

Temple Garden Cultural Landscapes: An Initial Exploration

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Abstract

Temple gardens in China embody a synthesis of religious philosophy, aesthetic cultivation, and ecological adaptation. They represent the spatial materialization of Buddhist cultural values, the Chinese garden-making tradition, and a cosmological worldview in which nature and human cultivation are deeply interrelated. While modern scholarship has produced rich work on Buddhist architecture, monastic economies, and the symbolism of Chinese gardens, temple gardens as a unique cultural landscape category—particularly their cultural logic, aesthetic patterns, and socio-historical functions—remain insufficiently theorized in a systematic manner. This paper conducts an initial exploration of temple garden cultural landscapes, focusing on their origins, spatial forms, cultural meanings, and contemporary implications. Drawing on historical sources, landscape studies, and cultural theory, the study demonstrates that temple gardens are not merely scenic or devotional spaces; rather, they function as material expressions of Buddhist cosmology, ethical cultivation, social exchange, and ritual order. Their landscapes are shaped not only by religious symbolism but also by environmental adaptation and social-economic conditions, including monastic agrarian systems and community interactions. Through analyzing representative temple garden cases and the evolution of monastic garden cultures, this paper argues that the core of temple garden cultural landscapes lies in the interplay between sacredness and everyday life, withdrawal and engagement, nature and cultivation. Furthermore, the study highlights contemporary challenges, including heritage protection pressures, commercialization, and the need to reinterpret temple gardens as living cultural landscapes rather than static museum-like artifacts. By reframing temple gardens through integrated cultural landscape theory, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions in heritage studies, landscape architecture, and religious cultural history regarding how traditional cultural landscapes can be meaningfully preserved, reactivated, and sustained in the present.

Keywords: Temple Garden; Cultural Landscape; Buddhism; Chinese Garden History; Sacred Space

1. Introduction

The cultural landscape of Chinese temple gardens represents a distinctive synthesis of religious symbolism, aesthetic philosophy, and ecological adaptation. These landscapes emerged through the long-term integration of Buddhism into Chinese cultural traditions following its introduction during the Han dynasty. As Buddhism rooted itself in Chinese society, it did not simply remain as a foreign spiritual doctrine but entered into dialogue with native philosophical systems, including Confucianism's ethical order and Daoism's reverence for natural spontaneity. The process of Sinicization was not only intellectual but spatial and material: the construction of temples in scenic mountains and valleys became a defining feature of Buddhist spatial identity. The phrase "monks dwell in famous mountains" captures the intentional geographic logic behind temple siting. Temples were established where mountains, forests, watercourses, and mists reinforced a sacred atmosphere, and these natural surroundings were not left untouched but carefully cultivated into meditative gardens. Such landscapes expressed an overarching worldview in which nature is not merely a backdrop but an active participant in spiritual cultivation. Embedded in these gardens are systems of meaning that relate to Buddhist contemplative practices, cosmological imagery, and aesthetic notions that value emptiness, tranquility, and the subtle interplay between human presence and natural environment. Therefore, temple gardens must be understood not simply as scenic sites but as living cultural landscapes in which the spatial environment is deliberately shaped to foster ethical discipline, meditative awareness, and spiritual transformation.

The historical evolution of temple gardens is closely tied to the organizational, economic, and cultural functions of monastic communities. Early monastic settlements required not only places for worship and meditation but also means for survival and self-sufficiency. As indicated in historical sources and supported by the referenced study, many temples developed monastic economies that included agricultural fields, orchards, medicinal gardens, and tea plantations, forming integrated ecological and cultural systems that supported daily monastic life (Mallarach et al., 2014). Over time, these practical horticultural spaces acquired symbolic significance and were gradually aestheticized into formal gardens, reflecting the growing sophistication of garden-making traditions during the Tang, Song, and later dynasties. Temple gardens thus functioned simultaneously as economic spaces, ecological systems, ritual settings, and artistic expressions. For example, the cultivation of tea in temple gardens not only fulfilled nutritional and medicinal needs but became deeply embedded in the spiritual culture of Zen Buddhism (Wan, 2024). The aesthetic practice of tea and Zen being of one flavor reflects the belief that the sensory simplicity of tea drinking corresponds to the disciplined clarity of meditative practice. This convergence of daily activity with spiritual cultivation contributed to a distinct ritualized domesticity, in which ordinary acts—walking, gardening, drinking tea, sweeping fallen leaves—were transformed into methods of maintaining mindfulness and moral self-regulation. Thus, temple gardens cultivated not only plants but also ethical character, perceptual awareness, and communal identity.

In addition to their functional and symbolic dimensions, temple gardens hold significant cultural and scholarly value as material embodiments of the Chinese philosophical understanding of the unity between humans and nature. Their landscape composition—featuring layered

mountain views, winding paths, hidden pavilions, flowing waters, and carefully arranged vegetation—enacts spatial metaphors drawn from Buddhist cosmology and classical aesthetics. The design principles emphasize quietness, subtlety, and the evocation of contemplative states rather than grand display. This distinguishes temple gardens from imperial gardens, which often sought to demonstrate political power, and from private literati gardens, which centered on personal leisure and poetic taste. Temple gardens instead prioritize collective rituality, spiritual introspection, and the cultivation of virtuous dispositions (Dill, 2024). Yet, in contemporary society, the cultural legacy of temple gardens faces considerable pressures. Rapid tourism development, commercial exploitation, loss of ecological integrity, and the erosion of genuine ritual practice risk reducing temple gardens to mere visual attractions. If the living cultural functions of these landscapes are diminished, their aesthetic and symbolic coherence may be lost. Therefore, academic inquiry into the origins, meanings, and cultural logic of temple gardens is not only of historical and intellectual importance but also vital for informing heritage preservation strategies that sustain both material structures and intangible cultural values. By approaching temple gardens as holistic cultural landscapes—rather than as static architectural relics—we may better understand how these spaces have historically mediated relationships between nature, community, spiritual cultivation, and aesthetic experience. Such understanding is essential for ensuring that temple garden landscapes remain living, dynamic cultural environments, capable of speaking meaningfully to contemporary social and spiritual life.

2. Historical Evolution and Cultural Formation

The cultural landscape of temple gardens did not emerge suddenly, nor was it simply borrowed from pre-existing architectural or horticultural traditions. Instead, it evolved gradually through layered historical interactions between Buddhism, Chinese philosophical traditions, regional environmental conditions, and shifting socio-political contexts. As Buddhism took root in China, temples became not only religious centers but also custodians of ecological knowledge, social organization, and aesthetic cultivation. The temple garden thus developed into a distinct spatial expression of the Chinese understanding of the relationship between nature and human cultivation. To understand how this cultural landscape formed, it is essential to trace its historical evolution across four major phases: initial localization, institutional consolidation, aesthetic refinement, and contemporary transformation.

2.1. Early Localization: Buddhism's Encounter with Chinese Landscape Tradition

When Buddhism first entered China during the Han dynasty, it encountered deeply established cultural traditions that shaped how landscapes were perceived and valued. Chinese philosophical thinking, influenced heavily by Daoism, emphasized natural spontaneity, mountain retreats, and the search for metaphysical insight through immersion in nature. Meanwhile, Confucianism reinforced a moral order grounded in social harmony and structured community life. Initially, Buddhist temples were urban and functional, serving primarily as translation sites and religious meeting spaces rather than as spatial embodiments of contemplative practice. Over time, however, monks observed that Chinese spirituality was intimately tied to natural settings, and they began

deliberately seeking remote and scenic locations for meditation and teaching. This shift laid the groundwork for temple gardens, in which the surrounding environment played an active role in spiritual cultivation.

The migration of temples to mountainous regions during the Wei–Jin and Southern–Northern Dynasties was influenced both by philosophical aspiration and socio-political instability. As educated elites withdrew from public life, mountains came to symbolize purity, transcendence, and intellectual freedom (Flere, 2024). Buddhist monks, sharing similar values of renunciation, began constructing monasteries along forested ridges, near springs, and within secluded valleys. These temple sites emphasized harmony with the natural terrain rather than architectural dominance over it. The earliest temple gardens were therefore not designed in an ornamental sense but existed as organically integrated natural settings used to nurture meditative stillness. This early phase established the foundational principle that the temple garden is not merely an aesthetic embellishment, but a spiritual environment shaped by and for contemplative life.



Figure 1. Temple Garden Landscape

2.2. Institutional Development: Monastic Economy and Cultural Self-Sufficiency

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, Buddhism received formal recognition and patronage, leading to the expansion of temple complexes into organized religious institutions. With increasing populations of resident monks, temples required sustainable means of supporting daily life. This necessity led to the development of monastic economies, which included agricultural fields, orchards, forests, and especially tea plantations surrounding temple grounds. Gardening and cultivation became integral to monastic routine, not as secular labor but as part of spiritual discipline. The environment was managed carefully to provide food, medicine, shelter, and ritual materials, linking ecological stewardship to ethical cultivation (Okyere-Manu et al., 2022). Over

time, these ecologically functional spaces adopted symbolic, spiritual, and aesthetic associations, transitioning into the intentional cultural landscapes recognizable today.

Tea cultivation holds particular significance in this historical stage, emerging as both a practical resource and a medium of spiritual refinement. Temples not only grew tea leaves but also developed techniques of preparation, brewing, and ceremonial offering. The expression “Tea and Zen share a single flavor” encapsulates how the simplicity and attentiveness required in tea-making became metaphors for meditative clarity. The garden spaces where tea was grown and consumed thus served as sites of philosophical dialogue, poetic composition, and contemplative communion. This convergence of daily sustenance and spiritual cultivation reinforced the idea that the temple garden is not a decorative retreat, but a site where ordinary practice transforms into ethical and perceptual awakening.

2.3. Aesthetic Refinement: Landscape Design and Symbolic Space in the Song and Ming Dynasties

By the Song dynasty, Chinese aesthetic culture reached new levels of sophistication, influenced by Neo-Confucian thought and Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Intellectuals emphasized the correspondence between external landscapes and internal states of mind, inspiring a more deliberate approach to arranging temple spaces. Temples began refining their spatial organization, incorporating pathways, courtyards, pavilions, and water features designed to cultivate rhythmic experiences of movement, focus, and stillness. These gardens remained rooted in natural topography but were crafted to produce emotional subtlety and contemplative perception. The emphasis was not on ornate beauty but on the creation of conditions conducive to meditation, including quietness, filtered light, flowing water, and layered visual depth.

During the Ming dynasty, temple gardens influenced and were influenced by the private gardens of literati culture. Yet, the two remained distinct in intent. Whereas literati gardens foregrounded artistic expression and personal sentiment, temple gardens foregrounded clarity of mind and spiritual discipline. Their visual language tended toward simplicity, asymmetry, and grounded natural textures, intentionally avoiding excessive ornamentation. Spatial sequencing played a central role: one encountered the garden not in a single panoramic view, but through gradual revelation. Trees, walls, and stone arrangements guided one from everyday awareness into meditative attention. This practice of structuring perception through landscape became one of the defining features of temple garden aesthetics.

2.4. Modern Transformation: Heritage, Tourism, and Cultural Continuity

In the Qing dynasty and early modern period, temple gardens accumulated centuries of cultural memory, becoming pilgrimage destinations and regional cultural landmarks. Their significance extended beyond religious practice, contributing to literature, painting, philosophy, and medicine. However, political instability, modernization, and secularization in the late 19th and 20th centuries weakened monastic communities and disrupted the holistic systems that sustained temple gardens. Many gardens suffered damage or fell into neglect, while others were reorganized as public scenic sites, detaching the landscape from its ritual and spiritual foundations.

In contemporary society, temple gardens face a dual challenge: commercialization and museumification. On one hand, tourist-driven development risks transforming temple gardens into visual spectacles divorced from spiritual purpose. On the other hand, treating temple gardens solely as cultural relics freezes them in time, preventing the dynamic practices—gardening, meditation, tea preparation, seasonal rituals—that give them living meaning. The preservation of temple gardens therefore requires more than architectural repair; it requires the protection of intangible cultural life, including daily rhythms, environmental ethics, and embodied practices passed across generations. Only by sustaining these living traditions can temple gardens continue to function as evolving cultural landscapes rather than static monuments.

3. Spatial Composition and Cultural Landscape Characteristics

The spatial composition of temple gardens reflects a carefully constructed interaction between religious symbolism, environmental conditions, and aesthetic sensibility. Temple landscapes are never arranged arbitrarily; rather, their layout embodies doctrinal ideas and philosophical worldviews, while simultaneously responding to the natural features of local terrain. The organization of space in temple gardens involves both physical structures—such as halls, pavilions, courtyards, and paths—and intangible experiential dimensions, such as silence, seasonal rhythms, and the sensory movement of the visitor. Understanding temple gardens as cultural landscapes therefore requires examining how architecture, vegetation, water, and ritual practice converge to shape a unified spiritual environment. This chapter analyzes the spatial structures commonly seen in temple gardens and identifies the key cultural landscape characteristics that allow these spaces to function as environments of contemplation, cultivation, and aesthetic revelation.

3.1. Overall Spatial Layout: Axis, Sequence, and Hierarchy

The overall spatial arrangement of temple gardens typically follows a sequential and hierarchical organization, which guides the visitor inward from the outer world toward the sacred center of spiritual engagement. Most temples employ a longitudinal layout aligned along a central axis, beginning from the entrance gate and progressing through a sequence of courtyards and halls. This arrangement is not merely structural; it performs a spiritual function by choreographing the visitor's bodily movement and mental attention. As one moves deeper into the temple, external distractions gradually fall away, replaced by increasing quietness and symbolic clarity (Kakalis, 2024). Each spatial threshold marks a stage of transition, mirroring the gradual deepening of meditative awareness.

Yet the main axis alone does not define temple spatial experience. The organization also relies on asymmetric balance and layered transitions. Side courtyards, secluded gardens, and meditation cloisters break up the linear progression, creating spaces where time seems to slow and perception sharpens. The visitor is thus encouraged not only to move forward but also to pause, reflect, and shift modes of attention. The path is not rigid or monumental; rather, it is subtly modulated, reflecting the Buddhist belief in the need to cultivate awareness gradually. Such spatial

sequencing transforms the temple garden into an environment of perceptual training, where architecture and landscape guide the mind toward clarity and tranquility.

3.2. Relationship Between Architecture and Nature

The relationship between built structures and natural features is central to the identity of temple gardens. Unlike imperial gardens that emphasize political grandeur, or literati gardens that highlight aesthetic playfulness, temple gardens foreground harmonious integration between buildings and the surrounding environment. Temples are often constructed on mountainsides, along river valleys, or near springs. The architecture does not dominate the landscape; instead, it follows the contours of the land, adjusting to slopes, ridges, and natural vegetation patterns. This approach reflects the Buddhist principle of non-interference with nature, allowing the environment to become an active participant in the spiritual experience of the temple.

The careful positioning of halls, pavilions, and cloisters ensures that natural elements—such as trees, stones, wind, and water—are incorporated into everyday perception. Courtyards are oriented to frame views of distant peaks; windows are placed to catch shifting light and shadow; and meditation rooms are located near streams or groves, where natural sounds cultivate stillness. The built environment thus becomes a mediator between individuals and the natural world. Rather than separating inside from outside, temple architecture emphasizes permeability, where walls, screens, and openings encourage continual dialogue with the surrounding landscape (Gissen, 2023). This subtle integration contributes to a sense of continuity between human presence and natural flow, aligning spatial experience with the Buddhist aspiration of transcending ego boundaries.

3.3. Vegetation and Seasonal Rhythm

Vegetation plays a profound role in shaping the symbolic and experiential qualities of temple gardens. The trees, flowers, and grasses chosen for cultivation are not simply ornamental, but carry moral, spiritual, and poetic associations. For example, pine trees represent endurance and integrity, bamboo conveys humility and emptiness, and plum blossoms signify resilience in adversity. These plants serve as visual metaphors that reinforce the ethical ideals embedded in monastic life. Monks interacting with these plants—whether sweeping fallen leaves or pruning branches—engage in acts of silent contemplation, merging physical labor with inner reflection.

The seasonal transformation of vegetation adds another dimension to the garden's experiential rhythm. Spring blossoms, summer shade, autumn leaves, and winter snow form a cyclical pattern that grounds spiritual cultivation in the passage of natural time. This seasonal awareness is not incidental; it is intentionally cultivated as part of meditative practice. Observing the slow change of colors, textures, and scents encourages patience, attentiveness, and acceptance of impermanence—central tenets in Buddhist philosophy. In this way, the temple garden is not static but temporally alive, a space where the unfolding of natural cycles becomes inseparable from the development of contemplative awareness.

3.4. Water, Sound, and the Sensory Environment

Water is another essential element in the spatial vocabulary of temple gardens. Springs, streams, ponds, and stone water basins appear throughout temple grounds, not only for practical purposes such as washing or irrigation but as components of a sensory environment designed to facilitate mental stillness. The sound of flowing water masks intrusive noise and provides a steady auditory backdrop, drawing attention inward. Water also serves as a visual mirror, reflecting sky, rooflines, and surrounding vegetation, establishing a poetic dialogue between the ephemeral and the material. In Buddhist symbolism, water often represents clarity of mind—the reflective surface of awareness unclouded by distraction.

Sound more broadly plays a critical role in shaping the atmosphere of temple gardens. The ringing of a bell, the chanting of sutras, the rustling of leaves, and the distant echo of footsteps all contribute to the acoustic identity of the space. Rather than overwhelming the senses, these sounds are subtle and rhythmic, supporting a meditative soundscape that encourages stillness and focus. The integration of water and sound into the spatial design illustrates how temple gardens cultivate embodied perception—spiritual insight is awakened not through abstraction, but through the lived experience of sensory harmony.

3.5. Paths, Movement, and Experiential Guidance

The pathways of temple gardens are not designed for efficiency but for experiential transformation. Paths often follow winding routes, guiding visitors through shifting perspectives and alternating modes of attention. This spatial progression echoes Chan Buddhist practices that emphasize attentiveness to each step and breath. Walking becomes a form of meditation, where bodily movement and mental focus converge. The uneven placement of stones, the gradual ascent or descent of slopes, and the alternation between open and enclosed spaces create tactile experiences that heighten bodily awareness.

The layout of paths also structures narrative meaning. One begins at the outer world of secular distraction and gradually moves toward the inner realm of contemplative presence. Along the way, transitional spaces—gateways, turning points, shaded groves—serve as symbolic thresholds, prompting reflection and reorientation. This method of spatial storytelling transforms the temple garden into a journey of the mind, where the external act of movement parallels internal transformation. In this sense, the garden is not only a space to be seen but a space to be experienced through mindful passage.

3.6. Cultural Life and Embodied Practice

Temple gardens are not simply visual or spatial environments; they are lived cultural spaces shaped by ritual, daily routine, and collective memory. Activities such as meditation, chanting, tea preparation, calligraphy, and horticultural care all take place within garden spaces. These practices are not additions to the temple environment; they are what animate and sustain the landscape as a living cultural system. In the historical formation of temple gardens, tea culture in particular played an important role in linking ordinary daily life with spiritual discipline, reinforcing the garden's integration of material and transcendent dimensions.

Embodied participation in these activities ensures that temple gardens remain dynamic rather than static. The garden acquires meaning through repetition, labor, and sensory immersion. Monks and visitors alike engage with the garden not as spectators but as participants in an ongoing process of cultivation. This lived dimension distinguishes temple gardens from preserved heritage sites, whose landscapes are often maintained but not inhabited. Without the continuity of embodied practice, the spiritual and cultural significance of temple gardens would be diminished, leaving only aesthetic form without its animating core.

4. Contemporary Significance and Preservation Strategies

The cultural landscape of temple gardens continues to hold profound relevance in contemporary society, despite rapid social change, urban expansion, and the globalization of cultural values. Temple gardens are not simply historical relics or aesthetic attractions; they are complex cultural systems in which religious meaning, ecological awareness, and aesthetic cultivation are intrinsically linked. Their spatial design encodes an understanding of the relationship between human beings and the natural world that remains deeply resonant in the face of modern environmental and psychological challenges (Devlin, 2025). In order to preserve these landscapes effectively, it is first necessary to clarify their cultural significance in contemporary life. Only on this basis can appropriate strategies be developed to ensure that temple gardens continue to function as living cultural environments, rather than becoming static monuments or commercialized spectacles divorced from their spiritual foundations.

4.1. Contemporary Cultural Relevance of Temple Gardens

Temple gardens offer a compelling vision of how environment shapes human consciousness. In an era defined by constant distraction, accelerated consumption, and digital saturation, the contemplative atmosphere embodied in temple landscapes stands as an alternative mode of existence. The spatial structures of temple gardens—marked by slowing pathways, layered thresholds, and rhythmic transitions—deliberately guide individuals away from haste and toward attentive presence. The experience of moving through a temple garden encourages a shift from external stimulation to inner awareness. This capacity to recalibrate perception is of psychological value in contemporary society, where stress, anxiety, and mental fragmentation have become widespread. Thus, temple gardens retain significance not only as heritage landscapes but as environments capable of supporting mental and emotional well-being.

Their cultural relevance can also be understood through the ethical and ecological values they express. Temple gardens model a mode of dwelling in which human activity aligns harmoniously with natural cycles. The cultivation of plants, management of water, and respect for terrain reflect a worldview that recognizes human beings as participants within broader ecological processes. Such a perspective contrasts with the anthropocentric logic that has driven industrial development and environmental degradation. The ecological practices embedded in temple gardens—particularly sustainable horticulture and resource conservation—offer practical and philosophical insight for contemporary environmental ethics (Berebon, 2025). In this sense, temple gardens

represent not an antiquated past, but a renewable cultural resource capable of informing ecological thinking in the present.

4.2. Threats to Cultural Integrity and Ecological Authenticity

Despite their cultural importance, temple gardens face serious challenges. One major threat comes from the commercialization of heritage landscapes, often driven by tourism development. In many regions, temples have become commercial destinations where visitors are encouraged to consume visual experiences rather than engage in contemplative practice. This shift alters the spatial atmosphere of temple gardens, replacing silence with spectacle and weakening the moral and spiritual environment that historically sustained monastic life. The result is a superficial aestheticization of the garden landscape in which the symbolic and ritual dimensions are overshadowed by visual entertainment.

A second threat arises from over-preservation, in which temple gardens are protected as static historical artifacts rather than as dynamic living environments. When preservation policies focus exclusively on architectural structures or visual appearance, they risk erasing the intangible cultural practices—meditation, horticultural labor, tea rituals, seasonal ceremonies—that infuse the garden with meaning. In such cases, the garden is preserved materially but loses its cultural vitality. As noted in research on temple-based tea landscapes, the cultural significance of these spaces depends fundamentally on the continuation of daily practices rather than solely on physical form. Thus, purely architectural restoration without practice-based revitalization results in a landscape that is visually intact but spiritually hollow.

A third challenge comes from environmental pressure, including urban development, pollution, and climate change. Many temple gardens were historically located in remote mountain regions; these environments have increasingly become sites of infrastructure expansion and commercial real estate development. Such encroachment can alter hydrological systems, disrupt plant communities, and degrade visual and acoustic landscapes. Moreover, shifting climate patterns threaten the seasonal rhythms that define temple garden experience, affecting plant growth, flowering cycles, and the sensory textures of the garden environment. Without proactive ecological stewardship, the environmental foundation of temple gardens may gradually deteriorate.

4.3. The Need for Integrated Preservation Approaches

Given these challenges, preserving temple gardens requires approaches that are holistic rather than purely architectural or economic. Preservation must recognize temple gardens as cultural landscapes, meaning that their value lies not only in physical structures but in the dynamic relationship among environment, human practice, and symbolic meaning. A garden without its ritual and daily life is no longer a temple garden but merely a scenic site. Therefore, preservation must integrate three interdependent dimensions: spiritual continuity, ecological stewardship, and cultural transmission.

Spiritual continuity refers to the maintenance of the contemplative and ethical practices that animate temple life. This continuity depends on the presence of monastic communities or dedicated practitioners who interact with the landscape through meditation, gardening, chanting,

and ritual observance. These practices ensure that the landscape remains a lived environment rather than a static backdrop. Preservation strategies must therefore support the social and institutional conditions that allow such communities to thrive rather than treating monastic presence as an obstacle to tourism development.

Ecological stewardship involves protecting the environmental conditions and biological diversity that give temple gardens their distinct sensory and symbolic qualities. This includes the maintenance of traditional planting patterns, water systems, and soil management techniques, as well as the preservation of local plant species adapted to regional climates. Modern conservation science can support these efforts, but it must respect the historical ecological knowledge embedded in monastic horticultural traditions. Preservation should not impose uniform landscape standards but recognize the regional variations that give temple gardens their unique identities.

Cultural transmission requires the continued teaching and practice of the skills, narratives, and symbolic interpretations associated with temple gardens. This transmission cannot be accomplished solely through written documentation or museum displays. It must occur through active participation, apprenticeship, and shared ritual experience. Teaching tea making, practicing seasonal gardening, reciting sutras, composing calligraphy, and guiding meditation in garden spaces are all forms of cultural transmission that sustain the living meaning of temple landscapes.

4.4. Community, Education, and Public Engagement

For temple gardens to maintain their relevance in contemporary society, broader public engagement must be cultivated. However, engagement should not be conflated with tourism or entertainment. Instead, communities should be invited to participate in mindful interaction with temple environments—guided walks, tea meditation workshops, horticultural participation, and contemplative ecology education. Such programs allow visitors to enter the garden not as consumers but as co-participants in a shared cultural experience.

Educational institutions can play a key role in this process. Temple gardens offer valuable resources for teaching history, aesthetics, ecology, and philosophy. Partnerships between temples and schools or universities can support research, ecological monitoring, and experiential learning programs. Students may learn not only about Buddhist culture and Chinese landscape aesthetics, but also about sustainable environmental practices embedded in historical horticultural traditions. These forms of engagement allow temple gardens to become sites of cultural learning, where modern individuals encounter alternative ways of living and thinking.

Local communities are also essential to preservation. Historically, temples often functioned as communal centers, providing charity, education, and moral guidance. Reviving these social roles can help reintegrate temple gardens into regional cultural life. When local residents participate in garden care, seasonal festivals, and practical stewardship, the garden becomes embedded in the cultural memory and identity of the community. This sense of shared ownership forms a strong foundation for sustainable preservation.

4.5. Toward a Living Future for Temple Garden Landscapes

The future of temple gardens depends on maintaining their identity as living cultural landscapes, not merely heritage sites. To achieve this, preservation must prioritize continuity of practice, integration of community, and ecological care. Temple gardens cannot be preserved through architectural restoration alone, nor can they thrive under commercial exploitation. Rather, they require conditions that allow the ongoing enactment of contemplative life within the landscape.

Such a vision aligns with broader cultural and environmental movements that recognize the value of slowness, attentiveness, self-cultivation, and ecological harmony. Temple gardens offer not escape from the modern world, but a counterpoint—a space in which individuals and communities may rediscover forms of experience that foster psychological balance, social responsibility, and ecological awareness. Their preservation is therefore not only a cultural task but a moral and environmental one.

The enduring significance of temple gardens lies in their ability to gather environment, body, and spirit into harmony. They are not relics of a vanished tradition, but reservoirs of cultural wisdom that speak to the deepest needs of contemporary life. Preserving them means preserving the possibility of a form of life grounded in attentiveness, humility, and reverence for the living world. Their future depends on our ability to recognize and sustain this possibility.

5. Conclusions

The study of temple garden cultural landscapes reveals that these spaces are far more than historical architectural environments or scenic tourist destinations; they are living embodiments of a worldview in which nature, human practice, aesthetic formation, and spiritual cultivation are interwoven into a continuous cultural field. Tracing their historical evolution shows that temple gardens emerged through the sinicization of Buddhism, the development of monastic self-sufficiency, and the refinement of aesthetic and spatial philosophies, ultimately forming an environmental model that integrates religious symbolism with ecological sensitivity. Their spatial composition demonstrates deliberate and nuanced design: axial sequences, layered thresholds, visual borrowing, seasonal vegetation rhythms, auditory modulation, and embodied pathways collectively construct environments that slow perception, refine attention, and encourage contemplative awareness. Yet temple gardens do not derive their cultural significance solely from their symbolic forms, but from the practices that animate them—meditation, tea rituals, horticultural labor, chanting, and seasonal ceremonies all serve to reaffirm the moral and emotional bonds that tie individuals to a shared environment. In contemporary society, this mode of spatial cultivation holds renewed importance. As modern life becomes increasingly characterized by acceleration, environmental exhaustion, and psychological fragmentation, temple gardens offer experiential models of slowness, ecological humility, and interior clarity. However, these cultural landscapes now face pressures of commercialization, aesthetic superficialization, and ecological decline, which threaten to reduce them to static images or commodified spectacles. Effective preservation therefore necessitates holistic strategies that protect not only material structures but also the intangible cultural life that sustains meaning across generations. Monastic

communities, local residents, cultural institutions, ecological conservation experts, and visitors must work together to maintain temple gardens as living cultural systems grounded in practice, continuity, and ethical stewardship. Only when preservation efforts recognize temple gardens as dynamic environments shaped by ongoing human engagement—rather than as artifacts frozen in time—can their spiritual, ecological, and cultural knowledge continue to serve contemporary needs and future aspirations. Ultimately, this research underscores that the value of temple gardens lies not simply in their beauty or historical significance, but in their enduring capacity to cultivate attentiveness, foster ethical relation to landscape, and offer models of harmonious coexistence between human beings and the natural world.

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