. It also overlapped with the initial origins of the ancient Grand Canal and with the city 2500 years ago. 'Slender' is
not about the landscape form, rather, it was its function. The surviving city moat, including the Slender West Lake, became the most important visible evidence to witness the entire history of the historic city of Yangzhou.

From the conventional aesthetics perspective of the lake, a door opened to allow understanding the historical reality of the lake. Today’s ‘classical garden appearance’ of Slender West Lake is not enough to display its layering of values and meaning, but it represents the pinnacle of cultural development in the moat system. From this vision, the concerns of this heritage lake extended out over 2.5 kilometres in length, toward the whole moat landscape in the city which could influence and shape the urban structure in today’s development. And this is the new point and powerful influence that attracted the politicians’ interest through this research – that heritage research is not only for the past, but rather, it aims to the future.

The dynastic history research identified three development stages over 2500 years of the Slender West Lake, covering from 485 BC to today, a simultaneous history with the city. The first stage: the initiative of the ancient canal (C); the second stage: the form as moat system (A, B, and D); the third stage: the refining stage of the lake (Figures 2 and 3).

**Cultural Interpretation of the historic Slender West Lake**

The historic urban landscape recorded the deep interactive process, forms, levels and results between nature and urban society, politics, the economy and culture. The dynamic historical perspective of this research set the cognition of the values of the Slender West Lake into broad groups aligned with historical contexts of the evolving city of Yangzhou. Based on this view, the research explored the interconnected cultural characteristics between the Slender West Lake and the city, and successfully interpreted the values of the canal culture, religious culture, scholar’s culture, imperial culture, political culture, commercial culture and civic culture carried by the Slender West Lake. It was demonstrated that Slender West Lake is a social and culturally constructed product.

The research evidenced that the Slender West Lake is a cultural icon of the city of Yangzhou, in a highly symbolic form. It demonstrated the landscape’s power to transcend time and space. As an organic part of the city moat and initial part of the ancient Grand Canal, the Lake played an important role in military defense, economic shipping, daily life and cultural activity throughout history. In this war-torn city, the culture of the Slender West Lake strongly and accurately reflected the character of the city and represented a symbol of war and peace.

The constant cultural construction of the Slender West Lake over 1500 years, presented an extravagant, romantic and dissolute culture, as well as a hedonistic and secular culture. It represented the wealth that this city always had, the pursuit of beautiful life in suffering wars

**Figure 3:** Sketch Maps of the Changes of Ancient City Yangzhou and the Forming of the Slender West Lake (Based on Research Report 1: The Dynastic History Research of the Slender West Lake)
and the philosophical consciousness of the meaning of life. It also evidenced that landscape was a place to heal the soul. Such identified character of the Slender West Lake was constructed by the glorious and solemn history of Yangzhou, which is unique and becomes the city’s identity.

**Inventory of heritage landscape resources and the establishment of a GIS database**

This research, based on the above new understandings of the historical values of the Slender West Lake, the position, function and meaning of the moat system, together with the conventional perception of a cultural image, defined the special boundary of the lake according to the authenticity and integrity of its multi-layered values. A thorough onsite survey and heritage resource inventory had been taken.

In order to provide the best support for research and also for the future heritage management, a specific GIS database archive was designed to collect all the heritage landscape information connected with the Slender West Lake, which included overall historical and present tangible and intangible data, such as a tangible mountain, water, plants, architecture, landform and road landscape elements, and also intangible aspects such as literature, painting, poems, events, activities, customs etc. This GIS archive was used as an effective tool to examine the changes of landscape throughout history. Now it has become a useful tool for heritage monitoring management. It is also a most complete GIS archive for a heritage landscape.

**Research on landscape elements, patterns and characteristics**

Based on the adequate onsite survey and historical information of the GIS database, a systematic study on this designed landscape has been undertaken. The discovery of regularities, the identification (and categorisation) of landscape elements, exploration of their connections, and discerning the landscape patterns was recognised as a key step to specify the character of the Slender West Lake which differs from the other landscapes. As most ancient designed landscapes were ruined in the wars, the research used ancient landscape painting to analyse classical landscape elements, characteristics and connected patterns (Figure 4).
Research found the high design standard of the landscape epitomised the overall essence of public historic urban lake landscapes in Hangzhou and Chinese classical gardens in Suzhou, and became the most outstanding designed landscape in the 19th century, strongly characterised by its moat-based linear shape and ‘country style’ of remembering the city blighted in the war. Such landscape character gave the city a strong identity that differed from Hangzhou and Suzhou’s elegance.

**Landscape character research: landscape text analysis**

In order to provide further evidence to justify the identification of the ‘country style’ of the Slender West Lake, a typical Chinese research method was applied, that is, the text analysis of ancient Chinese paintings, poems and literature of Slender West Lake. This is almost the most exciting process for the research as Chinese culture is characterised by a unique phenomenon, that is, Chinese landscape culture was highly developed in ancient society as an independent world famous cultural discipline. The cultural discipline typically included Chinese landscape painting, literature, poetry and gardens. Each of them recorded rich historical landscape information. Text analysis decoded the historical code by comparing all these materials with those on other cities and places (Han 2012).

The research carefully read the text from those historical treasures. The trees, the environment, the events, the patterns, the symbolism, the preferences, the character and the sense of the place, in paintings and in description, became the greatest source for the research to establish the authenticity of the Slender West Landscape (Figure 5). The research typically picked up those texts on the West Lake in Hangzhou. Once again, applying an analytical method of triangulation that justified the validity of identified ‘country character’ of the Yangzhou’s symbolic landscape and strongly enhanced the identity of city of Yangzhou, all of which is essentially important for the cognition of Yangzhou’s landscape today and to keep in future consciousness.

**Authenticity and integrity of Slender West Lake and recommendations for management and development**

Based on all of the above research, the reading of historical authenticity and integrity of the Slender West Lake, it became possible to compare the historical situation with the present. All layers of landscape research could be compared to examine the changes of authenticity and integrity, including the physical landscape element changes, pattern changes, characteristic changes, and the change of the character and the spirit of the place. This is the most important research finding for the site managers to set up the management principle of ‘the limits of acceptable change’ for heritage management and further to develop management recommendations.

The research found that the authenticity and integrity of the Slender West Lake had suffered a great loss in the recent 150 years. Today it is under extreme threat in the rapid process of urbanisation. Its embedded historical values are little known by the public and the managers. The rich symbolic meanings associated with the historic city are being forgotten and being replaced by entertainment and pleasant scenery. Landscape features embodying values are being modified and are

![Figure 5. Lake and Sky in Spring, Wuli, Qing Dynasty](image)
losing their local identity. But luckily, the moat system is still complete although only few civic people recognise that this is a moat with a 2500 year-history, instead of an ordinary slender river in the city.

**Conclusion**

Landscapes are not only something directly in front of our eyes; rather, they are representations from our mind and of the society. Landscape is culturally and socially constructed over time and space. Their meanings can hardly be perceived and understood until appropriate interpretation is in place.

As a pilot cultural landscape research in the historic city of Yangzhou in China, Slender West Lake’s history, values, meanings, symbolism and its status of authenticity and integrity have been preliminarily explored, interpreted and examined by applying the HUL approach. It is the first time the research on Slender West Lake broke the boundary of a scenic area and extended to the broad urban context of the city of Yangzhou, to feel the interweaving destiny between the lake and the city. It is a rebirth both for the lake and for the city. It saved the lake from being isolated in heritage conservation and contributed fresh strength to the city. During this process, the power of the landscape is not limited to within the conserved boundary; it has spread to the whole city, and concerns all civic people. It is not only a matter of the past but also of the future.

As shown in this project, landscape research is a powerful vehicle that bridges the old and the new; and puts historical wisdom back in today’s confidence. It is also an efficient way to help the politicians and the managers in the city to set up the management objectives with strong local identity. From this project, at this special moment with the inscription of the Grand Canal to the World Heritage List, there is confidence to believe that the ancient city of Yangzhou will be powered by a heritage engine that will transform its future.

**Acknowledgements**


**References**


van Oers, Ron 2006, ‘Preventing the goose with the golden eggs from catching bird flu – UNESCO’s Efforts in Safeguarding the Historic Urban Landscape’, *Cities between Integration and Disintegration: Opportunities and Challenges*, Proceedings of the 42nd Congress of The International Society of City and Regional Planners, Instanbul, Turkey, pp. 1-13

Endnotes

1 The two published books are:


2 The project ‘Research on cultural landscape values on the Slender West Lake’ was funded by ‘The World Heritage nomination office of the Grand Canal and the Slender West Lake’ in 2010, led by Tongji University. The author is the team leader of this project.

3 http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1443

The Grand Canal is a vast waterway system in the north-eastern and central-eastern plains of China, running from Beijing in the north to Zhejiang province in the south. Constructed in sections from the 5th century B.C. onwards, it was conceived as a unified means of communication for the Empire for the first time in the 7th century A.D (Sui Dynasty). This led to a series of gigantic worksites, creating the world’s largest and most extensive civil engineering project prior to the Industrial Revolution. It formed the backbone of the Empire’s inland communication system, transporting grain and strategic raw materials, and supplying rice to feed the population. By the 13th century it consisted of more than 2000 km of artificial waterways, linking five of China’s main river basins. It has played an important role in ensuring the country’s economic prosperity and stability and continues today as a major means of internal communication.