

## Article

# Spatial Distribution of Urban Heritage and Landscape Approach to Urban Contextual Continuity: The Case of Suzhou

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**Abstract:** Suzhou, one of the most famous historical cities in China, has undergone significant urbanization over recent decades. These changes have caused a gradual separation of Suzhou's urban heritage from its urban development and hindered the further growth of the city. This study analyzes the distribution of tangible and intangible heritages that constitute the context of Suzhou combined with the historic urban landscape approach to obtain the following conclusions: (1) The current distribution of Suzhou's urban heritage does not completely overlap with the built-up area of the city, and the non-overlapping areas reveal the imbalance of the current urban development and the fracture of the context of Suzhou; this imbalance is still a blind spot in the planning process. (2) The use of intangible cultural heritage will help to establish the possibility of contextual continuation in areas that lack urban heritage. (3) Multi-use community spaces that carry the intangible cultural heritage are particularly important for new urban areas, as they can help urban residents understand the traditional way of life in the region. (4) An approach to heritage management that goes beyond elitism, in conjunction with residents and communities, will help the ancient city to find a better balance between contextual continuity and economic development.

**Keywords:** historic urban landscape; urban context; built-up area



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## 1. Introduction

Currently, urbanization has dramatically changed the shape of human living spaces globally. Many traditional urban areas are being eroded or compressed into small areas due to their incompatibility with the demands of modern industrialized production models. The newly built-up urban areas in these cities have been separated from their historic centers through one-sided land use for rapid integration into the globalized economic market [1–4]. This not only impacts the urban landscape but also results in a gradual loss of the urban context and local identity that the locals rely on. This has become a significant issue in urban development, particularly in developing countries. Thus, it is crucial to study how this problem can be solved or mitigated. Additionally, Suzhou can be considered a representative case.

As one of the oldest and most economically developed cities in China, Suzhou has undergone complex social changes over more than 2500 years [5]. Especially in the last 40 years, unprecedented economic growth has led to rapid urban expansion, yet an unbalanced development model that prioritizes the economy still prevails [6]. Although China selected Suzhou as one of the first historical and cultural cities to be protected in the 1980s, the construction of the city in the early 20th century has had a huge impact on the city's development since then. Coupled with the spread of modernism in recent decades, the homogenization of the city and the isolation of the landscape have become huge problems that cannot be ignored [7]. This has led to a blurring of the boundaries between cities, but the distinction between ancient and new urban areas within Suzhou has become more and

more pronounced, as traditional spaces and regional cultures shaped over thousands of years have been eroded and new urban areas established rapidly over the past 20 years have abandoned the context of Suzhou. Therefore, a new understanding of the link between urban heritage and urban development in Suzhou requires a new approach: one that looks at both the tangible and intangible heritage of the city while at the same time examining the process of urban development.

The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach proposed by UNESCO as a tool for reinterpreting urban heritage takes into account the broader urban landscape and expands the nature of urban heritage even further [8]. The urban context as a continuum of urban heritage, with urban heritage forming the core of its continuity [9], and a holistic and dynamic approach to its relationship to the city would be important ways of thinking about urban development.

This research attempts to identify and classify the elements of Suzhou's urban heritage by taking the composition of Suzhou's urban context as the starting point. Through the spatial distribution of these urban heritages in built-up and unbuilt-up areas, it confirms that the current distribution of urban heritages and urban development in Suzhou is exhibiting an alarming separation, and through this separation the feasibility of heritage from the HUL perspective is explored as a new approach to this problem. In addition, this study also proposes specific measures to help the integration of historic cities and newly built-up urban areas. We hope these will be of value not only to Suzhou but also to other historic cities in East Asia or even worldwide.

## 2. Related Concepts of Urban Heritage

### 2.1. Urban Context and Urban Heritage

The term “context” originally refers to a linguistic concept that indicates the logical relationship between a word and its surrounding text and is not related to urban development. However, with the rise of the modernist movement in the 1920s, in the process of solving the problems of urban expansion and urban renewal, modernists gradually stood in opposition to tradition, and a large number of new and different buildings emerged without regard for the characteristics of a city and its totality, which could further damage its historical and cultural characteristics [10]. Based on this situation, the postmodernists introduced “context” into the field of architecture as an important way to understand architecture.

In the early days, the study of context in the field of architecture took the architectural monolith as the main object, and a significant amount of discussions were conducted around it, which gave rise to more thoughts on the relationship between architecture and the urban environment. For example, Kevin Lynch, in his book *The Image of City*, analyzed the process of building urban imagery from the cognitive impressions of the urban public and pointed out the interconnectedness between the urban environment and architecture. His view of the urban context was summarized into five elements: paths, landmarks, boundaries, nodes, and areas [11]. In his book *The Architecture of the City*, Aldo Rossi suggested that the intrinsic nature of architecture is the product of cultural practices and that the deep structure of architecture exists in the collective memory of people in the city [12]. In *Collage City*, Colin Roy emphasizes that the context is a product of different time periods and that this sedimentary and fragmentary context determines the character of the city [13]. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs argues that diversity is in the nature of cities; this encompasses economic, cultural, and social diversity, and is the basis for the continuation of the urban context [14].

In 1977, the Machu Picchu Charter emphasized that a city is not only concerned with the container but the contents, no longer isolated buildings, but the continuity of the urban texture [15]. By the end of the 1990s, Wu Liang Yong drafted the Beijing Charter, which suggested that culture is the accumulation of history, surviving in the city and architecture, melting into people's lives, and including the construction of the city; the conceptions and behavior of citizens play an invisible influence, which is the soul of the city and architecture,

and the meaning of architectural form comes from the local culture and interpretation of the local context [16]. This became an important programmatic document for urban development in the 21st century, and the importance of the tangible heritage that constitutes the urban context was confirmed.

## 2.2. Historic Urban Landscape and Urban Heritage

As the connection between the context and the city is clarified, its value as a sustainable element in the landscape is further recognized [17]. The concept of a “cultural landscape” was introduced by UNESCO in 1992 to close the gap between cultural and natural heritage, and after several congresses in 2005 and 2011, the historic urban landscape was formally established as a new approach to urban conservation. The historic urban landscape approach extends the object of conservation from “world heritage” to “urban heritage”, and the emphasis on intangible heritage makes it necessary to pay attention to the integrity of the urban context during development [18]. According to Miao, urban context should be seen as a dynamic and intrinsic sum of essential connections between people, the natural environment, the built environment, and the corresponding socio-cultural background in the course of historical development and under specific conditions [19]. As Gao pointed out in his dissertation, “the urban cultural context refers to the cultural system with certain stable characteristics formed by the cultural accumulation of multiple generations of residents during the development of a specific city, which can represent the collective cultural character and be inherited, shared and externalized through architecture, landscape, literature, art and citizen behavior” [20]. HUL, through the concept of “layering”, expands the view of heritage to the city, which is more closely connected to everyday life, and describes the intangible part of this urban landscape [21]. Thus, the importance of intangible heritage, which constitutes the context of the city, has been confirmed.

## 3. Materials and Methods

To achieve this purpose, this research investigates and analyzes the heritage of Suzhou based on the HUL approach, which emphasizes contemporary areas and intangible parts of the built environment. Firstly, the approach is to visualize the addresses of heritages in the official urban heritage list of Suzhou (Figure 1). Then, map their spatial distribution in built-up and unbuilt-up areas by type, and identify the value and the process of their changing the context of Suzhou. Materials are obtained from the list of cultural relics protection units at all levels provided by the Suzhou government, the list of intangible heritage, historical documents from local libraries, ancient maps, and local chronicles.

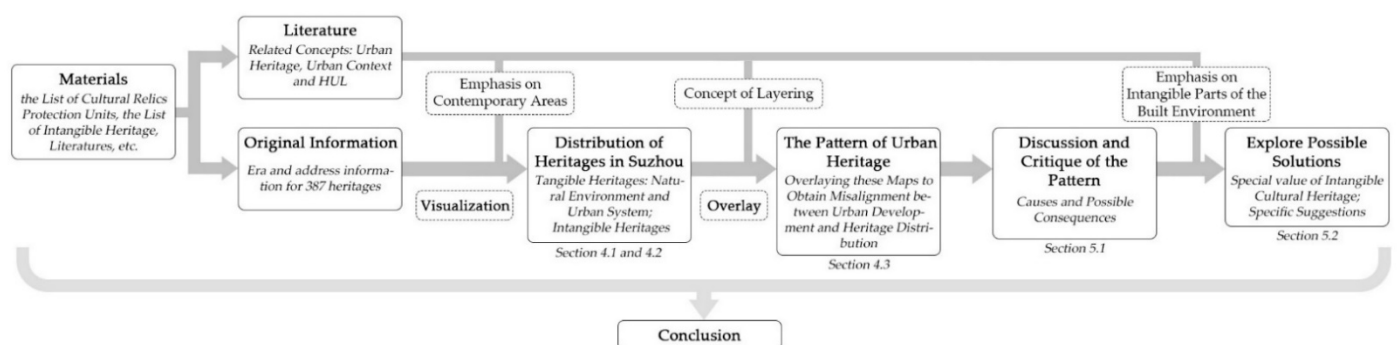


Figure 1. Flow chart of this research.

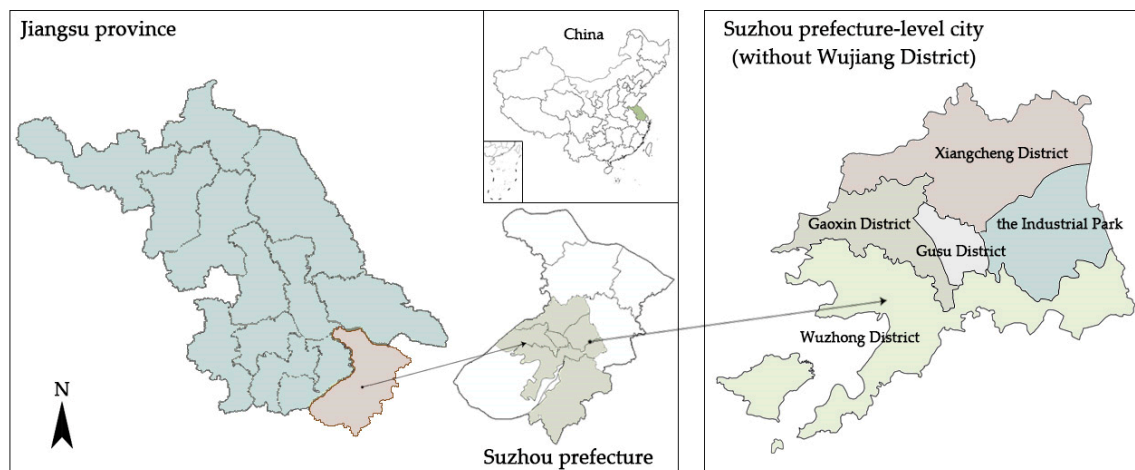
Then, based on the concept of layering in HUL, by overlaying these maps of tangible and intangible heritages as layers, Suzhou’s specific manifestations of the misalignment between urban development and heritage distribution are obtained. The characteristics and distribution of urban built-up areas that lack urban heritage are also pointed out.

Finally, the causes and possible consequences of this mismatch are critically discussed; the significance of recognizing and repositioning the urban heritages for contextual con-

tinuity is considered from the perspective of HUL; the specific suggestions are proposed based on the value of the heritages.

Suzhou, called Wu in ancient times, is also known as Gusu and Pingjiang and is one of the birthplaces of the Wu culture in China. Suzhou is located in the Yangtze River Delta and has many waterways in the region, and its crisscrossing rivers have given the city a special urban appearance, which is known as the “Venice of the East” [5]. As one of the oldest surviving cities in China, Suzhou has preserved a large number of private gardens with local characteristics formed under the influence of the Wu culture [5].

Today, Suzhou consists of six districts with Gusu District as the ancient city. Gaoxin District, the industrial park, Xiangcheng District, and Wuzhong District are all new urban areas established after 1949. This research takes these five districts as the object (Figure 2). Wujiang District is a county-level city incorporated into the urban area of Suzhou in 2012, and because it is relatively independent in the process of urban development like Kunshan and Changshu (two county-level cities in Suzhou prefecture) [22]. Thus, Wujiang District is not included in the discussion.



**Figure 2.** Location of the study area.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Distribution of Tangible Heritages

#### 4.1.1. Natural Environment

As a result of the human transformation of nature, different natural environments directly influence the formation of cultural landscapes and further influence the characteristics of settlements and cities. For Suzhou, which developed from the Wu culture, natural conditions have a fundamental influence on the development of the city and are the environmental basis for the creation of urban heritage.

Suzhou belongs to the Tai Lake Plain, which is a typical water network plain. The hills in the region of Suzhou are mainly located in the Wuzhong and Gaoxin districts [5]. The main hills are in the north-east direction, forming four groups and some isolated residual hills on the plain [23]. These hills provide environmental support for the many temples and other heritage sites in Suzhou that are built on mountains (Figure 3).

According to Wu Zixu, the builder of Suzhou City, “Wu and Yue were surrounded by three rivers, so the people had no place to move. But the southeast is low, millions of rivers converge here, rivers and lakes flood and flow everywhere, tributary channels are crisscrossed, and the nobles gang up to divide them, so the original old river courses are hard to figure out completely” [24]. It is evident that the water systems in the Suzhou area were numerous and often flooded before the construction of the city. The further use of the water system during the Middle Tang Dynasty led to the emergence of a water system with local characteristics, and during the Song Dynasty, the large polder system was demolished and a small polder system was formed; the hills and plains were continuously opened up



with more rivers, gradually forming a dense spiderweb-like network of water systems [25]. Overall, the Suzhou water system was formed in the Tai Lake plain by natural lakes, rivers, and artificial rivers in the process of continuous development.



**Figure 3.** Natural environment of Suzhou.

These waterways contributed to the development of the traditional water transportation system on the western side of Suzhou and influenced the distribution of heritage outside of the city.

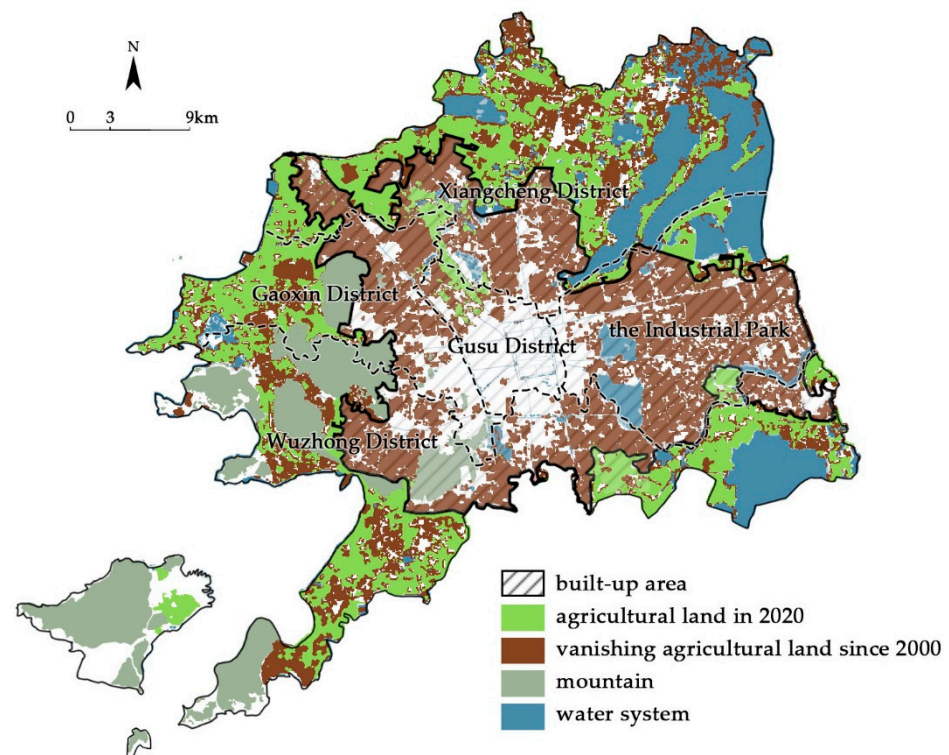
The relatively flat terrain and widely distributed yellow clay soil species made Suzhou an ancient agricultural area, while the dense network of water and lakes throughout the region laid the foundation for the implementation of a farming pattern in which rice was the main product and a system of water and dry rotational farming in the Suzhou area. The civilization developed under this mode of agricultural production had an important influence on the establishment of the city of Suzhou [26]. In the Wu-Yue Spring and Autumn Annals, the king of Wu's concern about the location of the city is recorded as follows: "Our country is located in a remote place in the southeast, where the environment is harsh and flooded; the ruler is unable to defend himself and the people have no place to rely on; at present, the country has no granaries and storehouses, and the fields are difficult to cultivate on a large scale due to natural conditions. What should we do?" [27]. It can be seen that the convenience of the natural environment for farming and grain storage became an important consideration for the ruler at that time during the survey stage, before the establishment of Suzhou.

#### 4.1.2. Urban System

- Agriculture Model

As it is in a region where rice is the main crop, polder fields (paddy fields surrounded by earthen dikes) have been an important mode of farming in Suzhou since the founding of the city in the Spring and Autumn period and became mature during the Tang and

Song dynasties, when the large polder system began to disintegrate and gradually shifted to a small polder system during the Northern Song dynasty [28], which established the main layout of polder fields in Suzhou thereafter. After 1949, due to the low resilience of the polder fields left by the Republic of China (ROC), which led to flooding caused by successive breaches of the dike, the polder and related river channels were transformed and the joint polder model was implemented in the 1950s onward, allowing the polder to transfer water surface and gradually developing electromechanical drainage and irrigation, which improved resilience to droughts and floods. By the end of the last century, polder fields accounted for 53.3% of the total arable land area in Suzhou [29]. By 2000, agricultural land was still the largest land type in Suzhou, but due to the rapid urbanization in the following 20 years, the urban built-up area massively eroded the original agricultural landscape base, except for a small amount of preserved arable land, and the rest is mainly distributed outside the urban built-up areas (Figure 4). (For the determination of the built-up area of Suzhou in this article, please refer to our previous article [7].



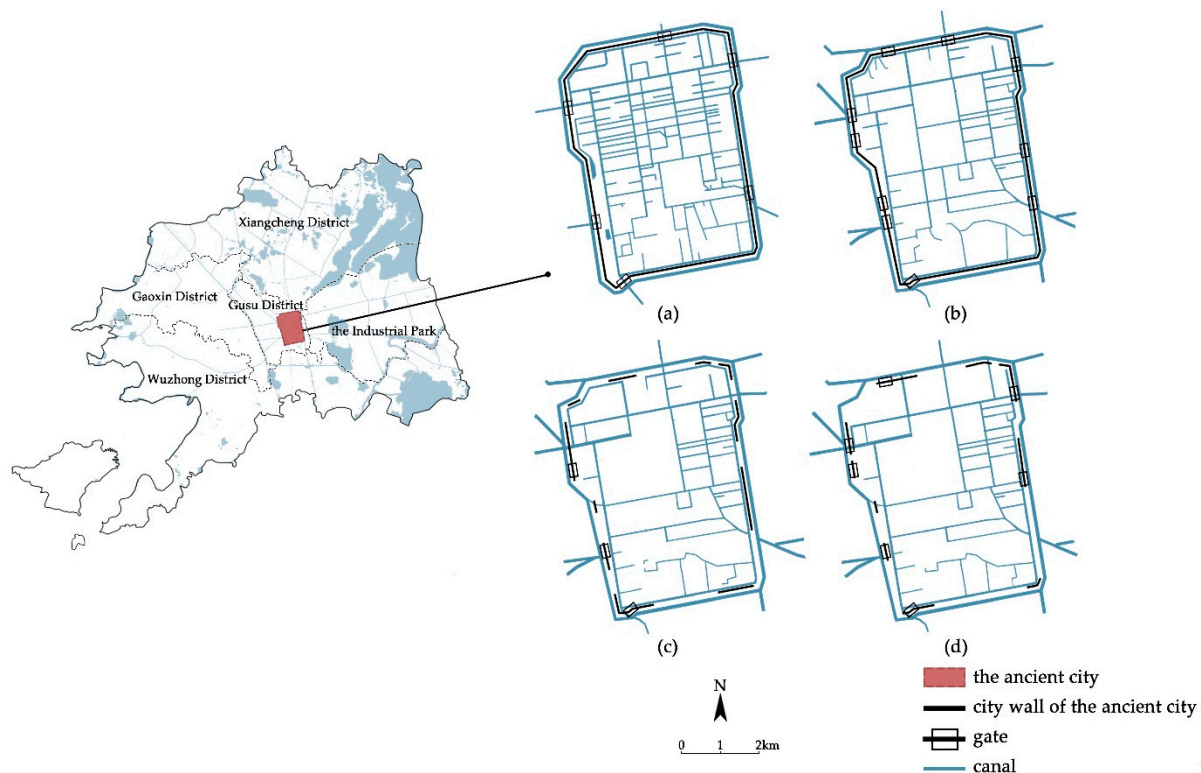
**Figure 4.** Agricultural land of Suzhou.

- **The City Walls**

The city walls of Suzhou were built during the Spring and Autumn period and have been destroyed and/or rebuilt many times since then due to wars, but the site of the walls and the area they enclose have not differed greatly from the present appearance since the Sui dynasty [30]. The early city walls were built by rammed earth, and Wu Di Ji states that the Helu city (Suzhou) had eight gates: the West Chang Gate, the Xu Gate, the South Pan Gate, the She Gate, the East Lou Gate, the Jiang Gate, the North Ping Gate, and the Qi Gate. During the Five Dynasties period, the walls of Suzhou were built of brick and stone, during the Song Dynasty, there were five city gates, and in the time of the Republic of China there were 10 gates and the total length of the walls was about 22.5 km [31]. As an important factor influencing the development of the city, the city wall shaped the form of the inner space of Suzhou for a long period, and it was not until the Ming and Qing dynasties that Suzhou's urban development began to break through the limitations of the city walls due to the rise of Shantang Street for waterborne commerce [32]. It can be argued that during

the feudal period, the city wall in Suzhou existed not only as a defensive infrastructure, but also served as an important boundary that distinguished between the inner and outer parts of the city, a boundary that allowed it to provide important intentional value for its residents.

Unfortunately, after the liberation, due to the one-sided pursuit of economic development after 1949, the original, intact city walls were not given much attention, and most of them were demolished; the historical city gates also suffered devastating blows, with only the Jin Gate, Pan Gate, and Xu Gate surviving. Although the preservation of the city walls received renewed attention after the reform and opening-up of China (1978), only two kilometers of the walls survived by 1985. In the decades that followed, the ancient city walls of Suzhou were rebuilt and have been regarded as urban heritages, but these walls have completely changed their functions, as public spaces or regional landmarks in conjunction with the moat of the ancient city. It has changed from a continuous ring of urban defenses in the past to a sporadic urban landscape heritage around the ancient city (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The city walls and pattern of water and streets in Suzhou in Song Dynasty (a), Late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China (b), 1985 (c), 2020 (d).

- City rivers and streets

Unlike the external rivers outside the ancient city, most of the rivers in the city were dug by hand, and a four-horizontal and four-straight pattern was formed at the beginning of the city in order to disperse the water power, which gradually evolved into a three-horizontal and four-straight water network pattern in the Song Dynasty [33]. At that time, there were about 82 km of rivers throughout the city, providing important structural support for the urban landscape of Suzhou. With the massive population growth and social changes during the Ming and Qing dynasties, many rivers were encroached on by the time of the Republic of China, and after the liberation of China, due to the left-leaning social production movement, the city's rivers were further violated; only the "three-horizontal and three-straight" waterways remain today [34]. Moreover, there is no specific name for the rivers in Suzhou; it is customary to name the rivers after the side streets. The streets



and alleys in Suzhou are dense and narrow, the typical width of an arterial canal in the ancient city being 5–12 m, and 3–6 m for a branch canal [33]. A typical street is 6 m wide and an alley 3–4 m, and the city developed three forms of street–canal systems with local characteristics of Suzhou (a river with one parallel street, a river with two parallel streets, and a river with no parallel street) [35]. This is also due to the fact that the excavation of the rivers in the city limited the direction of the streets and lanes in the old city, and these features eventually formed the unique parallel urban pattern of water and streets in Suzhou (Figure 5). This highly distinctive urban space provides a unique spatial scale and walkable place for daily life in the ancient city.

- Bridges

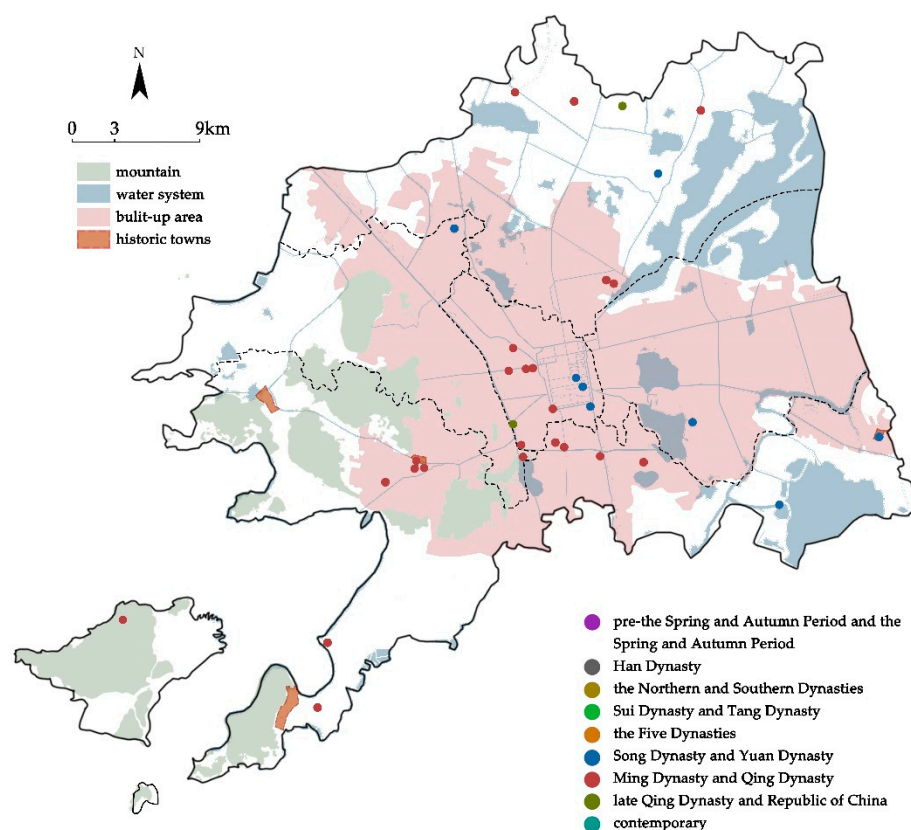
As an important part of the infrastructure of a water city, bridges have been spread all over the city since the foundation of Suzhou to connect various neighborhoods. An ancient poem from the Tang Dynasty states, “Green waves of water from east to west, north to south, and three hundred and ninety bridges with red railings.” The record shows that at that time, there were 25 bridges per square kilometer in the ancient city of Suzhou, and it is commonly said that one could touch “two bridges in one step” [36]. In the old days, according to the unwritten rules, once the bridge is crossed, the name of streets and alleys will change, so a bridge is not only a traffic connection body, but becomes the street’s dividing point. The bridges’ names are also rich in local cultural characteristics. After the Song Dynasty, the bridges were named mostly via stone monuments. Some bridges have patterns and inscriptions, and some bridges build pavilions to provide shelter for passers-by. These bridges with local characteristics have become an important element of the urban landscape.

However, after experiencing the prosperity of feudal society during the Ming and Qing dynasties, since the 17th year of the Republic of China (1928), with the further development of the social economy and to meet the needs of modern urban transportation, many stone arch bridges in Suzhou were changed into flat bridges, and along with the street reconstruction and river silting, some bridges were repeatedly damaged, and some were even demolished and scrapped. By 2020, only 33 ancient bridges classified as important cultural heritage remained within the city, with most of them having been built during the Qing Dynasty; earlier bridges mostly no longer exist [37]. These bridges are mainly located in Wuzhong District and Gusu District, of which 23 are located in the urban built-up area and the rest in the rural area, with the overall distribution centered on the ancient city area to the southwest (Figure 6).

- Architectures

Contextualism in architecture emphasizes the integrity of a building with its surroundings and the intangible culture, history, and traditions of a place [38]. Specific buildings, which are important components of urban heritage, have a long and deep association with the citizenry [11]. As the most important elements forming the traditional urban space, these buildings provide the material basis for traditional community life for the residents in the ancient city. Suzhou is dominated by gray and white buildings with sloping roofs as the main architectural form, mostly built near the river and derived from structures such as gables and projections; the layout is mostly patio-like to meet the needs of light and ventilation, etc. [39]. At present, 209 protected buildings exist in Suzhou mostly from the Qing Dynasty, the earliest being the Yan Yun Temple Pagoda from the Five Dynasties period and the latest being the Xiangcheng Granary from 1976. These buildings are mainly in the traditional residential houses and temples of the Suzhou region.





**Figure 6.** Distribution of bridges in Suzhou.

Currently, Suzhou's architectural heritages are also mainly distributed in the Wuzhong and Gusu districts, but the overall distribution is different from that of the bridge heritage. They are mainly concentrated in the ancient city and the historical towns outside (especially those towns outside the built-up area). The distribution in the built-up area is also extremely uneven. The division of architectural heritage in Suzhou shows a high concentration of distribution in the southwestern edge of the administrative range and the center of the ancient city while with a sparse distribution in the rest (Figure 7).

As a complex of space and architecture created by artificial means in pursuit of the spirit of nature, the Suzhou traditional garden is the ideal form of human habitation [40]. Implementing the principle of building according to local conditions has made it the most distinctive residential space with local features. Gardening in Suzhou has been prevalent since the Song Dynasty. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the number of gardens in the city reached its peak. Although Suzhou experienced a setback in the first half of the last century with a large decline in the number of gardens, the gradual restoration and preservation of gardens since then has led to a significant rebound. With increasing conservation efforts and changing social attitudes, some gardens have been transformed from private homes to public spaces.

There are currently 82 gardens within the prefecture-level city of Suzhou that are included in the Suzhou traditional Garden List [41]. Eight of them are listed as World Heritage Sites, and 46 are also recognized as cultural relic protection units. The 82 current gardens are mainly concentrated in the ancient city and partly located near the west side of the mountain range; most of them were built during the peak of gardening activities in the Qing Dynasty.

The gardens, as specialized architectural complexes, also show a distribution mainly within the ancient city and historical towns outside the city, but the difference is that the number of gardens outside the built-up area of the city is smaller and does not show high concentrated features at the southwestern edge of the administrative range that similar

to the architectural heritage mentioned above. At the same time, in the districts outside the ancient city, except for a small number of gardens distributed in the built-up area of Wuzhong District, there are no gardens distributed in the other districts of Suzhou (Figure 8).

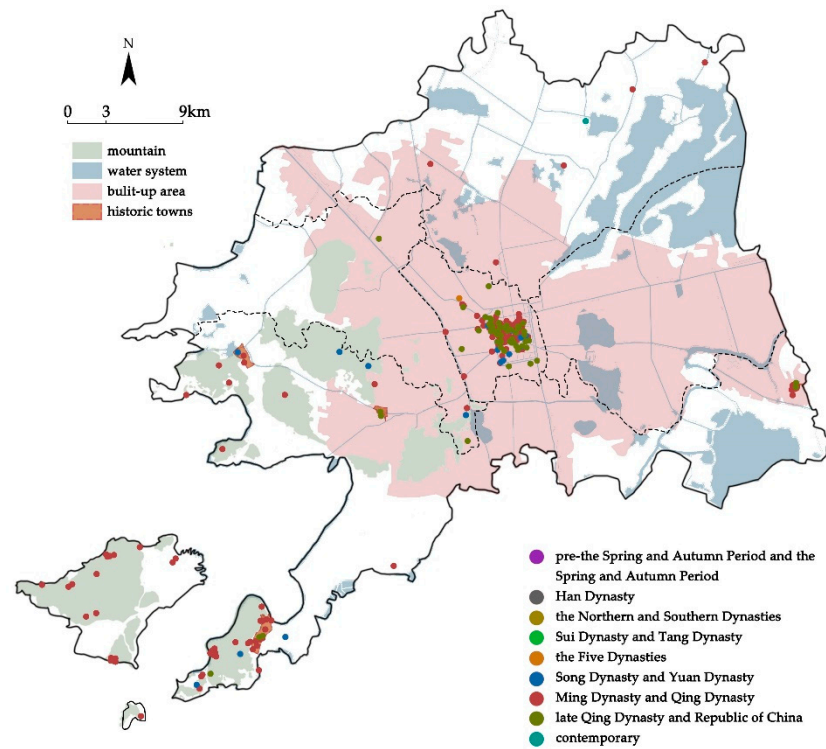


Figure 7. Distribution of traditional buildings.

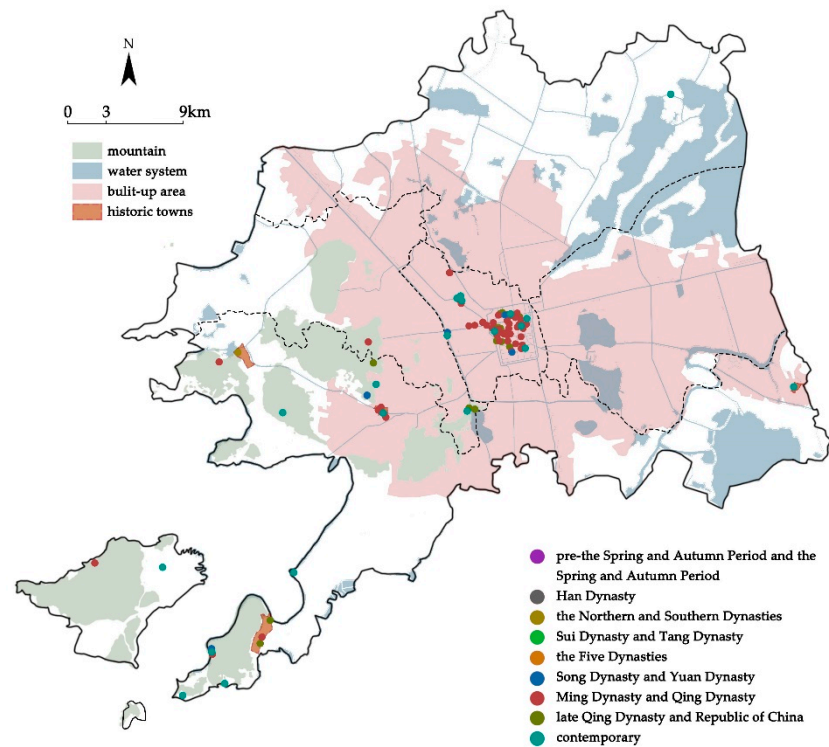
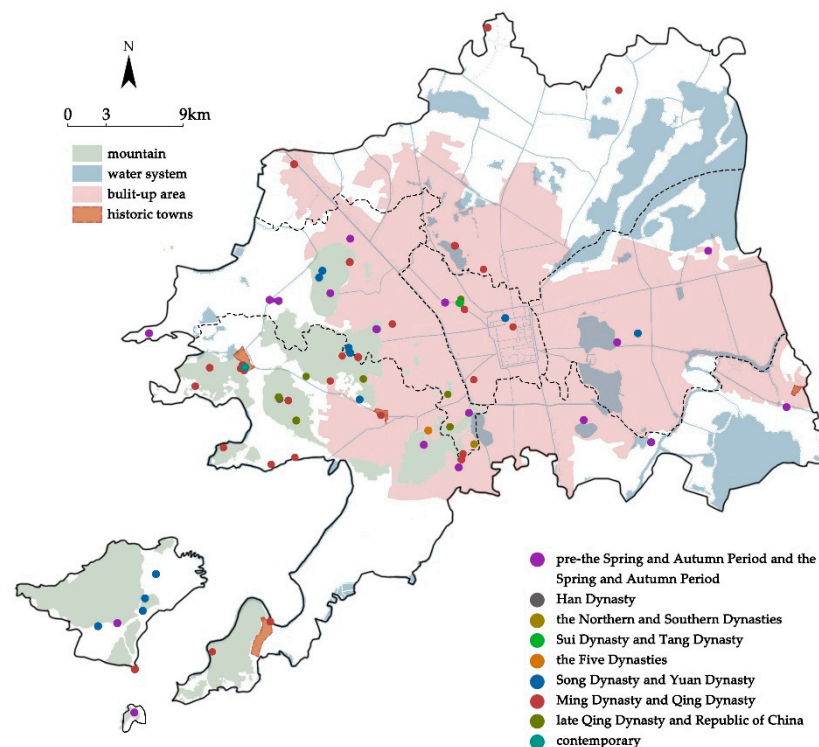


Figure 8. Distribution of traditional gardens.

- Relics and Tombs

As the most direct expression of the past culture, ruins and tombs contain life forms and specific historical fragments of people from the past. There are currently 54 cultural relic protection units in Suzhou. Mainly including the tombs of famous people in the Ming and Qing dynasties, in addition to a number of sites dating back to the Neolithic period, these provide the basis for our understanding of the living conditions in ancient Suzhou.

The chronological distribution of the relics and tombs is more even than that of the buildings and bridges, and it is especially noteworthy that these relics and tombs are not highly concentrated in the ancient city, but are more distributed around the hills on the west side of Suzhou, and with a relatively even distribution in the built-up area (Figure 9).



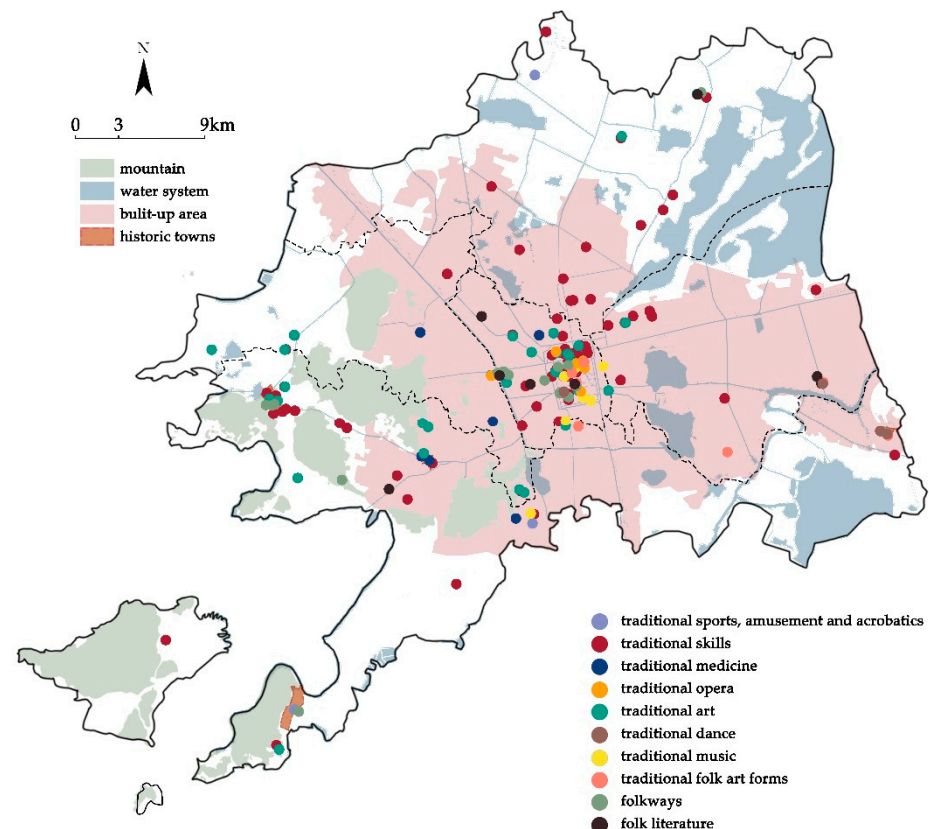
**Figure 9.** Distribution of relics and tombs.

#### 4.2. Distribution of Intangible Heritages

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines “intangible cultural heritage (ICH)” as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity [42]. In other words, the existence of ICH is a dynamic result of the mutual adaptation of practitioners and the current environment, which contributes to the identity of the group. The recognition of ICH also means that the protection of context has shifted from purely material to the key element of people. As a cultural system nurtured on a plain with a unique water network, Suzhou’s culture is essentially a combination of an agricultural culture and a river and sea culture, which has led to the formation of regional traditions such as the soft and gentle Wu dialect, the lifestyle of living near the river and feeding on fish and shrimp, and the sericulture handicraft industry [43]. For thousands of years, the people who inhabit this area have lived in dependence on the environment

and have continued to practice these traditions. Since the understanding and expression of ICH depend on tangible existence, the living landscape constructed based on both tangible heritage and the physical environment becomes a spatial expression of culture, and this feature makes ICH also have the ability to transmit values [44,45]. It is this capacity that has shaped the most important basis of identity for the local people of Suzhou. Therefore, the value of ICH for context continuance has the same importance as the value of the human element in context preservation as a factor influencing the sustainability of Suzhou.

Currently, there are 6 human Intangible culture heritage items, 33 national items, 124 provincial items, and 172 municipal items in Suzhou. They are mainly divided into traditional sports/amusement and acrobatics, traditional medicine, traditional opera, traditional skills, traditional arts, traditional dance, traditional music, traditional folk art forms, folkways, and folk literature. Intangible heritages are also mainly distributed in the built-up areas of Wuzhong District and Gusu District, with traditional skills and traditional arts as the main groups. The ancient city is the area with the highest distribution density, while outside the ancient city there are scattered distributions in all directions of the built-up areas, not showing a clear tendency as the distribution of tangible heritage (Figure 10).



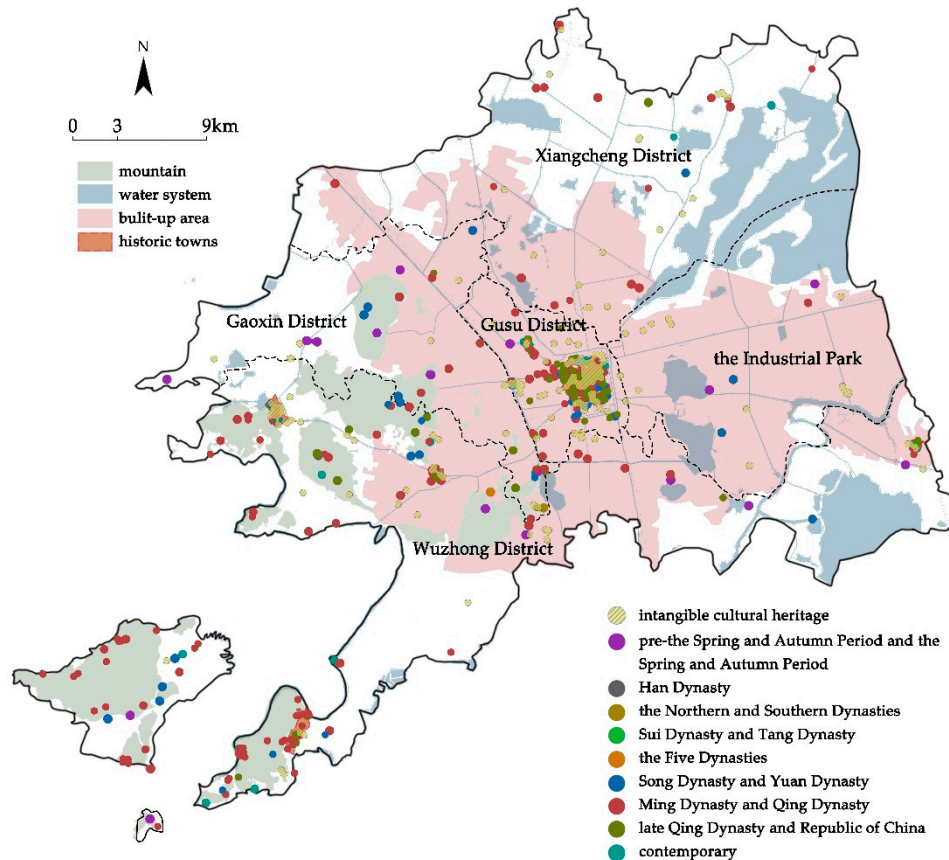
**Figure 10.** Distribution of intangible heritages.

#### 4.3. The Pattern of Urban Heritage

Overall, the natural heritage of Suzhou has provided the basis for the creation of Suzhou's cultural heritage, which has developed to the present day, with the Ming and Qing dynasties as the most significant period. The highest density of cultural heritage distribution is in the ancient city, followed by the historical towns and around the mountains. The overall distribution shows the ancient city as the center, and the number of elements on the west side is much larger than that on the east side (Figure 11). In addition, from the perspective of administrative divisions, Gusu district has the largest amount of cultural heritage, followed by Wuzhong district, then Xiangcheng district and Gaoxin district, and the industrial park has the least. Excluding the ancient urban area in the center of the city,



the industrial park, as the district with the highest built-up area, has the least amount of cultural heritage distributed, while other districts also show the pattern of the amount of cultural heritage in the built-up area being less than that in the unbuilt-up area.



**Figure 11.** Distribution of heritages in Suzhou.

After 2000 years, the overall urban landscape is nearly unchanged in the ancient city of Suzhou. Although cultural heritage from all periods has been preserved, relatively little urban heritage has survived from prior to the Song Dynasty due to the changing times. Within the ancient city of Suzhou, a large number of early urban spaces and buildings have been gradually replaced with Ming and Qing dynasties and ROC forms in a natural process of succession as a result of population growth, living needs, and changes in social attitudes during the various periods. Outside the ancient city, the built-up area of Suzhou was small until 1987 and was gathered within the present Gusu district, so much of the Song and pre-Song cultural heritage remained, mainly in the area around the mountains and waters. Inside the historic town, the situation is similar to that in the ancient city of Suzhou.

The distribution of intangible cultural heritage is mainly due to the fact that the bearers of intangible heritage are people rather than fixed objects, and the current development of urbanization makes the built-up areas more convenient for the bearers' lives. At the same time, the high concentration of ICH in the ancient city is due to the richness of the traditional space on the one hand. On the other hand, the fact that ICH is often seen as part of the tourism industry in the ancient city, the large amount of traditional space provided by the ancient city in line with the development of tourism makes these ICHs exist as commercial space in the tourism economy.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *The Findings from the Pattern of Suzhou's Urban Heritage*

There is no doubt that the current scope and continuity of the conservation in the ancient city of Suzhou are worthy of recognition. However, the distribution of urban and other heritage also shows that even in a city with a long history and distinctive regional identity like Suzhou, there is a mismatch between the traditional trajectory of cultural development and the rapid urbanization process. This mismatch shows that the urban heritage that makes up the urban context is still spatially uneven and fragmented: the urban heritage in the ancient city is highly concentrated and covers almost the entire area, while the urban heritage in the new district is very small and far from sufficient to cover the built-up area, especially in the industrial park. Outside the built-up areas, a large amount of cultural heritage is distributed in places far from the urban areas, far from the daily life of the urban residents.

The reasons for this situation are multiple. First of all, the traditional development of Suzhou was based on the water trade of the Beijing–Hangzhou Grand Canal, which brought prosperity to the ancient city and its western side and determined the tendency of the tangible heritage to be distributed westward. However, the industrial park and Gaoxin District are newly built urban areas based on economic benefits, and their establishment and expansion rely on modern logistics and railroad systems instead of traditional water transportation. Therefore, the space outside the ancient city is more favorable for the construction of large factories. In particular, the large amount of farmland and wasteland remaining on the east side of the ancient city after 2000 was considered most favorable for the construction of supporting infrastructure to receive supporting industries and related raw materials from Shanghai [46]. Secondly, due to the influence of planning, the industrial park is particularly special. As a new urban area that has absorbed a large number of out-migrants from the ancient city and foreigners, this district has been rapidly transformed from a simple, high-tech industrial zone to a highly modernized urban area that has complete urban functions and infrastructure [47]. The industrial expansion and the homogeneity of the original land properties in these 20 years have meant that the industrial park lacks the support of the tangible cultural elements that have been layered for thousands of years in the ancient city in the process of developing sound urban functions. The lack of local characteristics brought about by modernism has contributed to the dominant style of the area; alternatively, it can be said that the problem of a homogenized urban landscape has arisen. On the other hand, heritage is often confined to historical environments, such as historic centers, historic towns, and archaeological sites [48]. In these areas, urban heritage is continuous in the temporal dimension through layering. In contrast, the current identification of heritage objects (i.e., cultural relic protection units) is based on static temporal and spatial spheres [49]. Faced with a wider urban space and a wider range of cultural elements, heritage in the traditional sense can neither be discovered and identified in the built environment in new urban areas nor can it act directly in new urban areas to shape the character of the urban landscape and continue the context in a traditional form across geographical limitations. The situation that the park now faces comes from the serious lack of urban heritage in this urban area, which makes the further development of the new urban area and its integration with the old one a huge obstacle.

The emergence of these problems in newly built-up areas such as the industrial parks is essentially a symptom of the disintegration of the residents' connection to the city and the loss of urban policy makers' perception of urban landscape features due to the pursuit of economic efficiency in the rapid development of Chinese cities. Even in the currently publicized urban plan for 2021–2035, no further effective solutions have been proposed. Although the plan proposes a holistic approach to work and an expanded interpretation of the historical deposits that form the urban heritage (e.g., the newly delineated Wusa Road historical district and the Guantaiwei River–Tiancizhuang historical district, which are mainly characterized by the ROC), the policy planning still only emphasizes macroscale landscape corridors and landscape views, and the protection and continuation remain

focused on the existing historical towns and city [50], without optimizing the modern living space that has lost its regional features.

As a modern urban area rising from the ground, the industrial park is faced with the spread and solidification of this functionally oriented urban space, and the residents as individuals are unable to develop a sense of community that can unite these young communities. At the same time, the industrial park is gaining importance as the new city center of Suzhou, and a weak community will undoubtedly hinder the further development of the city. It can be argued that if the industrial park, as a part of Suzhou, becomes an island of landscape and spiritual space separate from the urban context of Suzhou, this will do great damage to the sustainable development of Suzhou at both the community level and the planning level.

In addition to new urban areas, historic urban areas also face problems. Admittedly, according to the results, it can be found that these areas have ample layers of history, which provides the material basis for urban heritage and points to a correlation between traditional space and urban heritage. However, in terms of the continuity of context, the material basis in the ancient city is highly tied to tourism instead of daily living space and the heritage conservation model dominated by the official discourse does not identify the heritage or context elements within historic urban areas on a larger time scale. Currently, there is only one officially recognized post-1949 tangible heritage site in the unbuilt-up area of Xiangcheng District, while the rest are pre-1949 heritage sites. Urban sustainability requires planners to respect the dynamic process of the city and create high-quality tangible or intangible constructions that are in line with the urban context of the present [51]. However, the absence of post-1949 urban heritage will result in a break in the cultural continuum, which will push the heritage back into a static state of time and space. At the same time, this means the absence of contemporary regional landscape standards, which will make the continuation of Suzhou's context more difficult in this modernist era.

Moreover, the shift in the function of the ancient city to tourism has left Suzhou's ICH in a state of rigidity, and as Eichler points out, tourism essentially determines how ICH is represented to the outside world outside the perspective of the cultural bearers, and the high degree of entanglement of ICH with tourism hinders communities from determining the meaning of ICH and their right to cultural self-determination [52]. Coupled with the current concentration of Suzhou's ICH in the historic city district and the widespread distribution of residential areas and out-migrating residents of the ancient city in the new city district, Suzhou's ICH has been cut off from the widest community. In the Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage, authenticity is officially interpreted as "maintaining what it was like in the past when transmitting and disseminating this ICH, as well as respecting its historical original", or otherwise, "variation and distortion to the historical original is detrimental to the ICH" [53]. This has led to a tendency for the preservation of ICH in China to fall into stasis as well. However, human subjectivity, as the key element of ICH, determines that ICH should be in the dynamic process of being constantly recreated by the practitioners or communities concerned [45]. The rigidity and separation from the community have put Suzhou's context in danger not only in the tangible heritage field under the appearance of "comprehensive conservation", but also in the field of ICH inheritance under threat.

Therefore, the integration of the historic center with modern urban areas requires a modification of the current policy perspective and the positioning of urban heritage in society, i.e., focusing on the connection between urban heritage (especially the intangible cultural heritage) and the daily living space of locals, rather than treating them as "antiques" detached from the community.

## 5.2. Implications from the HUL Approach

To solve the above dilemma, HUL's approach proposes a brand-new perspective, namely that a city should contain a broader urban context, which includes not only historic areas but also contemporary areas and intangible parts of the built environment [18]. In

other words, through HUL's landscape approach, Suzhou's heritage conservation approach will enter into a dynamic mode and further help us to understand urban heritage by considering the city as a holistic environment, no longer limiting the concept of urban heritage to the historic district, and the continuation of Suzhou's urban context within the wider built-up area will further develop from the transmission of tangible forms to a renewal that incorporates intangible heritage.

In this perspective, to achieve the continuity of the urban context we first need to recognize that in the relationship between heritage and people, the attachment of the individual to a tangible place will help the individual to acquire a sense of belonging and purpose to that place, while the merging of the individual personality with the place creates a local identity, which in turn gives meaning to the life of that community [54]. Therefore, the value of traditional landscape elements and traditional spatial scales brought by tangible heritage cannot be ignored, but the form of its existence cannot fall into formalized reproduction. For this reason, considering the industrial park and other newly built-up areas where tangible heritage is scarce, the spread of intangible culture becomes even more important. The new urban areas, as areas that have received a large number of out-migrants from the ancient city, have a basis for community identification with the urban context of Suzhou.

Mairi's study of the Outer Hebrides demonstrates a community-based model that involves the local community in the specifics of intangible culture and in doing so enables residents to better understand the meaning of intangible heritage and its associated landscape context [55]. Abu Bakar's study of the Melaka region also suggests that in order to ensure the transmission, maintenance, and recreation of intangible culture the community participation approach is crucial [56]. In 2011, UNESCO, in its review of intangible heritage projects in urgent need of safeguarding, also noted that "intangible heritage" always changes over time, and therefore living forms, re-creation, and continuous development are the norm for intangible heritage [57]. Howett also points out that the overemphasis on physical structures that prove their historical value will change their effect on communities in non-core areas [58]. This is to say that while the material basis is the origin of the ICH, the further spreading in non-core areas can no longer be overly dependent on it.

Modern living space is the most intuitive form for people to understand the city. Wellman argues that the large and complex population and fast-paced modern life of modern cities have greatly weakened intersocietal ties, and this weakening of social relationships has further led to the loss of a sense of community [59]. Good urban space and urban context can facilitate social relationships and mitigate the effects of weak social ties on community attachments [60]. Therefore, the resulting good community is the key to urban development and helps cities to better resist threats from economic, social, and natural sources [61]. As an important part of the urban context, intangible heritage is not strictly limited by geographic space, which makes it possible to implant a wider range of heritage sites in new urban areas. The provision of more nodes in new urban areas for the presence of intangible heritage units or inheritors will help alleviate the "desolation" of heritage in these places and help Suzhou's new urban areas develop soft power that matches the material base, thus finding a way out of the homogeneous landscape dilemma that is consistent with Suzhou's regional characteristics and achieving regional integrity. At the same time, the popularization and re-creation of intangible heritage into the community will help people who have moved out of traditional urban areas to recall this common memory to achieve a return to a sense of community. This means that redirecting the attention to the people in the newly built-up areas will help those areas formed in a short time to return to the urban context of Suzhou. In addition, bringing ICH into these newly built-up areas will prevent the misappropriations or undermining of their rights to cultural heritage practice and form a tool of conflict resolution and prevention, eventually to socially restore society [52].



Specifically, a universal system should be established in newly built-up areas. Such a system should aim to achieve the goal of community interaction or community participation in urban renewal, and needs to include the following features:

- (1). These spaces should be as traditional in scale, walkable, and multi-use as possible to ensure that traditional forms of daily community activities can occur;
- (2). One of the core functions of these multi-use spaces is to provide a space for ICH and to integrate the educational and training institutions so that ICH will no longer be tied to tourism and will increase its contact with the communities;
- (3). The formation of these spaces should ensure the community voice based on the integration of traditional landscape elements;
- (4). Establishing a supervisory committee composed of residents and managers to ensure the long-term interests of the community and to enable the selection of ICH projects appropriate for the local community

In response to the rapid formation of urban space, HUL's perspective also allows us to see the need for a sustainable balance between the urban and natural environments, between the needs of present and future generations and the legacy from the past [18]. Urban space built on arable farmland is actually a process of blind urban sprawl annexing agricultural landscapes. As a cultural landscape, the polder fields and other farmland in Suzhou show the interaction between agricultural production and regional culture, and the disappearance of food and agriculture as part of the local landscape is also the disappearance of a portion of the context. Both urban and agricultural landscapes are important components of the urban context and in HUL's perspective, the city is an extension of the cultural landscape [62]. There is no assignment of superiority or inferiority to agriculture or the city; they are simply seen as different presentations of the human transformation of nature—they are both ways that help us to understand the production and life of the region.

Therefore, the redesignation of traditional agricultural landscape areas in new urban areas will help agriculture move from a primary industry to an urban landscape that helps urban residents understand the context of traditional areas, and will also provide a basis for intangible heritage in newly built urban areas. Specifically, the traditional agricultural space should be integrated with the multi-use space proposed above as part of the spatial elements to mitigate the full spread of modernist style in the new urban areas. A management mechanism for landscape-maintaining agricultural land should be established and work with the above-mentioned supervisory committee to determine the specific area of agricultural space within the multi-use space.

In addition, the Suzhou Landscape Bureau has shown consistency with the HUL approach in the identification of the Suzhou traditional Garden List. Among the 84 gardens within the administrative scope, 20 gardens combine tradition and modernity created by modern craftsmen or designers, 13 of which are located in built-up areas of Suzhou. This undoubtedly alludes to the concept of a border urban context in terms of traditional gardens and architecture. Particularly noteworthy is the Suzhou Museum, which has become popular due to I.M. Pei's original design and whose current popularity among the public has made it one of the most culturally distinctive urban landmarks in Suzhou. This design attempt is a successful combination of traditional Suzhou landscape and modernism [63]. Interestingly, Slavova's research in Bulgaria also shows examples of the creation of new heritage and intangible heritage elements that enhance community life through civic acts [64]. Additionally, as Christopher Tweed mentions in his article, "in this postmodern era, where citizens play a greater role in determining what is cultural, elitism in designating heritage will no longer be taken for granted" [65]. Spennemann proposed that cultural values held by a community are mutable qualities, and heritage items listed in local government heritage registers are canonized in their value as heritage, and although these values were attributed by a past generation, they may no longer reflect the perceptions of the present [44]. The selection of the Suzhou traditional Garden List (which is an honorary designation and a regulatory mechanism—unlike cultural relic protection units, which

have legal significance) thus points to the possibility that contemporary elements in line with Suzhou's context can be screened and promoted through a joint official and civic effort.

Therefore, by establishing a sample bank or selection mechanism in which residents can participate throughout the process, more objects should be selected within a wider range of urban spaces under the guidance of this approach to select a heritage that is in line with contemporary values. In addition, a summary of features based on such a mechanism will serve as a reference for the renewal in other areas.

## 6. Conclusions

This paper classifies the urban context elements of Suzhou's prefecture-level city into three categories, namely natural heritage, tangible heritage, and intangible heritage, and summarizes the spatial distribution characteristics of these elements by visualizing them, to point out the disconnect between urban heritage conservation strategies and urban development in Suzhou's current built-up area. The analysis reveals that the urban heritage in Suzhou has been layered in a process of historical changes. The heritage of each period from the Stone Age to the Republic of China has survived, but a large amount of heritage was destroyed under the influence of the modern social development and the production movement in the early period of the founding of the People's Republic of China. In the 1980s, urban conservation was again emphasized, and the urban heritage of each region began to be gradually protected and classified. However, the change in the main mode of urban development in Suzhou has shifted the direction of development from the west side to the east side of the city, which is mainly agricultural land.

The spatial distribution of the urban heritage shows us that the overall distribution is centered on the ancient city, and the tangible and intangible heritage of the city is mainly distributed on the west side, except for the high-density ancient city. The unbuilt-up areas on the west side are also more distributed, while the new city built within a short period has almost no urban heritage, and the rapid urbanization has annexed a large amount of agricultural land. Suzhou's urban heritage is beginning to be seriously challenged.

HUL's perspective suggests a solution that integrates contemporary built-up areas with intangible heritage by expanding the scope of context, which requires planners to reshape the urban landscape of the new urban areas of Suzhou based on the value of intangible heritage in the community, as a basis for reintegrating the regional culture with the context of Suzhou.

Planners should also pay attention to the problem of over-urbanization. Arable land is not just a place for food production, and a single understanding and marginalization of its function will lead to the disappearance of the traditional cultural foundation. Fortunately, HUL's view on the need to strike a balance between the natural and built environment provides a solution to the current blind expansion of cities and sows the seeds for the continuation of the urban context.

In addition, HUL's dynamic perspective points to the possibility of identifying contemporary elements of Suzhou's context through a joint effort between citizens and officials. This will help historic urban areas find ways to connect with the contemporary, and will help Suzhou achieve a smooth continuation of its context on both a temporal and spatial level.

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