



# Yangzhou Artistry in the Techniques of Landscape Construction in Jiangsu Province, China

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**Abstract.** Yangzhou's landscapes and their unique construction artistry are symbols of the city's cultural heritage and form an important part of classical landscapes in Jiangsu Province, East China and Chinese canal history more broadly. Historically, Yangzhou traditional landscape construction techniques, which in the context of this paper refer to the 'Yangzhou artistry' attained maturity in the middle of the Qing dynasty (eighteenth to nineteenth century) as it emerged as its own genre. The five creative characteristics associated with Yangzhou artistry include the appropriate use of place and materials; craft and intention in planning; elegant, delicate and round forms; a unique integration of north and south; and a natural simplicity balanced with a serene profundity. To date, little has been written about the historical formation and development in the artistry of Yangzhou landscape construction techniques and knowledge of the art form is at risk of being lost. This paper seeks to dig deeper into the cultural characteristics of Yangzhou artistry and to lay the foundations for further intensive research of the protection for canal culture heritage.

**Keywords:** Yangzhou artistry · Techniques of landscape construction · Yangzhou landscape · Cultural Heritage

## 1 Introduction

Located within the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal World Cultural Heritage area, Yangzhou city is known as a 'landscape city'. Landscapes are places devised for people to rest, explore and enjoy, and as Li (2017) declares, 'Yangzhou wins with its landscapes'. The traditional landscapes of Yangzhou city in East China's Jiangsu Province include views of lakes, forested mountains in cities, in addition to gardens built in everyday people's homes. Many of these landscapes consist of a skilled expression of man-made hills and rocks, buildings, flowing water and flower gardens within the confines of small spaces that make them both aesthetically pleasing and places of contemplation and meaning. Consequently, it can be said that Yangzhou is a city of landscapes and both its aesthetic and way of life makes it arguably one of the most livable cities in the world.

Creating a landscape relies on many techniques, making it a comprehensive art of building with stones, plants, water features, scientific planning, and careful arrangement that combine to create the poetry that promotes a pleasant living environment (Wu & Fan, 2015) [1]. In addition to the universal artistic qualities of landscape construction, Yangzhou's historical approach encouraged a unique artistry that expressed distinctive Yangzhou cultural elements. Consequently, Yangzhou's landscapes show a blend of elements from the north and the south, of the majestic and the impressive, the elegant and the wholesome (Chen, 2018) [2]. The halls, corridors, and pavilions within its gardens are tall and straight, the rock gardens are wide and ancient, and the latticed windows are exquisite and diaphanous. The poetic and pictorial characteristics of these elements have exquisite style that is unmatched elsewhere and reflect the unique achievements of what is widely referred to as Yangzhou artistry. In recognition of this artistry, Yangzhou's local techniques of traditional landscape construction were included in the national list for China's non-material cultural heritage masterpieces in December 2014.

Yangzhou has experienced many wars throughout its history and little remains of the original objects of its landscapes prior to the Qing dynasty (seventeenth to twentieth century). However, traces can still be found in records. As the area prospered in the Ming and Qing dynasties (fourteenth to twentieth century), naturalistic paintings are particularly notable among historical materials. Most of these records show only the names of the landscapes although some offer written descriptions in scenes from their times. In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties (seventeenth century), Ji Cheng, a master of landscape wrote China's first landscape monograph, *Yuan Ye* in 1631. This book records the design ideas and methods that informed Ji Cheng's landscapes in Yangzhou; it also contains remarks on some of the artisanal skills found in Yangzhou during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

During the 1960s, Chen Congzhou conducted field surveys, mapped Yangzhou's existing landscapes and buildings, and wrote *Yangzhou Landscapes and Houses*. The data collected in maps and photos has laid an important foundation for further research, which in recent times has focused on the aesthetic characteristics and related design concepts of Yangzhou's landscapes, taken as a whole or as individual landscapes. However, little has been written or documented about the development of artistry in construction techniques used to create Yangzhou's landscapes. There are only a few texts in *Beauty is Immortal in the World: Yangzhou Landscapes and Yangzhou Landscapes in the Late Qing dynasty* (nineteenth to the beginning of twentieth century), in addition to scattered remarks in other records of architectural and stacked stone constructions. Overall, there is a dearth of literature for those interested in a complete and comprehensive understanding of the artistry in Yangzhou's landscape construction techniques. These essential skills are mostly passed on by one generation of artisans to another, however, over time, some artisans who had mastered the art of landscape construction in Yangzhou already passed away and at the same time, extensive use of modern technology has eroded the traditional methods; accordingly, these methods are on the verge of being lost.

Through drawing on relevant literature and other historical materials, a field investigation of existing classical landscapes and visits with artisans engaged in Yangzhou landscape construction, this paper aims to provide an overview of the unique artisanal craft of Yangzhou's landscapes and raise awareness and understanding of landscape

construction skills as part of non-material cultural heritage protection. It also aims to strengthen the promotion of this artistry and, ultimately, promote the protection and inheritance of these skills.

## 2 The Historical Formation and Development of Yangzhou Artistry

The term ‘Yangzhou artistry’ can refer not only to the unique and distinct blend of elements and style of Yangzhou’s landscapes, but to various Yangzhou skills (Guan & Liu, 2017) [3]. For the purposes of this paper, ‘Yangzhou artistry’ refers specifically to the crafts used in the creation of Yangzhou’s landscapes and their distinctive regional and cultural features.

In its formation and development, Yangzhou artistry is inseparably linked to the long-term accumulation of landscape construction knowledge and practices among Yangzhou’s artisans.

Over a period of 800 years, from the Western Han dynasty to the Sui dynasty (second century BC to seventh century), Yangzhou landscapes were limited to official constructions where only royals and nobles could live and relax. Due to the financial and material constraints on landscape construction at that time, landscape creation could only be adapted to the actual conditions, and the standards for landscape construction were only decorating it as luxurious as possible and making it as convenient as possible for visits.

### 2.1 The Emergence of Early Yangzhou Artistry

During the first year of Sui Daye period (605 CE), Emperor Yang explored Yangzhou several times and constructed a substantial number of palaces; for a time, the Yangzhou royal landscape was exceptionally prosperous.

Yangzhou, at the intersection of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal and the Yangtze River, was a significant north–south transportation hub and a center of distribution during the Tang dynasty (seventh to the beginning of tenth century). As transportation and economies developed, wealthy merchants and magnates gathered in Yangzhou. The materials available for landscape construction were enhanced and improved as landscape construction became increasingly popular. One commentator remarked that ‘landscapes are chiefly houses, and there are fewer carriages and horses than boats’ (Yao, year of publication unknown) [4].

During this period, residential landscapes in Yangzhou formed a ‘fairyland’, encouraging a livable environment with mountains, water, flowers, trees, and pavilions that concentrated the scenery of nature in their courtyards. Taking advantage of their financial prosperity, the nobility built rock gardens in these courtyards, bringing water into the landscapes of their residences as they planted exotic herbs and flowers and established a variety of splendors in small spaces. There were houses in landscapes and landscapes in houses, joined in beautiful combination. These residential landscapes, also known as urban mountain forests, contributed a phenomenon that has been extensively over time.

The prosperity of Yangzhou in this period attracted a substantial number of artists and intellectuals, who left behind many classic poems about Yangzhou. Their intervention added a scholarly ‘ink flavor’ to the residential landscapes of the Tang dynasty. The

artists and intellectuals, due to their dealings with officials and wealthy merchants, had a distinctive aesthetic vision that influenced the creation of residential landscapes. This vision focused primarily on the pursuit of poetic and picturesque environments and the creation of elegance. They inscribed couplets on pillars and in the galleries of monuments, taking these residential landscapes to another level of literary atmosphere.

The ordinary people of Yangzhou, economically affluent at the time, also constructed their own small landscapes. During this period, Yangzhou's landscapes were chiefly composed of houses, reflecting the local popularity of creating residential landscapes. This had a profound impact on the creation of residential landscapes in Yangzhou during the Ming and Qing dynasties, gradually forming the unique style of artistry in Yangzhou's landscape construction techniques and a unique 'Yangzhou taste' also developed.

## 2.2 Yangzhou Artistry Forms as a Structured and Distinct System

As the Song and Yuan dynasties (tenth to fourteenth century) endured socioeconomic turmoil, private landscapes became smaller in scale than they had been during the Sui and Tang dynasties. Most landscapes came to be constructed by governments of the times, chiefly for official purposes. The Construction System of Official's of this period developed in splendor as the craft industry's division of labor, achieving its peak, became precise and efficient. Consequently, the Song dynasty had a more specific classification based on the content and characteristics of work, even among craftsmen of the same kind. According to the Building Method that developed that time, there were thirteen works of building construction aside from the eight divisions that were led by the Manufacture of Siege Weapons Division (Zhang, 2001) [5]. The division of craftsmen in Yangzhou's landscape building techniques was in line with these practices.

With the economic development of Jiangnan after the middle of the Ming dynasty (fifteenth to sixteenth century), handicrafts and commerce gradually became vibrant and prosperous enough to provide the economic foundation for landscape construction. Landscape construction became more popular as landscape construction techniques became increasingly sophisticated.

## 2.3 Yangzhou Artistry Achieves Maturity as a Genre

As Yangzhou's economy grew in the Ming and Qing dynasties, private landscape construction prevailed, attracting a substantial number of craftsmen from both north and south. As Yangzhou's landscapes thus influenced by Su style landscapes as shown in Fig. 1, and loyal style landscapes, incorporated characteristics of both north and south, they grew increasingly mature, in turn affecting most of northern Jiangsu, centered on Yangzhou, Ning and Zhen, and the area around Anhui (Xie, 2018) [6]. It would be said that Yangzhou's landscapes were the best in the world and that Yangzhou is the best at artistry of building houses. Yangzhou's landscape construction techniques were thus characterized by their own remarkably distinctive characteristics and styles, collectively recognized as Yangzhou artistry.

In summary, landscapes in Yangzhou first appeared during the Western Han dynasty (second century BC to second century), developed through the Sui and Tang dynasties, matured in the Song and Ming dynasties, and flourished across the Qianlong period



**Fig. 1.** Su style stone stacking: Lingering Garden: Guan Yun Hill (Source: Min Liu)

(1736–1796) of the Qing dynasty (Ji & Yan, 2015) [7]. With the development of these landscapes, the first signs of Yangzhou artistry also appeared during the Sui and Tang dynasties, leading to the formation of a more formal system in the Song and Ming dynasties and maturing into a genre by the mid-Qing dynasty. The distinctive marks of these stages of development are still vaguely visible in some of the best-preserved ancient gardens of Yangzhou.

### 3 Main Creative Characteristics of Yangzhou Artistry

Workers associated with the construction of ancient gardens and landscapes could be categorized into two groups. There were those involved in planning and design, including masters who owned landscapes, their architects and commissioned scholars and painters. On the other hand, there were artisans, craftsmen of various kinds, who relied on their skills to interpret plans and bring to life the vision of the landscape design as imagined.

The works of artisans were divided into various creative categories, such as tile, wood, stone, lacquer, carving, flowers, and wood cultivation and skilled craftsmen were appointed as masons, carpenters, lacquerers, carvers, florists, and so forth. During their landscape construction activities, various craftsmen divided the labor and worked collaboratively as a whole.

The landscapes in Yangzhou that are particularly renowned show not only a wealth of wisdom, effort and labor, but above all, prominently exhibit the main artistic values of the Yangzhou artistry and are full of imagination and creativity.

#### 3.1 Appropriate Use of Place and Material

In the context of Yangzhou's landscapes, the term 'appropriate use of place and material' refers to the characteristically ingenious artistic creations that are based on available places and materials to overcome the limitations of actual conditions.

While the layout of residential landscapes in Yangzhou is comparable to those elsewhere in China, the space within which they are built is relatively small. To counter this, landscape architects created a complex two-floor cloister system to connect the landscape space and form a system of three-dimensional movement, as shown in Fig. 2. There



**Fig. 2.** He Yuan Garden Two-floor cloister (Source: Min Liu)

are several types of cloisters depending on the shape of the space—straight or curved, high or low, separate or joined. The result is a network of caves, mountain houses and stone rooms that are vertically connected with each other and interchange naturally. The cloisters at He Yuan Garden in Yangzhou are a particularly extraordinary example of architectural function and charm.

Whilst Yangzhou was prosperous through the Han, Tang, and Qing dynasties, it had also been devastated by several wars resulting in a collection of ruins and remnants throughout the region. In reconstruction following the wars, Yangzhou craftsmen used rubble scattered across the land to build walls. In laying the masonry, the inside and outside were arranged with bricks running horizontally, vertical bricks were used to pull everything together and the middle was filled with pieces of broken brick. Whilst each exterior facade was finely crafted, the nature of the interior has led to the description of a Neat and Meticulous Wall built by brick rubble with thin seams (Zhao, 2014) [8] and is a prominent feature of Yangzhou’s wall masonry. Not only did these walls reduce waste but, more significantly, they instill memories of the past and a profound sense of nostalgia.

### 3.2 Craft and Intention in Planning

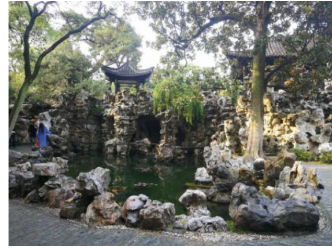
The artisan’s mindset is unique, his pre-construction consideration of craft and intention is crucial. Prior to commencing construction, artisans would be required to carefully consider the master’s intention, or vision as part of the process of ensuring an accurate ‘second creation’ from the designs. The finished work often exceeded expectations and impressed the original designers.

With respect to stone stacking, masters frequently only drew the outlines of rock gardens to communicate their intention. Similarly, the shapes of the hills drawn by the masters provided little guidance - the stones chosen for the construction were not produced in Yangzhou and their variety and overall unfamiliarity meant they were extraordinarily difficult for the craftsmen to manage. Craftsmen were required to learn to identify the nature and shape of each side of a stone, in addition to the color, pattern, and even each stone eye and crack prior to stacking.





Four Seasons Rock Garden: Spring



Four Seasons Rock Garden: Summer



Four Seasons Rock Garden: Autumn



Four Seasons Rock Garden: Winter

**Fig. 3.** Four Seasons Rock Gardens in Ge Yuan Garden (Source: Min Liu)

In the ‘Four Seasons Rock Gardens’<sup>3</sup> of Ge Yuan Garden in Yangzhou, four diverse types of stones were used to promote the landscape through the cycle of the four seasons, see Fig. 3. Yangzhou’s craftsmen specialized in stone stacking were good at building rock gardens adhered to walls, namely they liked to set the rock gardens they built close to walls instead of putting them in the center of the place—like the concept of using a whitewashed wall as a piece of paper and ‘painting’ on it with stones: the stacking was helped by high walls. Consequently, landscapes surrounded by rock gardens look natural and much like a mural (Fang, 2005) [9]. This leaves space in the landscape for pavilions and houses; it also implies that there are mountains outside the walls, expanding the spatial meaning as the foot of a hill signifies the hill’s larger presence. In addition to being natural, contrasting, and realistic, this method is also compact, saving labor and materials.

### 3.3 Elegant, Delicate, and Round Forms

Describing a form of art as ‘exquisite and elegant, delicate and rounded’ can be considered to refer to the sentiments of fine craftsmanship and poetic expression. Yangzhou’s residence and landscape combinations, their chosen materials and the meticulous work involved combine to achieve a special overall effect, but also convey an ability to carve very fine detail, as shown in Fig. 4. Yangzhou’s frames and decorations show the beauty of the inherent colors and textures of the materials, reflecting their pure quality. The exterior walls of buildings are not whitewashed; with brick-formed doorways, their appearance is trim and straight. The corners of square doorways are also furnished with brick carvings which look simple, exquisite and elegant. The practice of using high quality materials is in line with the aesthetics of Yangzhou and reflects the exquisite character of Yangzhou’s construction work throughout.



Grinding Brick Inlaid Lattice Window

Brick Carving Decorated Door Opening

**Fig. 4.** Brick decorations in Ge Yuan Garden of Yangzhou (Source: Min Liu)

Fig. 5-1

Fig. 5-2

Fig. 5-3

**Fig. 5.** Latticed Ridges (Source: Min Liu)

### 3.4 Unique Integration of Techniques from the North and South

Yangzhou artistry integrates the characteristic beauty of the south with the majesty of the north. The appearance falls between northern and the southern styles, the structure and attention to detail also expressing the advantages of each, while the overall style is known as elegant and invigorating.

The first manifestation of this integration lies in the use of diverse materials. The materials used in Yangzhou's landscapes (including rafters, doors and windows, railings, and windowpanes) are not as wide as those in the north, nor as slender as those in the south. This is especially true in the choice of wood for beams, columns, and woodwork, which is predominately round and straight, with some pieces incorporating rectangular cross sections.

Second, the shapes show the diversity of styles from the north and the south. The roof ridges in Yangzhou's landscapes are dominated by latted ridges with various forms, as shown in Fig. 5; a style distinctively associated with Yangzhou. Corner beams are also one of the characteristics of Yangzhou's landscapes and are called Laoqiang and Nenqiang in the dialect of Yangzhou, as shown in Fig. 6. The turned-up angle of corner beams is relatively relaxed and plain, neither as rough as in the north nor as graceful as in the south. The cross sections of the rafters under the roof gradually transition from a round to an oval, following a rhythm and creating an overall shape that resembles a spreading swallowtail. (Yangzhou City Landscape Journal Compilation Committee, 2018) [10].





**Fig. 6.** Corner Beams (Source: Lichang Zhao)

Of most importance in this integration of the characteristics of north and south is the unique artistry of Yangzhou's latticed windows, which are exquisite and diaphanous, as some examples shown in Fig. 7. Taking the latticed window as an example, the latticed window in the north is affected by the climate, so the window opening is smaller, its length and width are often between 500–900 mm, and the materials used are mainly brick, wood and glazed tile; latticed windows in the south are more diverse, materials used are brick, tile, wood, clay sculpture, stone, etc. The size of the window opening varies with the proportion of the wall of the building or structure, usually between 900–1800 mm. The frame of Yangzhou latticed windows inherits the northern style. The materials used are mainly bricks and tiles, and the size is huge. The largest latticed window is over 2000 mm in size. The workmanship on the framework of these windows, using bricks, panels, and small tiles to create an effect. They are also known as scenery windows, they display extraordinarily varied patterns, wide decoration rims and brick carvings at the corners of the frames. These are as complex as the brick carvings used in the north and unlike the delicate, pretty, relatively plain window views used in the south, and form a distinct and essential feature in the creation of Yangzhou's landscapes.

In the Qing-dynasty, *Story Collection at Lu Garden*, Qian Yong wrote that 'Yangzhou is the best at artistry of building houses' (Qian, 1979) [11]. The construction of residential homes in Yangzhou is characterized by the most distinctive features and achievements in tilework, woodwork and carving. Chen Congzhou, after several visits and surveys, praised Yangzhou's landscapes, describing the style as 'elegant and invigorating'.

### 3.5 Natural Simplicity, Serene Profundity

Yangzhou artistry lends to construction of landscapes that highlight the simple beauty of nature and a serene mood of diverse and intriguing meanings.

The stone stacking in Yangzhou's landscapes emphasize a particular use and effect of natural rocks; stones are stacked with unexpected hollow spaces inside, and they create senses of dangerous wonders, or floating stones appear to move. To pursue the natural landscape experience of these urban mountains and forests, people admiring the stone-stacking skills can enter spaces, go up or down, stop and watch, or connect with structure. The Qiu hill, as shown in Fig. 8 in the northeast corner of the Ge Yuan Garden is comprised of irregular yellow stones rising from the ground and towering into the sky.



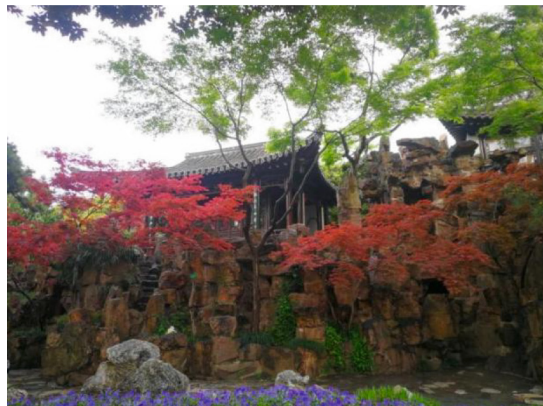
Grinding Brick Latticed Window



Banwang Latticed Window



Small Tile Latticed Window

**Fig. 7.** Different types of latticed windows (Source: Lichang Zhao)**Fig. 8.** Qiu Hill in Ge Yuan Garden (Source: Min Liu)

With its meandering stone plane, its three-dimensional arrangement, and its ingeniously stacked structure, it reaches the peak of its kind, achieving natural simplicity and a serene profundity of its surrounds. The Qiu hill is currently the only example of its kind among modern Jiangnan landscapes.

When He Zhi-dao left the government and returned to his hometown during the the ninth year of the Guangxu reign (1883 AD), he bought and reconstructed the He Yuan Garden in Yangzhou, also recognized as the Jixiao Mountain Villa (Zhu, 2002) [12]. There is a hall in which a plaque is hung Fuhai Xuan, alluding to the phrase from the Analects of Confucius: If people don't accept my proposition, I will leave to the ocean by boat. In the front of this hall—referred to as the Boat Hall on account of it being shaped like a boat—garden makers used cobblestones and tiles to pave the floor in a pattern that looked like undulating, rippling waves of water. The Boat Hall is like a mooring, potentially a metaphor of the owner's wistful memories from decades of sea travel. This artwork evokes a serenity and is a priceless example of the exquisite skill, innovation and variety of traditional landscape construction techniques.

## **4 The Value of Yangzhou Artistry**

Yangzhou artistry is at the core of Yangzhou's landscape construction skills, today, some are still passed down by craftsmen, and some can only be seen in the relics of the famous gardens of the past dynasties.

### **4.1 Great Historical and Cultural Value of Yangzhou Artistry**

The famous gardens remained in Yangzhou are precious cultural heritages, which reflect the artistic style, technological level, aesthetic concept and social, political and economic aspects of the construction period, we can see these in He Yuan Garden, Ge Yuan Garden as well as Xiaopangu Garden in Yangzhou. They are the crystallization of the development of ancient artistic creation. These physical examples full of Yangzhou artistry skills have important historical and cultural value.

### **4.2 Great Artistic and Aesthetic Value of Yangzhou Artistry**

The Yangzhou artistry vividly and truly reflects the way Yangzhou people built gardens after the Ming and Qing Dynasties. These ways reflect people's way of life, customs, and aesthetic concepts. They accumulate and inherit the culture of salt merchants in Yangzhou, forming unique Yangzhou landscapes. Yangzhou gardens, as an important branch of Chinese private gardens, have high artistic aesthetic value and cultural value. For example, in the building, grinding bricks can make the walls as smooth as a mirror, and the brick seams can hardly be seen. This exquisite craftsmanship is closely related to the salt merchant culture and reflects the unique artistic aesthetic value.

### **4.3 Great Scientific Research Value of Yangzhou Artistry**

Yangzhou artistry is a highly technical practice incorporating local characteristics, since the late Qing dynasty, due to wars and general decay, Yangzhou's ancient landscapes have been damaged and devastated. The historical passing down of knowledge of the various techniques specific to Yangzhou artistry has played a significant role in the preservation and restoration of the city's historical landscapes and districts. These unique techniques provide useful reference for other types of construction techniques and have high scientific research value.

## 5 Conclusion

Through outlining the formation and development of Yangzhou artistry in the history of landscape construction in Jiangsu Province and categorizing its characteristics, I have laid a foundation for subsequent in-depth research. Further investigation is required around the passing down of knowledge given many of today's craftsmen are advanced in age and some traditional techniques appear to have no successors. This and other factors have created difficulties to the protection and restoration of classical landscapes. In the future, it is expected that through digital images, 3-D printing and artistry skills manual development to rescue, categorize, and protect these traditional techniques.

As a matter of cultural heritage and a symbol of Yangzhou's culture, Yangzhou artistry possesses significant historical and cultural values. Intensive research, protection, and inheritance of this artistry will serve to build a park city, enhance the lives of individuals, and implement harmonious social development.

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