

# Ecotourism Planning Ideas of Ancient Buildings in Suzhou (Jiangsu, China) from the Perspective of Tourism Spatial Economy

Xin Yuqi

Business School, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo, China

xinyuqi\_0624@163.com

**Keywords:** Space economy; Space perspective; Ancient architecture tourism; Tourism development

**Abstract:** This paper follows China’s national tourism spatial layout planning of the "14th Five-Year Plan". High quality tourism development must meet the characteristics of "spot radiation, belt series and network coordination". Therefore, in this paper, Suzhou, the city with long history, also known as the ancient Jiangnan (regions in the south of Yangtze River), located in Jiangsu Province, China, is taken as a case study. From the perspective of space economy, the discuss mainly focus on the planning ideas of ancient architecture ecotourism in Suzhou. Case analysis highlights that ecological tourism of ancient buildings in Suzhou lacks comprehensive spatial planning, the concept of the ancient architectures touring is positioned backward, the spatial coupling of tourism-related goods and service is insufficient, and the authenticity of ancient architectures is lost and excessively hollowed out. Countermeasures is put forward at the end of this paper, suggesting that future directions include building an idea of space-oriented tourism planning, increasing the spatial characteristics of ancient architecture tourism, increasing links between tourism and tourism-related industries, and creating a multidimensional symbiosis mechanism for spatial economy forms.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, tourism spatial economy has become a hot topic in tourism, regional economy and urban tourism development. Tourism is an experiential activity based on the spatial movement of trip tourists and destinations. From an economic perspective, consumption is more likely to be generated during the tourism spatial movement process. Thus, the concept of “all-area tourism-based development” believes that the tourism flow needs to plan the tourism factors allocation from the spatial movement, to adopt an open and destination-based tourism spatial system, and to develop attractions around the urban space scale, including city tour, leisure, business, ecology and etc. (Guo Yujie and Chen Yining, 2016).

Table 1: Data on the scale of eco-tourists in China

Period	Tourist Population of ecotourism (*10,000 ppl)	Growth Rate(%)
2017	250282	-
2018	281219	12.4
2019	309376	10.0
2020	141553	-54.2
January-May 2021	86654	55.5

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Ancient architecture ecotourism was once a key project of urban tourism development, because ancient architecture has become a profound historical and cultural heritage, and also relies on beautiful natural ecological landscapes, such as Xitang, Wuzhen, Zhouzhuang and other ancient towns in the south of the Yangtze River. With buildings of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, all the river courses, bridges, corridors, and ancient bridges in those ancient towns are important

architectural heritage in the south of China. According to Table 1, the scale of ecotourism between 2017 and 2021 grew steadily before 2019. The Covid-19 epidemic in 2020 caused a negative growth of -54.2%, and the year-on-year growth rate from January to May 2021 was 55.5%, which shows that the ecotourism market is bouncing back.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Literature Review on Tourism Space Economy**

Guo Yujie and Chen Yining (2016) [1] analyzed the concept of spatial economy of “all-area tourism-based development” and proposed a theoretical system of tourism industry perception at the spatial level. Guo Lian (2017) [2] selected the panel data of the tourism industry of the prefecture-level cities in Guangxi Province of China, and found that the major tourism cities in Guangxi Province are Nanning City and Guilin City. Sun Guangtian (2020) believes that space economy is an inevitable trend of tourism development, and the “all-area tourism-based development” model should break the limitation of time and space from the traditional tourism [3]. Wu Zhicai et al (2020) conducted an empirical study on the spatial structure of tourism economy of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area, and found that Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau are the cities from which tourism resource flow out, and the rest of the cities play the role of receiving these tourism resource [4]. Huo Hong et al (2020) [5] selected the Northeast regions as an example, and analyzed that there is an obvious spatial dislocation relationship in the tourism space economy in the region.

### **2.2 Literature Review on the Planning and Design of Ancient Tourism Buildings**

Ma Hongfang (2019) analyzed the characteristics of Huizhou ancient buildings, which locate in Huizhou District, Huangshan City, An Hui Province, China, and proposed a theme-based homestay design scheme [6]. Through designing the historical and cultural scenic spots and landscapes, Fei Lingjun (2020) [7] suggested that folk customs and regional culture may be a creative idea for tourism development. Li Hui and Zhu Wanting (2021) mentioned that ecotourism is a development concept of green tourism and ecological harmony [8]. The ancient architecture tourism planning can transform this concept to the planning of "ancient architecture tourism resort". Taking Qidong County, Hunan Province as an example, Xiong Jian (2021) believed that Guiyang ancient town and Shajingwan ancient dwellings are representative ancient buildings [9], while Mountain Siming and Huanghuayuan are representative natural landscapes, both of which can collaborate in the form of regional spatial synergy in order to build a rural tourism brand in Hunan Province.

### **2.3 Literature Review**

In previous literature, many scholars have analyzed the related issues of “all-area tourism-based development” from the viewpoint of spatial economy. These research perspectives all try to solve the problem of low spatial connectivity of tourist attractions, which is also an obvious reflection of the poor economic benefit of spatial tourism in China. Moreover, previous scholars have argued that the tourism planning and design of ancient buildings should be combined with local cultural characteristics, and that ecological and green elements are also a development strategy. However, the existing literature also has certain shortcomings, because there are no scholars who have combined spatial economy and ancient architecture tourism development for case study. Therefore, in this paper, the research attempts to fill the gaps in the existing literature by taking Suzhou, one of the most popular ancient towns in Jiangnan (the south of Yangtze River), as a case study.

## **3. The theoretical Logic of Tourism Space Economy in the Development of Ancient Buildings**

### **3.1 Taking the Key Elements as the Conditional Basis**

The essence of the spatial tourism economy is to shape the industrial relevance according to the spatial connection of the trip destinations. Tourism planning should also focus on spatial planning,

and formulate the characteristics of tourism development according to the location characteristics, resource endowments and economic development of the destinations, rather than copying or imitating similar practices of other scenic areas.

### 3.2 Creating A Combination Mode of “spot, line and surface”

The most attractive characteristic in the tourism ecology is constructed according to the convenience of transportation. Convenient transportation road system includes parking lots, highways, and individual traveler service system, upon which multiple types of business such as excursion, leisure, business, and ecology, can also be the attractive elements in the tourism ecology. Besides, it is also necessary to build a tourism service system consisting of tourism sector service and other social support and guarantee system together, so that to bring out the corresponding benefits of spatial tourism.

### 3.3 Optimizing the Spatial Structure of the Tourism Industry

The configuration of tourism industry resources and elements should be more modernized, extending the tourism industry chain and radiation, building a number of cross-regional and cross-industry organizations, making the tourism consumption supply system more complete and meeting the needs of tourism consumption upgrades. It is possible to build some shopping areas, hotels, entertainment venues, restaurants, recreation and health care and other forms of consumption on the travel destination, highlighting the local cultural characteristics and forming a reasonable spatial layout according to local conditions.

## 4. Case Analysis

### 4.1 Analysis of the Status Quo of Ancient Architectural Tourist Attractions

Table 2 shows the Top 10 scenic spots with the influence of ancient architecture and cultural relics. It can be seen that the comprehensive influence index of Suzhou Gardens in Suzhou City is 70.33, ranking 5th among related tourist attractions in China. The ranking also reflects the representative significance of ancient buildings such as Humble Administrator's Garden and Lingering Garden for ancient architectural tourism development, so it is suitable to take Suzhou as a case study for research. Suzhou Gardens is the type of garden that integrated both house and garden. This architectural form originates from the Ming and Qing dynasties. Surrounded by the natural landscape of mountains, rivers, flowers and birds, the gardens are intersected with rockeries, trees, pavilions, terraces, ponds and bridges, enjoying and interesting. Guanqian Street and Shantang Street in Suzhou City are pedestrian zone with ancient architectural styles, filled with various kinds of time-honored shops, malls and restaurants. There are other ancient architectural attractions in Suzhou as well, e.g., the Tiger Hill Pagoda, Hanshan Temple, and Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Zhongwangfu, which are in Huqiu District and Gusu District, respectively.

Table 2: Top 10 Influential Scenic Spots of Ancient Buildings and Cultural Relics

Ranking	Area	Cultural Relics Protection Site	Comprehensive Influence Index
1	Beijing	Palace Museum	86.65
2	Beijing	Badaling Great Wall	75.63
3	Beijing	Tiantan Park	75.01
4	Beijing	Summer Palace	74.61
5	Xi'an	Qin Shihuang Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum	72.31
6	Suzhou City	Suzhou Gardens	70.33
7	Jiuquan City	Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes	69.81
8	Beijing	Yuanmingyuan Scenic Spot	69.05
9	Datong	Yungang Grottoes	68.41
10	Beijing	Prince Gong's Mansion Scenic Spot	67.45

Source: "2021 National Cultural Relics Tourism Scenic Spot Influence Assessment Report", China

According to Table 3, from 2015 to 2019, the number of tourists in Suzhou increased from 106.31 million to 136.09 million but fell to 112.74 million during the Covid-19 epidemic. At the same time, according to Table 4, the proportion of Suzhou's Tourism Revenue to GDP dropped to 10.10% in 2021, which is a decrease of 4.2 % compared with 2019. It shows that the economic contribution of Suzhou's tourism industry has fallen sharply compared to the period before the outbreak of Covid-19 epidemic. In the context of declining demand for tourism of all-area, it is necessary to explore the optimization of tourism development.

Table 3: Data of tourist arrivals in Suzhou

Year	Tourist Arrivals(*10,000 ppl)	YoY Growth(%)
2015	10631	6.0
2016	11456	7.8
2017	12222	6.7
2018	12956	6.0
2019	13609	4.0
2020	9410	-30.9
2021	11274	19.8

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

Table 4: Data on tourism revenue and GDP in Suzhou

Year	Tourism revenue (100 million yuan)	GDP(100 million yuan)	Proportion(%)
2015	1884	14504	12.99
2016	2078	15400	13.49
2017	2328	17300	13.46
2018	2609	18500	14.10
2019	2751	19236	14.30
2020	2067	20171	10.25
2021	2294	22718	10.10

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

## 4.2 Spatial Planning of Ecological Tourism of Ancient Buildings in Suzhou

### 4.2.1 Lack of Overall Space Planning

As shown in Table 5, the current spatial distribution of ancient architecture tourism in Suzhou suggests that there are serious resource mismatches among ancient buildings and natural landscape attractions such as Suzhou Gardens, Guanqian Street, Shantang Street, Hanshan Temple, Taihu Lake, etc. Located in the center of Suzhou City, Guanqian Street, Shantang Street and Lingering Garden is easily to attract more tourists, but others with less popularity are distributed in a more scattered space, with insufficient traffic support. The Gardens in Suzhou are the most famous ancient architectural attraction, including a total of 108 gardens in 2018, as shown in Table 6. However, taking the Lion's Grove and the Lingering Garden as examples, the nearby road signs are not clearly marked, there is a restricted policy for motor vehicles with non-Suzhou license plate, and the parking lot planning is also unreasonable. In spite of the above reasons, the long walking distance to the nearby scenic spot is another reason that caused limited ecological choice of travel destinations when touring in Suzhou. It takes too long for tourists to get to a site, making it impossible to visit multiple sites at one time, which is not conducive to the development of ancient architectural tourism routes.

Table 5: Data of Suzhou Gardens

Category	Data	YoY Change(%)
Number of tourists (*10,000 ppl)	600.99	23.65
Passenger flow in May (*10,000 ppl)	120.43	20.04

Source: Official website of Suzhou Forestry Bureau, China

Table 6: Number of Suzhou Garden Lists

Year	Quantity (place)
2015	33
2016	26
2017	31
2018	108

Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China

In fact, the current tourist attractions in Suzhou rely overly on historic gardens and ancient towns and streets, because these areas are more concentrated with residents and businesses. However, it also leads to the neglect of ecotourism resources development. Huqiu District, as an example, does not have the complete and perfect tourism resources, and also lacks corresponding consumer facilities support. Its public transportation is far less convenient than that of Gusu District and Wuzhong District. All these have caused Huqiu District neither to stand out in ecological tourism or ancient architecture tourism, nor to play a radiating effect, which is also the reason of the imbalance of spatial distribution in Suzhou tourism space planning.

#### 4.2.2 The Outdated Concept of Positioning of Ancient Buildings

From the perspective of modern space tourism, the purpose of travel is to relax, enjoy different cultures, do sports, spend holidays, experience lifestyles and etc., which requires a richer connotation, content and form in tourism, paying more attention to the experience value of tourists, and enlarging the single resources into comprehensive plot resources in the specific planning. Suzhou City has developed a large amount of single tourism resources, without giving attention to the combination value of resources, so the tourism elements are too separate from each other, showing no attraction of interconnection and amplifying effects.

What's more, the perception of ancient buildings as tourism resources tends to be static. The scenic sites are often treated as the attractive elements, without transforming into other tourism products. Places like Hanshan Temple in Huqiu District, Suzhou, where the geographical location is high, can build bases such as ski resorts, golf courses, and paragliding club according to its topography, rather than a single value as a temple.

#### 4.2.3 Insufficient Spatial Linkage of Tourism-related Industries

From the perspective of the industrial structure of ancient buildings tourism, Suzhou's advantageous industries have not played their advantages in tourism planning. There is a spatial fragmentation between ancient architecture tourism and tourism-related industries. Most of the business entities are individual entrepreneurs. The interest structure is very loose, and there is no spatial complementary effect of each industry. For example, whether it is an ancient street, an ancient town or a garden attraction, the consumer facilities are showing no difference. It implies that no spatial linkage is considered in the tourism attraction planning, and that no special experience could be provided beyond the scenery.

Furthermore, the lack of horizontal industrial cooperation in different scenery spots causes limitation and weak stability in the spatial integration of supporting industries. For example, some tourism companies tend to recommend highly profitable or lagging routes, or resort to coercive marketing, and lead the tourists to worse travel experience.

#### **4.2.4 Loss of Authenticity and Excessive Hollowing of Ancient Buildings**

In the planning of Suzhou gardens and ancient towns and streets, historical blocks are gradually being demolished, which has resulted in the loss of traditional patterns and styles, and the "islanding" and "bonsaiing" of typical ancient buildings. For example, the layout of ancient buildings and commercial business has obvious hierarchical differences, and are not integrated naturally. The authenticity of the traditional ancient architectural style is lost under the soulless spatial layout, showing no uniqueness of the historical heritage as the center. E.g., for the benefits of spatial economy, commercial and entertainment venues have been introduced to Guanqian Street, while the local residents have been asked to move out. The living atmosphere of ancient buildings has gradually faded in recent years. From the perspective of space planning, the introduction of commercial facilities can improve economic efficiency and meet the goal of urban landscape construction, but it has resulted in a lack of local humanistic interest.

### **4.3 Spatial Planning Countermeasures for Ecological Tourism of Ancient Buildings in Suzhou**

#### **4.3.1 Building A Space-oriented Tourism Planning Idea**

The tourism industry planning of Suzhou's ancient architecture should change from a single site orientation to an ancient city destination orientation. The characteristics of the ancient architectures could be collaborated with the ecological landscape of the Taihu Lake, Yangcheng Lake, ancient towns and streets, Huqiu Mountain, and gardens, etc..The spatial layout structure is supposed to give priority to ecology and greenery, and facilitate the transportation system and individual visitors service system. This requires the integration of urban spatial planning and tourism industry planning, creating attraction spots of each landscape in the spatial scope, and turning each landscape into a multi-type attraction spot integrating sightseeing, leisure, business and ecology. It is essential to explore the spatial spillover effect of tourism to the development of the tourism-related industries, and underline the uniqueness and differences of each scenery spot.

In the regional tourism experience, tourists tend to adopt mobile Internet for one-stop ticketing, reservation, inquiry, consultation, transportation ticket purchase and many other service functions, which requires the cooperation of relevant scenery spots within the area and jointly develop a mini-app, website or APP to provide services and facilitate tourists' demand for the spatial tourism services.

#### **4.3.2 Increasing the Spatial Characteristics of Ancient Architecture Tourism**

Space is not only the spatial layout in the geographical sense, but also reflects the collection of tourism economic activities of the same attribute in the area, radiating and extending the organizational structure of the tourism industry. In the old idea of tourism development, it used to include catering, entertainment, folk customs, farmhouses, etc. However, there are many deficiencies in spatial characteristics. The tourism development of ancient buildings can also adopt the idea of "tourism +", integrating some emerging industries and cultural characteristics, rationally making good use of geographical and spatial characteristics, and introducing some deep integration of new business models.

In the development of the new spatial tourism, it is necessary to strengthen both the complementarity within each "spot" and the difference outside the "spot", and regularly change the theme according to the seasons. New planning ideas can be launched according to the rhythm of each tourism season. For example, in spring and autumn, the selling point can focus on leisure and sightseeing. In summer, the focus can change to the enjoyment of vacations, and to recreation and health in winter. In spatial planning, commercial layouts should also be formulated in accordance with the main content of scenic spots, so as to improve the tourists' impression of the traveling destination, and the local tourism brand effect.

#### **4.3.3 Enhancing the Linkage between Tourism and Surrounding Industries**

At present, considering the obvious hierarchy and difference in the ecological tourism spatial planning of ancient buildings in Suzhou, it is necessary to focus on the tourism development of

natural scenic spots such as Xishan Island, Dongshan Island, Taihu Lake, Huqiu Mountain, and Hanshan Temple. On one hand, the public transportation should be more complete by building more direct bus and subway lines. On the other, the local fresh agricultural products can be used as a base to create a group of rural characteristic products that integrate commercial leisure, agricultural experience, ecological tourism, etc.. What's more, the scenery along the lake can be used as a selling point in the social network. The lake could not only expand the coverage of tourism space, but also form a complementary trend with the ancient buildings in the city, making the image of touring in the ancient city more vivid.

For example, some historical tourist attractions in Suzhou are often located near ancient buildings, lakesides, mountains and gardens. It is worthwhile to consider designing an ecological farming agricultural tourism base with some flowers, seedlings and fruit trees to provide leisure experience, DIY workshops, viewing tours, outdoor camping, folklore, health and other ecotourism projects. In addition, the ecological greenway can be incorporated to host sports events such as cycling, marathon, golf, horse racing, outdoor adventure, etc. The undeveloped terrain can in turn be developed into farms, livestock farms, camping bases, parks and other ecologically relevant facilities according to local conditions. In this way, multiple linked service industry clusters are formed.

#### **4.3.4 Shaping the Multiple Symbiosis Mechanism of Spatial Form**

First of all, in the development of ancient architecture tourism, it is important to maintain the simultaneous renewal of architectural texture and spatial sites, and to continue the surrounding pattern of ancient buildings as a whole, so as to produce open space in the neighborhood. By classifying the basic frames of ancient buildings for protection and renovation, it can highlight the essential features of ancient buildings, revitalize the architectural style and spatial functions, and avoid ancient buildings from becoming "islands". Secondly, for the local residents of the ancient streets and towns of Suzhou, they are the constituent elements of the ancient architectural tourism and cultural space, and carriers of the local culture and spirit. When developing tourism, it is necessary to investigate the wishes of local residents, coordinate the proposals and suggestions from them, and try to protect the original ecological environment in the development process and pay attention to the concept of spatial development of multi-integration. The participation of the community in the development process is also an important part of the shaping of ancient architectural space tourism.

### **5. Research Conclusions**

In conclusion, "spatial tourism economy" is an important theoretical basis for ecotourism planning of ancient architectures, which needs to increase the spatial aspect of diversified understanding in tourism development, pay attention to the national demand for high-quality development of tourism industry, and promote high-quality, intensive and spatialized tourism development of ancient architectures. In this paper, Suzhou, an historical cultural city, is selected and analyzed for its problems and countermeasures in tourism spatial planning, hoping to give some insights to policy makers.

### **References**

- [1] Guo Yujie, Chen Yining. From the Perspective of Tourism Space Economy of Global Tourism [J]. *Journal of Tourism*, 2016, 31(9):2.
- [2] Guo Lian. Research on Guangxi Tourism Spatial Structure—Based on the Perspective of Tourism Centrality and Tourism Economy [J]. *Journal of Guangxi Radio and Television University*, 2017, 28(3):8.
- [3] Sun Guangtian. Research on Global Tourism Development from the Perspective of Tourism Space Economy [J]. *Modern Marketing: Information Edition*, 2020(3):1.

- [4] Wu Zhicai, Zhang Lingyuan, Huang Shihui. The Spatial Structure and Collaborative Cooperation Model of Tourism Economic Connections in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area [J]. *Geographical Research*, 2020, 39(6):16.
- [5] Huo Hong, Bai Yicai, Zhan Shuai. Spatial Dislocation Analysis of Tourism Resources and Tourism Economy in Northeast China [J]. *Journal of Northwest Normal University: Natural Science Edition*, 2020, 56(4):7.
- [6] Ma Hongfang. *Anhui Culture Theme Homestay Design Based on Ancient Building Protection and Renewal*. Anhui Agricultural University, 2019.
- [7] Fei Lingjun. *Research on Landscape Planning and Design of Historical and Cultural Scenic Spots* [J]. *Reading and Writing: Early*, 2020(6):2.
- [8] Li Hui, Zhu Wanting. Planning and Design of Ancient Buildings in Tourist Resorts from the Perspective of Ecological Economy [J]. *Architectural Structure*, 2021, 51(1):I0012-I0012.
- [9] Xiong Jian. Evaluation of Rural Tourism Resources Based on Text Analysis: Taking Qidong County as an Example [J]. *Tourism and Photography*, 2021(4):2.